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pass laboratories

INT-60 Integrated Amplifier

as reviewed by Robert S. Youman



Over the past ten years, I have reviewed a half dozen or more products from Pass Labs. I ended up purchasing many of those components. It seems like every time I roll the dice and drift away in another direction, I come running back with my hair on fire and apologizing to the audio gods. This includes some dabbling with both solid state and tube designs.

In the end, everything is subjective, but in my humble opinion there is no better brand out there for innovative design, military spec like build quality and outstanding sound performance. In this case, if you also consider the astonishing value realized when compared to the best, we have something very very special.

It would be easy to say that the new INT-60 integrated amplifier is just another magnificent design in the tradition of so many others from this company. That would be a mistake and would not do the INT-60 the justice that it so well deserves. In this price range and possibly even at twice the MSRP of \$9000, we have a new bench mark.

Review System

Magico Q7 Speakers
Pass Labs INT-60 Integrated Amplifier
Vitus RI-100 Integrated Amplifier
D'Agostino Momentum Integrated Amplifier
Playback Designs MPS-5 CD/SACD/DAC
VPI Aries Extended Turntable
VPI 12.6 Memorial Tonearm
Van den Hul Frog Cartridge
Synergistic Research Element CTS Power Cords
Synergistic Research Atmosphere Level 4 Interconnects and Speaker Cable
Synergistic Research Powercell 10 UEF & FEQ - PowerCell Equalizer
MIT SL-Matrix50 Interconnects and SL-Matrix90 Speaker Cables
SRA VA Turntable Isolation Base
Rix Rax Hoodoo Component Rack
Magico QPod Footers

Caveat Emptor

System synergy and personal taste are critical when evaluating high-end audio products. This review is based on my subjective requirements, my subjective ears, my specific system and my specific listening room. This combination is only one data point of many that exist out there for these components. For further insight into my personal biases, check out the Meet the Writers section on the *Positive Feedback* website. Please consider my comments and analysis appropriately.

Design

The INT-60 is a Class A/B design rated at 60 watts into 8 ohms and doubles into 4 ohms at 120 watts. It leaves class A into class A/B at a peak of 30 watts. This combination of Class A and Class A/B output was selected to provide a broader range of options and efficiency for a variety of speaker loads. Damping factor is 150. The INT-60 weighs 93lbs. Overall dimensions are 19 x 21.2 x 7.6 inches.

For comparison purposes, the Pass Labs INT-30A integrated amplifier introduced back in 2009 with much fanfare, is a pure class A design rated at 30 watts at 8 ohms and 60 watts at 4 ohms. It weighs in at 60lbs. Over all dimensions are 19 x 19 x 7 inches. Based on these specifications alone, you can tell we are talking about two completely different animals, yet as always Pass Labs aficionados are fascinated by the evolution of the product line.

The gain section of the INT-60 is basically a simplified version of the Pass Labs XP-10 preamp. I reviewed this unit back in the day and it is another high value big time performer. A great building block and foundation for success.

The faceplate is a thing of beauty. I have grown to prefer the look of the Point 8 faceplates over the Point 5 series. Thank you Desmond Harrington for another industrial design magnum opus! Similar to the other Point 8 designs, we now finally have a Pass Labs integrated amplifier with a very sexy level meter and simple classic lines. There is also a volume level display, standby power button, mute button, and 4 input buttons. A large volume control with a silky smooth feel at 1dB steps balances the overall look and feel.



The rear panel includes one set of preamp RCA and XLR outputs, four sets of RCA inputs and two sets of XLR inputs. There is also a terminal for signal ground and an AC mains inlet for after market power cord flexibility. Lastly, I love the new Furutech speaker cable binding posts. They are a fairly large tear drop design for less finger fumbling and strain. They also have a torque limiting function so that you can tighten down your speaker cable terminals with just the right amount of force and no guessing.

There are the typical Pass Labs heat sinks elegantly integrated into the overall casework. BTW, the INT-60 runs warm but nowhere near that of many pure Class A amps that have visited my listening room. A handsome Pass Labs metal remote is included with basic functionality and straight forward ergonomics.

Sound and Comparisons

I owned the Pass Labs INT-30A integrated amplifier for two years. I also have friends who own both the Pass Labs XA30.5 and the new XA.30.8 amplifiers. I am very familiar with their systems. I mention these specific models because many of our readers are well acquainted with these products and they are all somewhat related in the design and evolution path of certain price points in the Pass Labs portfolio.

Over the years, I have stated several times that the Pass Labs INT-30A integrated amp is one of the best values in the industry. Despite the introduction of the new INT-60 integrated amp, it is still available at a MSRP of \$7150 and understandably so. Based on the XA30.5 amplifier and a simple line stage, it is still a fantastic component and many might still prefer it. Remember, subjective taste and system compatibility will always define our system choices!

The Pass Labs Point 8 family of new amplifiers was introduced to the market almost a year ago. There is plenty of discussion on the Internet comparing the Point 8 versus the Point 5 series for performance and sound. Both have their strong supporters. Both have their strengths and weaknesses. See my comments below for comparing the INT-60 (Point 8 series) to the INT-30A (Point 5 series).

I am a huge believer in integrated amplifiers and have reviewed several outstanding models. That includes products from Pass Labs, Vitus, D'Agostino, Simaudio, BMC and many more. Since we are talking about a broad range of price points and a variety of unique Class A and Class A/B designs, the old apples and oranges complaint is surely valid. But, the comparisons can still be useful for a general sense of sound performance and personality.

First things first. The bench mark INT-30A affords the listener a glorious harmonic palate of warmth and seduction. Highs are lithe and agile yet never splashy or with edge. Mids are as good as it gets - especially for female vocalists and reed instruments. Bass is slightly rounded but with adequate

weight and impact. There is a golden glow about the INT-30 that can be quite addictive. If you are a tube guy or gal who wonders about solid state, the INT-30 might just float your boat. Even at just 30 watts of pure Class A power, it provided plenty of drive for virtually every speaker I ever brought into the listening room.

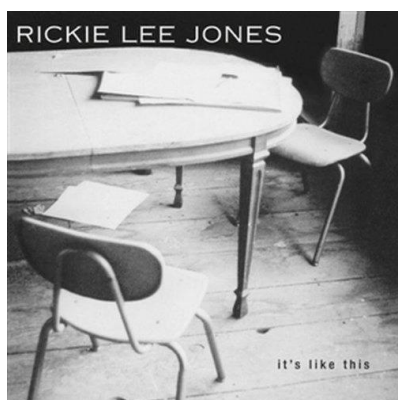
One of only a few exceptions was the Magico Q7 speakers which are rated at 92 dB efficiency. Despite that rating, it's no secret that you need plenty of power and current to really make them sing. For the first time, the INT-30A could not deliver. Everything seemed to take a step back. Bass did not live up to all its potential. The soundstage was not as extensive and as far reaching as I have experienced with other amplifiers. That PRAT (pace, rhythm and timing) thing that I so love with the Q7s was just not happening.

The INT-60 yielded a whole different story. Not quite as colorful as the INT-30A, it still presented a wonderful combination of fleshed out detail and additional speed. The overall tone of the INT-60 was slightly on the warm side, but I found the word "neutral" coming up time and time again in my listening notes. There was a life like presence to the highs that provided a nice balance of both the splash and the metal body of the hi-hat symbols. Bass was tight and physical with plenty of dynamic punch and authority.

Now I was getting a tremendous level of transparency and resolution. Micro and macro dynamics were as good as some of the best I have heard in my listening room. Sound stage width and depth was all there with plenty of layering and pint point imaging. The noise floor had retreated back into a deep black cushion. This allowed for some impressive low level listening without any loss of balance or dynamic punch. Bottom line - I was swept away by the sonic beauty and boldness of the presentation. For my ears, this was closer to the real thing.

Compared to the more expensive integrated amps that I have reviewed in the last year, the INT-60 still did not have the depth charge like bass of the Vitus (\$16,000) and D'Agostino (\$45,000) but it was not too far off. It also lacked some of the refinement and sense of ease of these megabuck 200 watt plus designs. However, at \$9000, I have to unequivocally state that the INT-60 is an absolute steal. It is a must audition regardless of whether you are checking out integrated amplifiers or separate components at twice the price.

Music



Rickie Lee Jones - *It's Like This*

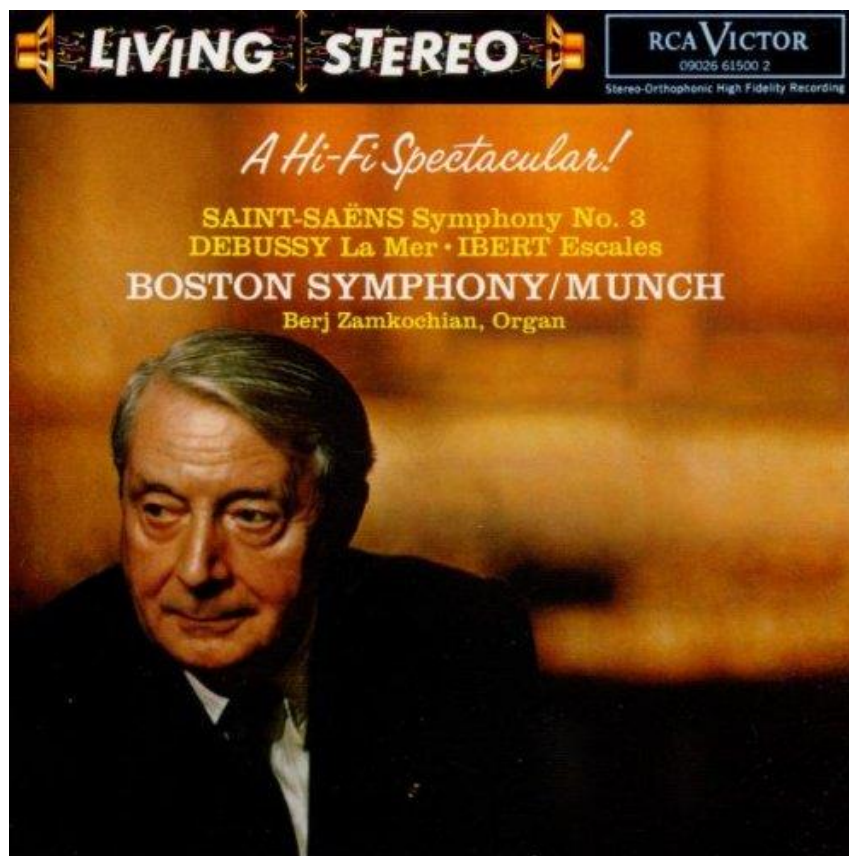
Released in 2000 and now discontinued on CD, *It's Like This* is a hidden gem in the Rickie Lee Jones catalog. Like her Pop Pop recording, this is another collection of her favorite songs and the covers are as creative and inspiring as always. Marvin Gaye, Paul McCartney, Dan Hicks and Traffic are major contributors. Sound is audiophile quality on most tracks depending on the producer and studio.

My favorite is Steely Dan's *Show Biz Kids* with Joe Jackson on backing vocals. Steely Dan is hard to cover because they have such unique style and vocal requirements. This particular cut is about

the Las Vegas strip and all its vulgarities. Rickie delivers her typical jazzy flavor to an already upbeat hip and lively arrangement.

Simply miked with just a few acoustic instruments, the INT-60 draws you into a vast and airy soundstage with a vivid picture of each participant. Right from the beginning, Mike Elizondo leads the way with some tasty acoustic bass chops that are as meaty and muscular as I can remember. Some percussive bell and chime effects sprinkle through the air and will have you sitting up straight wanting more.

When Ricky kicks in you notice that this isn't your Father's Rickie Lee Jones. When very young her voice could be described as ruthless and clinical when badly recorded, but here we have that aged smoky voice of life experiences. It's a marvelous performance and the INT-60 brings out all the very best qualities.



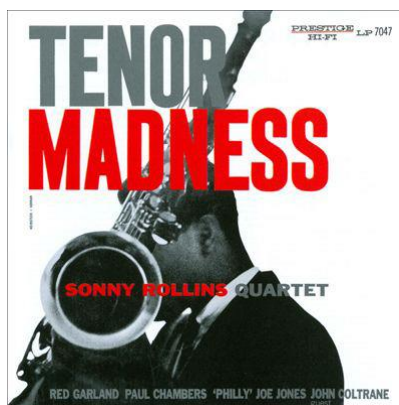
Charles Munch - A Stereo Spectacular/Saint-Saens: Symphony No.3

Originally released on the RCA Living Stereo label in 1959, the Saint-Saens Symphony No.3 conducted by Charles Munch and performed by the Boston Symphony in the Boston Symphony Hall is one of the true classics. The composer, conductor, orchestra, symphony hall and label all have the stars aligned on this one. Now we also have a wonderful reissue produced by Analog Productions on 200g LP with remastering at Sterling Sound and pressings by Quality Records. You truly have an all star team surrounding every element of the music and production.

I have the original release and the Classic Records reissue. There are certain variables for each that I did prefer in terms of sound quality, but the Analog Productions reissue wins by a landslide. I honestly did not think it could get any better so I am glad that I took a chance and bought my third copy. I highly recommend that you do the same if you are a big fan of this symphony.

To my mind, this is a very romantic piece with sweeping violins and gentle woodwinds driving the music forward. The balance of orchestra and organ is a difficult thing to accomplish but it all comes

together beautifully here. The INT-60 has the necessary power and resolution to make you shutter as the organ kicks in during the third movement. The visceral excitement of the strings and the tremendous authority and weight of the orchestra come through like few other recordings and only via the very best components.



Sonny Rollins - *Tenor Madness*

Released in 1956 on the Prestige Label, recorded at the Van Gelder Studios and produced by Bob Weinstock, the title track is considered one of the most important in jazz history as it is the only known recording featuring both Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane. Historians consider this an essential milestone for both artists. The rest of the lineup includes Philly Joe Jones on drums, Red Garland on piano and Paul Chambers on bass - a dream team recording session of talent if there ever was one.

Another masterpiece from Analog Productions, this 45 RPM reissue will startle you as the INT-60 has that rare innate ability to deliver wave after wave of explosive transient speed and detail. One contrast that is realized like seldom before is the distinction between Rollins and Coltrane when alternating back on forth during the session. While both are obviously playing tenor sax, and the differences in technique can be heard, the tone and timbre of both instruments are as clear as a bell which helps you enjoy the exchange even more.

There is an astounding amount of dynamic contrast and immediacy as the rhythm section ebbs and flows through the interplay. Again, the INT-60 presents the recording venue in all its glory with a deep and wide soundstage. You can sense the two kings of tenor moving and breathing within their space. The challenge and inspiration for both musicians on stage together is fully realized. If you love small quartets and quintets along with the rich sonic textures that only the tenor sax can provide, this is a must own recording.

Final Thoughts

Nelson Pass and Wayne Colburn are up to their old tricks again. The legacy continues as two of our most respected designers bring another treasure to the market place. Like Michael Corleone states in the classic Godfather trilogy, "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in." The Pass Labs Xs preamp (\$38,000) and Xs 300 monoblock amplifiers (\$85,000) were true statement pieces for the ultra high-end community, but I am a betting man and I think the INT-60 integrated amplifier might just make an equally strong statement for audiophiles with a more reasonable budget and equally high expectations. Like the entire Pass Labs Point 8 product line, the trickledown effect of the Xs series has been considerable and the INT-60 is the latest to enjoy all that it can offer. I may not be a "War Time Consigliere", but I strongly recommend that you check out this remarkable audio achievement. It's an offer that you just can't or at least shouldn't refuse!

Postscript

I would be remiss if I did not mention the Pass Labs XP-25 phono preamp (\$10,600) that was used for this evaluation. For those readers who have followed my integrated amp reviews, they know that I do not like multiple boxes. My ultimate one box solution would not only include a preamp and amplifier, but also a top notch phono preamp!

Yes, I have reviewed a few that did include the phono preamp, but I have yet to hear one that performs at a level equal to that of the entire design. I know that it is possible as I had a one circuit board integrated phono section in my Hovland HP-200 preamp that was amazing. Unfortunately, for what little room is left in that one box, most manufacturers are now trying to squeeze in various DAC and streaming solutions. I get it. The market dictates.

When it comes to phono preamps, the new Xs phono preamp seems to be getting all the press lately for Pass Labs. I would love to hear it someday! I did review the single chassis Pass Labs XP-15 and it was fabulous. I have also spent plenty of time with several standalone tube and solid state phono preamps from Conrad Johnson, Audio Research, Joule Electra, Krell, and Sutherland. All were very impressive, but I am startled by the improvements that the XP-25 offers from those that I have auditioned.

I guess nothing comes for free, so maybe there is no need to twist my arm any further. The XP-25 is the real deal and it makes a huge difference. It is a two chassis design with a separate dedicated power supply and my guess is that this is the game changer. Also included are some thoughtful control options for gain, impedance and capacitance. The bottom line though, is that the sound is wickedly brilliant. Slightly on the warm side, performance at all frequencies is stellar. Transparency and speed will have you giggling.

So, if I cannot have my all in one dream machine, the combination of the INT-60 and XP-25 is a hard one to beat - especially if you are big into vinyl. Again, if like me you may love simplicity and of course less is more, but it's probably time to wake up and smell the coffee. A full review is planned for the future.