

part-time audiophile

by Garrett Hongo

Pass Labs XP-32 Line Level Preamp | Review



I have to admit, when it comes to a new iteration of a piece of gear I've already become familiar with and admired, I get the audiophilic shakes, atremble with the Kierkegaardian fear that this could be better, this could be great, this could eclipse what I know. So, when Marc Phillips, editor-in-chief of Part-Time Audiophile, wrote a few months ago and asked if I'd be interested in reviewing the Pass Labs XP-32 linestage, I said "Yes" immediately, as I was curious what changes Wayne Colburn, chief engineer of all of Pass Labs' preamps,

had made in the design since the XP-30 that I knew well. Even more, I was curious to experience whatever new sonic universe that the Pass Labs XP-32 could create once settled into my home reference system. Because, rather than one of the “in-crowd” cognoscenti, I’m more of a passionate amateur in hi-fi, pursuing these curiosities of mine that pop up like fireflies at the edges of my knowledge, leading me onward, quietly enticing my love of audio that has me almost constantly seeking a world of enhanced musical experiences that the latest audio gear might be able to deliver. In other words, I live in anticipation and expectation, a “victim of love” like the Eagles once sang about.
Words and Photos by Garrett Hongo

But where does that love lead? “What kind of love have you got?” sang the Eagles. The kind that made me change things all around in my system, kicking four separate pieces out of my audio rack—a preamp, a power supply, my SACD player, and a DAC/streamer—in order to make room for this new, three-box Pass Labs linestage. Out went the Zanden 3100 pre, the power supply for the Pass Labs XP-25 phono, the Esoteric K-05x SACD player, and the Node 2i streamer/DAC. In came the control/power unit of the Pass Labs XP-32 and the two boxes of its L and R audio circuitry. It made for quite the radical change in the look of my system and I felt that tantalizing insinuation of anticipation how it might change up my sound as well.



Design and Development (Wayne Colburn)

In an email exchange with Wayne Colburn, I asked what prompted the change from the XP-30 to the XP-32. He said it was because of things they’d learned in developing the premier XS line of products. While the XP-30 was also a duo-mono, it wasn’t outfitted with double-shielded transformers and the three fully independent power supplies of the XP-32. These changes decreased noise and, together with the use of new old stock Toshiba FETS and the creation of a larger output stage (a carryover from the XP pre) and its higher bias, these resulted in a sound that the Pass Labs team liked much better. Finally, the XP-32 uses a different volume control, an off-the-shelf part from the Muses line of NJR (Nisshinbo Micro Devices

Co.) that was introduced to Nelson Pass (the company’s famed founder and then its President) and Colburn twelve years ago. The control has no active circuitry like op amps but instead uses precision resistors. Pass Labs was one of the first companies to use it. In the end, Wayne felt that the Pass Labs XP-32 is a product made for someone “looking for the truth in music”—in other words, no additives and nothing missing either.

Colburn, an audio veteran, built his first amplifier when he was thirteen. It was for his younger brother’s Gibson guitar. His brother had spent all his money on the instrument and couldn’t afford an amp, so Wayne went to the local Radio Shack and started soldering from a kit and other things. He hasn’t stopped building electronics or looking for ways to improve audio equipment since. In college, he studied consumer electronics and broadcast gear for radio. And, in 1989, while working for General Electric’s radio division, he spotted what was a now famed “help wanted” ad placed by Nelson Pass in a trade journal. “High Pay No Work All Glory,” the ad said, regarding openings for audio enthusiasts with analog technical skills and experience constructing prototype audio

equipment. “Apply to Nelson Pass, Threshold Corp.” and it gave the address of its original Auburn, California location. Colburn answered, Pass hired him, and eventually made him a partner at Pass Labs in 1994. “As I have gained more experience,” Colburn wrote, “I have moved more toward Nelson’s philosophy of simpler circuits and getting more from parts and circuitry. A preamplifier does need to do certain things like input switching and volume, of course, but, after that, it should step out of the way. Low noise and low distortion are important to me as well as reliability along with consistency.”

He says he’s given much freedom in the designing of preamps and phono stages, that Pass lets him do what he loves but that, in the end, any new design is also a group project, getting the chassis fit and finish along with the sound that they want. Kent English, Mike Jaynes, and others throughout the company lend their ears, time, and expertise toward the execution of any new design like the Pass Labs XP-32.

Description and Installation

The Pass Labs XP-32 (MSRP \$18,375 in silver and \$19,125 in black) arrived in a tall, (23”W x 18”D x 27”H) heavy cardboard box weighing 80 pounds. Inside were three individual boxes, each containing one of three units bagged in plastic and floated on polystyrene corners—a control/power supply chassis and two additional chassis for gain in the analog signals of each stereo channel. Each chassis measured 17”W x 12”D x 4”H and the total weight was 57.5 pounds. Inside the box with the control unit was a remote in aluminum casing, a stock power cable, and a helpful user’s manual. Inside the box of each of the circuitry units was a JAE umbilical cable with circular ring connectors bagged in plastic. The warranty is for three years, parts and labor.



As I said, incorporating the XP-32 entailed evicting four units from my 5-shelf Box Furniture rack—three components and one power supply—that occupied two shelves in my system. Out went a Zanden 3100 preamp, an Esoteric K-05x SACD/CD player, a Bluesound Node 2i streamer/DAC, and the power supply of my Pass Labs XP-25 phono. This cleared spaces for the control/power unit of the Pass preamp to be placed on one shelf and the two boxes of the L and R circuitry units to be stacked one upon another on a lower shelf. I kept the control for the Pass phono where it was, on the shelf under my TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable and ran its umbilical from where I’d moved its power supply—

on an amp stand on the floor between one of my speakers and my audio rack. This was about the most I've ever had to do to incorporate a review piece, but, the resultant three full tiers of Pass Labs electronics facing into my listening room, all in silver aluminum, gave my system a sleek, unified look. An especially attractive touch was the CNC-incised "PASS" logo at the center of each of the (now) four pieces of electronics in my rack.

The control unit has a clean, gleaming aluminum front that incorporates a rectangular, alphanumeric, blue-fluorescent display at its center, a large volume-control knob to its right, and five control buttons to the left. The controls are the same on the remote, which also has buttons for channel balance and "Pass Thru." When "Pass Thru" is selected, the gain is set to 0dB ("179" on the display) by default and other controls are locked so that the Pass Labs XP-32 can be used for a home-theater system that normally has its own volume adjustment.



At the back, on the far left, is an IEC receptacle that also incorporates a power switch and a fuse holder for a 5mm x 20mm non-resettable time delay glass fuse. To the right of this, evenly spaced across the back, are two circular sockets for the multi-pin ring connectors of the two umbilicals.

The separate L and R channel boxes are identical, both with pinlights at the center that wink on once in operation and a secondary volume control knob at the right. This knob may be set equal to or less than the main volume control. On the back are a plethora of connections. First, on the far left of each, is the circular socket for the umbilical's ring connector. Then, there are five numbered inputs, a dedicated home-theater input, and a

tape-loop input, all on both XLR and RCA jacks. There are three outputs, both XLRs and RCAs—one main output that conforms to the volume control setting, a second output whose level can be adjusted with the independent gain control on the front to allow bi- or tri-amping, and a unity-gain tape-loop output. I set gain on each of the channel controls all the way up to have as much gain as possible when called for, as I used only one stereo amp—a Zanden 8120F (in for review).



Setting up entailed a shit ton of cabling. First, I ran right and left channel XLR interconnects (Audience frontRow) from the Pass XP-25 phono to the Input 1 XLR sockets of each channel box. Then, I ran two pairs of Audience frontRow RCA interconnects from a Zanden 120 phono and an Auralic Altair G1 streamer/DAC to RCA Inputs 2 and Inputs 3 on the two channel boxes. I left all other inputs unused. Then, I connected a pair of Zanden XLR interconnects from each of the channel box's "Master" Outputs to the Zanden 8120F stereo amp. I connected the ring couplings of each of the two umbilicals from the XP-32's control/power unit to the sockets of each of the channel boxes. It bears noting that the connectors are keyed and can only go in one way. The larger tab went to the top. The rings have a conventional right-hand thread that twists so easily I didn't have to use a tool to tighten them. There is a clockwise rotation of the ring to secure the connector, and a counter-clockwise one to disconnect. Only after all these were accomplished did I plug in my Audience frontRow MP powerChord from my Audience Adept Response aR6-T4 line to the control/power unit of the Pass Labs XP-32. To do otherwise is to risk serious damage to the circuits. Then, I reached behind the control unit, flipped on the power switch (designed to be left on otherwise), and powered up the Zanden amp as well.



Pass Labs XP-32: Listening

Exclusively analog in my listening, I began my sessions with my TW-Acoustic Raven AC 'table with a Koetsu Sky Blue MC cartridge mounted on a Raven 10.5 arm (with my Pass Labs XP-25 phono). What first struck me with the Pass Labs XP-32 in my system was the cleanness and clarity of the sound. It was as though I'd been diving and crossed from a thrash of only slightly algaed waters into the penetrating brilliance of a calm and protected lagoon. "I could see for miles and miles," The Who once sang, and that's what popped into my head on first impression. Every sonic image was clearly presented with appropriate air and space surrounding it. And there also seemed to be an added quantum of speed and precision of timing to everything.

Paul Simon

One of the first tracks I put on was from a re-issue of Paul Simon's Graceland (Legacy 8691-91472-1)—"I Know What I Know." The song, an exuberant take-off on African high-life music, came through strikingly clear and clean, from a broad and deep soundstage that pushed out farther than the walls of my listening room. Simon's vocal image was huge and seemed taller than my 8 ½' ceiling, emerging from an oval-shaped pool suspended around my Ascendo System M speakers. Interaction between the two electric guitars was brilliant, sliding notes slinky and affecting, riding above the thump of a kickdrum, explosive toms and snare. If I wanted, it seemed I could focus on each individual drum strike, the splash and slam of them reverberating but not masking any initial impact. Simon's lead vocal was wondrously expressive throughout, with a satiric edge to his conversational verses but joyous and exuberant, joining in with the chirping female backup singers in the choruses.

There were noticeable timbral shifts in emotional expression, Simon masterfully contrasting the party atmosphere of the song and its infectious African rhythms, its complexity of instrumental and vocal textures, with the offhand and wan delivery of his witty lyrics. The whole tune had a character of irrepressible snap and sass, an intimate, joshing proposal from a dance partner amidst a swirl of club music and jubilant players.

“All Over Now” from *In the End* (BMG LC-19813) by the Cranberries created an even more imposing wall of sound. The chiming guitars, together with the kickdrum and bass, made for a thundering electronic tsunami until dropping away to spotlight Dolores O’Riordan’s captivating and eerie lead vocal. The sonic field the musicians created was like a tall church organ, a castle-like structure taking up the entire soundstage, alternating between seeming impenetrable and then creating an open, a permeable space filled with strong, discernible images, capturing the inner sonic textures of various instruments. At different moments, there might be O’Riordan’s keening voice, a bowed cello or bass, a trio of backup singers, or a guitar churning out whammy chords. Throughout, there was a fabulous feeling of momentum and weight, the entire band itself like a huge, single instrument, a pulsing ocean of sound.

LA4

By contrast to the two rock tracks, “Spain” by the LA4 on *Just Friends* (Concord Jazz Direct to Disc CID-1001) featured an intricate clarity and intimate instrumental presences, led by drummer Jeff Hamilton’s rapid brushwork on the snare. Bud Shank on alto stated the theme, while Ray Brown laid down a big, resonant bass, and someone (guitarist Laurindo Almeida?) created a syncopated percussive line of applause. Shank’s alto was pure and piercing, while Almeida strummed soft chords on acoustic guitar. Shank’s playing traveled through a variety of musical styles—rhythm ‘n’ blues honks and burbling, bebop clusters of notes, bossa nova fades and slurs, and Tranelike shimmers and screechings—while never losing hold of the gorgeous melody. Together, the bandmates demonstrated sensitive interactions, Almeida creating subtle cues on guitar, while Shank and Hamilton made theirs brisk and emphatic. Almeida made some brilliant runs too, settling either on full-bodied plucked notes or dramatic strummings. Ambience, delicacy, and intimacy was the character here, with a level of realism and presence rare in my experience.

Switching to my Helius Artemis ‘table with Koetsu Gold MC cart mounted on an Artemis Phaedrus arm (with a Zanden 120 phono), I played Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* (CBS Half-Speed Master HM47293) performed by the Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Pierre Boulez. *L’Adoration de la Terre* opened with a brilliant oboe, its sound piercing and clear, backed with rich and ominous bassoons. Then came brass fanfares that were penetrating, with rich tonal colors evolving in time. There were thunderous crescendi sparkling with manifold percussion instruments—bells, bass drum, triangle, etc.—followed by emphatic flutes and an overblown piccolo. Then gentler brass fanfares fluttering like mothwings gave way to the dreadful dronings of violins and violas and mournful woodwinds. Basses and bass drum created the tempo of a funereal procession. The soundstage exceeded the spread of my speakers by 3’ and the depth was generous too—about 5’. Orchestral sections were separated with air and space, all placements correct and stable, although imaging is normally quite elusive with orchestral music.

Occasionally, a flute, piccolo, fanfare, or string instruments would stand out. What I did miss was some tonal richness and slower decays of notes. For example, though drumrolls and strikes hit suddenly and impactfully, I didn’t hear that fullness of inner body, reverberance, or pulsations of decay I often hear with my Zanden 3100 linestage, a tubed unit. There wasn’t the shimmering, brassy bouquet that sometimes surrounds a trumpet or

French horn. Instead, there was a bracing, light cavalry speed and suddenness of attack that stirred my synapses like I was on a party dose of ecstasy. In the end, I thought this might be the most precise and successful illusion of orchestral presentation I've yet heard from my system. There was enormity, gravitas, timbral clarity and precision, as well as stable location of instrumental sections, with startling peaks of volume absent of distortion or smear.

Anna Netrebko

"Ancor non giunse! ... Regnava nel silenzio," a scene and cavatina from Lucia di Lammermoor by Gaetano Donizetti, is an admirable duet sung by soprano Anna Netrebko and mezzo soprano Elīna Garanča with the Wiener Philharmoniker, directed by Giandrea Nosada from Opera Arias (DGG 479-7448). After opening with a gorgeous tutti, followed by delicate arpeggiated notes and the melodic statement from a harp, Garanča sang as the orchestra swelled. Then came Netrebko's cavatina, emotional and tragic, with lots of tremolo in her voice. The main part of the aria that follows was full of spectacular inner ornaments of vocal performance, all sounding clear, clean, and powerful. Missing was a touch of body to Netrebko's voice and a sense of air around it. But I enjoyed the system's ability to capture subtle vocal shadings, even in the passaggio from chest voice to head voice, and the dramatic climax was strong and emphatic.

Samara Joy

Switching back to the Raven/Koetsu rig and Pass Labs XP-32 front end, the system fared much better with Samara Joy's "Round Midnight" from Linger Awhile (Verve B0036472-6 01). The young chanteuse starts with a bravura intro, horns backing her, then quiets her presentation and sings stylishly, tracing the sinuous melody with her agile, luxurious vocal. Joy sings like a reed instrument but with even more control and sophistication. There were saturated tones everywhere, with rich timbres and complex textures. The track created a club-like atmosphere, with a dashing solo by Terrell Stafford on trumpet, his forte notes leaping forth out of the soundstage like paws of a panther. Joy's voice is a panther—sensuously tracking the melody, then taking leaps out of the cage of its confinement, generating extravagances of feeling in operatic glissandi that stretched her held notes in plush muscularities of sound.

Pass Labs XP-32 Conclusions

Wayne Colburn said that he imagined the Pass Labs XP-32 as a preamp for those seeking the truth in recorded playback of their music. After spending over two months with it, I wholeheartedly agree. I enjoyed the supreme clarity of sound it lent my system, bringing forth a feeling of speed, precision, and vivacity in various genres of music from jazz to opera, symphonic to rock. The quality of my own attentiveness was enhanced to the point I could become more involved with each presentation, enjoy subtleties and excitements both, as though I could either ease back or be hyper-focused if I chose to. Revealed were multiple dimensions to listening than I'd realized before, the music not only presenting in conventional soundstage layers, but affecting my realizations about it, my participations with it multiplied beyond immediate sensation into levels of thought and appreciation that seemed to journey from the visceral to the contemplative. The Pass Labs XP-32 kicked my listening from a flattened universe into one of multiple tiers and spheres, as though I stood under the apse



of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, on the cross of the incarnate and the ethereal, staring up at the dome of the Empyrean. If what you want are experiences with your music that might school you beyond mere enjoyment to moments of expanded awareness and appreciation, to a feeling of aesthetic journeying from passing pleasures to heightened, even exquisite insights, I urge you to give the Pass Labs XP-32 a serious audition. It could change the way you hear things. It could unchain the heart of your listening and rock your world.

Garrett Hongo