

FUTURE AUDIOPHILE

Pass Labs XA60.8 Class A Monoblock Amplifiers Reviewed



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Author's Reference AV System



If you're an audio hobbyist, you are probably aware of Pass Labs, its founder Nelson Pass, and the company's reputation for innovative audiophile amplifiers, preamplifiers, and integrated amplifier designs. All the company's amplifiers are solid-state designs (meaning that transistors amplify the signal as opposed to tubes), with your choice of Class A or Class AB topology. The goal of any Pass Labs amp is to provide a tube-like sound, but with better bass control that only solid-state designs can offer. To attain that, Nelson Pass believes Class A architecture gets the job done better than any other,

but of course, there are trade-offs with heat dispersion and, of course, weight. The Pass Labs XA60.8 monoblock amplifiers, the subject of this review, retail for \$14,250 per pair and can hardly be considered entry-level. Still, they are the starting point for the XA monoblock product lineup. If you are considering this price point, it suggests this is not your first amplifier purchase but rather the next step on your journey to experience something more than what you are currently experiencing.

The XA60.8 claims 60 watts per channel into eight Ohms, which may be considered low considering its size and cost. However, I suspect these monoblocks are underrated and can deliver more power, as I have never auditioned a speaker they could not manhandle – and I've had a few high-end and highly demanding speakers pass through my listening room recently.

Keeping the amplifiers like this cool is essential, and Pass Labs accomplishes this task by way of massive heat sinks that run along the right and left sides of the casework. A thick aluminum faceplate holds a gorgeous blue illuminated power gauge, with the power button just above it. With all that in place, the XA60.8 provides a classy but understated appearance that is easily recognizable. Let's delve into this amplifier design and determine if it will satisfy your conquest for audio bliss.

What Makes the Pass Labs XA60.8 Audiophile Amplifier So Special?

- The Pass Labs XA60.8 and the entire XA product line are solid-state construction. They operate in Class A mode, meaning the output transistor is on full-time, and the output current runs for the entire waveform cycle. The effects of Class A operation maximize linearity, with pleasing sonic results that are easily noticeable.
- The XA60.8's high-current design allows the amplifiers' power output to approximately double into four Ohms to a specified 120 watts per channel and double again into two Ohms to 240 watts per channel, according to Pass Labs' specifications. Many amplifiers aren't stable into two Ohms, so this is significant.
- The monoblock configuration means separate power supplies for each channel, which are large and have a large electrical capacitance for each channel. In a typical stereo amplifier, both right and left channels share a single power supply that can be overburdened at peak levels of the audio signal, which can cause an underwhelming and less charismatic audio experience that is less convincing. The monoblock design of this amp also means each channel has its own circuitry and casework, eliminating electromagnetic crosstalk or interference, resulting in a clean separation of channels with better definition, image, and soundstage.

Why Should You Care About the Pass Labs XA60.8 Monoblock Amplifiers?

The XA60.8 amps hit a particular combination of design priorities with their solid-state componentry, Class A operation, high-current design, monoblock construction, and their proprietary circuitry, all working together to provide an authentically organic experience. Additionally, their sonic characteristics are not dominant but are highly engaging – as well-implemented tubes can sound. The XA60.8s can drive pretty much any speaker that I can imagine. Most of today's best audiophile speakers are not difficult loads, but in the event you have speakers that aren't a total cake-walk to drive, the XA60.8s have your back. They can drive literally anything that I been able to throw at them in terms of speakers and just laugh at the challenge.



Some Things You Might Not Like About the Pass Labs XA60.8 Amplifiers

- As I mentioned earlier, the Pass Labs XA60.8 run warm. I measured a surface temperature of approximately 102 degrees, and when you consider there are two of them, it can make a room heat up. Before turning on the amps in my small 14-by-15-foot listening room, the temperature was sixty degrees. After about 30 to 45 minutes, the room was 67 degrees. Larger rooms will be less affected by such overall heat issues, and this may be a welcome consequence in colder climates, but in typical warmer Southern California weather, it can make a room uncomfortable – especially in the summer.
- These amplifiers are large at 19 inches wide by 21.25 inches deep by 7.5 inches high, and there are two of them, which means they take up a considerable amount of space. A proper cabinet with airflow considerations for cooling must be part of the plan, or amplifier stands placed near the speakers are another great solution.
- The XA60.8s are heavy, weighing in at 88 pounds each, to be exact. Set it and forget it should be the strategy if you make these amplifiers part of your audio system. You don't want to be moving them around.
- Unless you have solar electricity (and possibly some big batteries) you can expect a healthy electric bill. Class A amps work like a faucet, in that they are either all-on or all-off. They are inefficient. They run hot. They can heat up a room. But damn, they sound good.

Listening To the Pass Labs XA60.8 Monoblock Amplifiers...

With the help of a BlueSound Node music streamer in conjunction with my Tidal subscription, and through a Pass Labs XP-12 preamplifier, to the XA60.8s, which were connected to Focal Kanta No. 2s floorstanding speakers, I streamed various songs from various artists. One famous track from his 1981 debut album Face Value, Phil Collins's "In the Air Tonight," an MQA (Master Quality Authenticated) (buy at Amazon) track, presents a slow-paced, dramatic, moody song for the first 3:16, until the ultra-famous reverse gated reverb drum fill explodes. Nearly all musical passages need very little power, but this is a classic example of the opposite as the Phil Collins track quickly pushes the Pass Labs XA60.8s to do the job they do best, with rapid response to the explosive changes in the signal waveform with ease. Listening to this song with an inferior amplification does not do it justice, but the Pass Labs monoblocks deliver it with finesse and control. The soundstage was tall and wide, with a natural timbre

to Collins' voice. With each amplifier playing its part using its dedicated power supply, the bass was controlled yet detailed while reaching the depths of the lowest audible frequencies, showing no indication of strain. Imaging pushed the performance into the room with an instinctive quality of the live performance. 1995's Tiger Lily by Natalie Merchant, especially the track "Carnival" (buy at Amazon), shines when played through the Pass Labs XA60.8s. With an ensemble of acoustic and electric instruments, the song starts with a lively but seductive percussion section, with electric bass guitar jumping in soon after, combined with Natalie's swanky vocals creating an overall convincing image that gives the impression of an expertly recorded studio session that was immediately three dimensional. The soundstage floated nicely in the middle of the room, conveying life with a glow that translated to a natural quality perceived as realistic. There is no editorializing or tainting of the original presentation, but rather a direct replication of the original recording. Another notable quality is the tremendous amount of deep mid-level bass present at lower volumes, negating the desire to crank up the volume to satisfy my senses.

Do the Pass Labs XA60.8 Monoblock Amplifiers Hold Their Value?

Over the long haul, the Pass Labs XA60.8 should hold its value better than most amplifiers due to its build quality, brand legacy, and overall design. All audio equipment depreciates, however some components lose value more quickly than others. It's also worth noting that Pass Labs updates models infrequently. Something substantial must change with hardware or a new design concept to materially change performance. That is one of the excellent characteristics of owning well-designed gear. And even if a new design rears its head, it does not mean your Pass Labs XA60.8s' performance is suddenly lessened. If you still like it, keep it. This is a buy once/cry once type of purchase. In looking at resales of Pass Labs amplifiers, I noticed a common theme: sellers mentioned they were or had moved up a model in the Pass Labs lineup, necessitating the sale of their current amplifier. That says something.





What Is the Competition for The Pass Labs XA60.8 Monoblock Amplifiers?

The most similar amplifier to the XA60.8 is the Accuphase A-75, a 60-watt amplifier in a stereo configuration (both channels in a single component). While not in a monoblock design, it operates in Class A mode with the same power rating as the XA60.8 and is a high-current design. Of course, the Accuphase A-75 lacks the benefits of separate right and left chassis and power supplies, which monoblock designs enjoy. However, single-component casework will be easier to implement. At \$15,999, the A-75 is more expensive but not egregiously so. I know there will be naysayers claiming Class A operation is unnecessary to achieve the performance level I experienced. While I do not share that opinion, and since I have limited Class A solid state models to select from, I offer you a class AB alternative, and what better choice than Pass Labs' very own X260.8? This is a high-bias design, meaning it should operate in Class A mode for most of your listening, unless you have a very large room, very thirsty speakers, or you play your music way louder than you should. The X260.8, like the XA60.8, is a monoblock design but is rated at 260 watts per channel into 8 Ohms and retails for \$14,250 per pair, which is identical to the XA60.8s. Since budget is often a point of comparison, the X260.8 is a viable alternative if you believe overall power is more important than pure Class A operation. Again, due to a lack of similar designs, I ventured out with a tube design by Cary Audio with their CAD 805 RS Vacuum Tube Monoblock amplifiers, which are rated at 50 watts per channel in pure Class A. They're priced lower but in the vicinity of the XA60.8 at \$12,746 per pair. These amplifiers have similar specifications, albeit in a tube design. They will possess the same drawbacks with heat and space considerations. There are plenty of other tube designs in this category as well. Still, I have experienced

some of Cary's tube amplification at trade shows in the past and remember being very impressed. There are other Class A amp designs of significance from the likes of Classé Audio, Germany's T+A, and some of John Curl's designs at Parasound.



Final Thoughts on the Pass Labs XA60.8 Monoblock Amplifiers...

The Pass Labs XA60.8 monoblock amplifiers are quite a handful. They run hot, take up enormous amounts of space, and can spark a lively debate with your significant other, yet I would not have it any other way. **The XA60.8s' naturally live sound quality throughout the frequency range far outweighs any of the cons. I just love them.**

Their vibrant and realistic, with an air of brilliance that I have not experienced with other amplifiers I've had in my system, and they stand as my reference. In my experience, having amplifiers come and go over the years as an audio enthusiast and a reviewer, Class AB amplifiers can do an outstanding job, but in the end, they lack that exceptional quality that a Class A design can impart on the overall sound quality, especially at this price point. Taking the Class A design a step further in high-current monoblock foray, along with the Pass Labs circuitry and implementation, is a recipe that yields a wondrous audio experience. If you are an experienced audio consumer searching for something closer to the holy grail, consider the Pass Labs XA60.8 or perhaps another model within the XA lineup with more power if you believe you need it. You simply cannot go wrong here.