

Reviews

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Audio Ramblings - The Axiom Passive...

by Dave Clark

Axiom II Passive Preamp Fully balanced/XLR version from Luminous Audio (\$349)

It is always such a joy to find items in the high-price world of audio that are not so high-priced and still get you so much of what one can expect when handing out serious coin. Case in point: the Axiom II Passive Preamp Fully balanced/XLR version from Luminous Audio (\$349 as configured, one has many options of inputs - RCA - pots and wiring).

Now passives have a bad rap, and for many reasons, these justifiably so. Yeah, they do not 'pre' the signal in terms of amplifying, treating, coloring, or whatever; so pretty much what goes in is what comes out—there is not much inside to do much of anything to the signal, good or bad. Sure there are connections, wire, switches, and a volume pot—all of varying quality and worth—but the signal is passed through a passive device for minimal effect.

Simple to make, cheaper to make, easier to make... well to a point that is. The problem is getting the parts in the passive to have as little impact on how well the output impedance of the source and the input impedance of the amplification play together. Active preamplifiers deal with this actively making any source's output impedance a moot point to the input of an amplifier. Passives just pass it along. In many cases, the option of adding a resistor to the signal path inside the passive addresses this to a degree—but it is never a perfect world. Best case is to have a quality source with a decent enough output impedance to drive an amplifier with a benign impedance, and then match them as best as one can with the a passive fitted with a resistor to do what it can. Worst case you lose some dynamics, slam, bass drive, and so on. Best case what you lose is all rather moot—that is, it is not enough to be an issue.

This is what you get with the Axiom units... nice deal Tim! Drop it in and wow, you get music. Music that has so little missing in terms of what passives are reputed to omit... or commit to the signal. I love this little guy. Placed between the Playback MPS-5 and my Clayton M200s with PAD Proteus Provectus XLR cabling (1.5m from the MPS-5 to the Axiom and 3m to the Claytons) I experienced dynamics, slam, bass extension and impact, sweet extended treble, dimensional images, and a wonderfully rich and textured midrange. I get my music and in a way that I am hard pressed to say that I am missing much, if anything. Of course doing side by side comparisons requires changing cables, letting the tubes and amps warm up, and so on... so quick comparisons are difficult.

My point is that just using the Axiom... well I can listen for hours and never sit there questioning what is wrong or what is missing. The music plays, the system sings, and I am happy.

But come on Clark, there has to be trade-offs? No doubt. When I have taken the time to compare the Axiom directly to the Cary SLP-05... and what a PITA that is, but we be audio reviewers so we must do the component shuffle... sure it can't do what the Cary does: that oh so sweet tube presence and warmth, greater dynamics, wow slam, deeper bass extension and control, and so on and so on. The Cary is doing what an active preamp is supposed to do—maximize the output from a source to meet the input of an amplifier. So yeah, I bought the Cary just because it does that so well with the Claytons—they are a perfect match for my music, my preferences, my speakers... and so on. Synergy perfected absolute. Differences are there, but not to a point that makes me toss the Axiom across the room and pity the fool who thinks passives are the way to go and actives are the tools of the forsaken.

Sorry man, the Axiom is quite nice, does what it does for so little cash, and yes, it makes my music play. Sure, mine has only 1 input which makes it difficult to use, sure it is not the best option for analog users unless your phonostage is robust and a good match for your amplifier... and so on. No need to nitpick, I love the Axiom and cannot recommend it any higher for those who find the want of passive as opposed to an active preamp with more options and inputs than they will ever need. Give it a try! Perfect for those who are computer-based with a quality DAC. Damn... that is how I used it here!

<http://luminousaudio.com/axiom2/bal.html>

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