

Like A Swiss Watch

NAGRA CDP AND CDC COMPACT DISC PLAYERS

Wayne Garcia



For over fifty years the Swiss professional-audio firm Nagra has been building exceptionally high-quality recording equipment for broadcast, cinema, and music applications. The brand gained legendary esteem among enthusiasts for its engineering excellence and superior sound quality, but it wasn't until 1997 that audiophiles were able to enjoy consumer-oriented Nagra components. That was the year the company introduced the PL-P battery-powered tube preamplifier. In the decade since, Nagra has built tube as well as solid-state amplification (see Issue 173's review of the Pyramid amplifier), but aside from a DAC released in 2002 it hasn't made a statement with a source component. Until last January, that is, when Nagra introduced not just one but three CD playback sources at the Consumer Electronics Show.

Realizing this ambitious goal wasn't easy. Over the past several years, the Nagra team thought long and hard about whether it should adopt Red Book CD, SACD, DVD-A, or a "universal" format for its players. In the end, the failure of DVD-A and SACD to penetrate a wide market, the sonic compromises involved with multi-format players, the maturity of the CD format,

and the huge number of available and new titles convinced them that Red Book CD remained the way to go.

The Nagra lineup comprises the CDP(layer—\$13,495), a straightforward machine with a fixed analog output, and the CDC(concept—\$14,995), which sports volume and balance controls and a dancing "modulometer," and can either be fed into a preamp or used to directly drive power amplifiers in CD only systems. Nagra also offers the CDT(transport—\$12,495), a transport-only mechanism that can eventually be upgraded to a CDP for the \$1000 difference in retail price.

Having lived for many months with MBL's superb 1521 A CD transport and 1511 E DAC (see review in Issue 164), I was somewhat taken aback by the Nagras' small size. If the robustly beautiful, German-made MBL stack is akin to a Mercedes Benz, then Nagra's diminutive, understated, equally precision-made trio are like a Swiss watch. In retrospect, I probably shouldn't have been so surprised by the compact dimensions of these units. After all, Nagra is the company that made portable high-quality recording a reality back in 1951 when it introduced the Nagra 1 reel-to-reel deck. And the Nagra CD players bear a striking resemblance to

Nagra's portable recording gear.

Nagra's design brief emphasizes building the most neutral-sounding components possible, and nothing in my 60-day audition period led me to believe otherwise. Because of this, the Nagra CD players can take awhile to wrap your mind around. Luckily, U.S. distributor John Quick offered to provide me with both versions of the player for comparison's sake. I first lived with the CDC for several weeks, and got great musical pleasure from it. But it was with the arrival of the CDP that the two Nagras' qualities really snapped into focus. Since both players offer essentially similar sounds, with the CDP ultimately being the purer-sounding unit, I'll discuss their performance as one, and describe the differences in an accompanying sidebar.

Among the most outstanding of the Nagras' traits is the ability to clarify mixes that can sound downright murky. Take the

well-known example of Emmylou Harris' magnificent *Wrecking Ball* [Asylum]. Producer Daniel Lanois is famous for his highly atmospheric mixes, but in this case the layers of "swimmy" sound suggest a tangled thicket of underwater sea grass. The Nagra players clarified Lanois' mix to a degree I had never before experienced. Harris' otherworldly soprano, especially, shone through with uncluttered purity. Bass notes, from Lanois' own fat electric bass to Brian Blades' crisp sledgehammer drum strokes, were also heard with a newfound sense of clarity and definition. Thankfully, the Nagras deliver this purity without sterility, and they never spotlight any one area of the frequency spectrum, but have great top-to-bottom coherence.

Sourced from a company that supplies parts for the Mars Rover

Fans of large-scale orchestral works will love how this purity and resolution effortlessly reveals deeply layered networks of musical lines, exemplified by Michael Tilson-Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony's performance of Mahler's Second Symphony [SFS Media]. The CD layer of this excellent DSD recording also shows the Nagras' lovely dynamic shading; the symphony's powerful dynamic peaks remain clear even when orchestral, vocal, and organ choirs threaten system meltdown. But the symphony's hushed chamber-like moments were perhaps even more striking. These CD players maintain their clarity and nuance during the most sparsely scored passages—such as Lorraine Hunt Lieberson's mezzo-soprano passage from the "Ulrich" movement, or the silky massed strings and exquisitely delicate and airy solo flute in the lengthy finale. Best of all, the Nagras are intensely involving, intellectually and emotionally.

Because most CD players sound somewhat better with their displays turned off, and some dramatically better, I thought I should hear the Nagras with displays off. John Quick didn't encourage the experiment, but playing Captain Luke's "Rainy Night in Georgia," from Music Maker's

Technical Stuff

Built on the same 11" x 2.75" x 9" brushed aluminum chassis, the Nagra players look like no others. The CD player and transport appear identical, while the "concept" player has that modulometer (an essentially worthless but cosmetically cool backlit meter that roughly indicates signal output), the volume and balance controls mentioned above, plus a headphone jack and a toggle switch that selects between Main Out and Headphone Out. All three players sport two additional toggles—one that opens and closes the CD-loading drawer, and another that either dims or kills the players' function displays, plus Nagra's familiar-looking rotary switch, which can be used to manually control transport functions or be placed into "R" (for remote-control) mode.

Many high-end CD players feature top-loading disc trays to minimize mechanical instability, wear and tear, and inconsistent disc placement that results in excessive servo-correction. Realizing that most people prefer the convenience a front-loading tray affords when it comes to component placement (and even stacking), Nagra devised a solution it feels offers the best of both worlds—the "Nagra Mono-block tray." Here, the disc-transport module (a Philips CD-Pro2M) is mounted to and moves with the tray. Fitted with a "silent block silicon suspension mechanism," the aluminum monoblock module is said to provide an unusually stable seating platform for compact discs. The high-precision rails on which the unit rides in and out boast a tolerance of just two microns between rails and drawer. Movement is provided by a pinion mounted on a precision motor sourced from Maxon, a company that supplies parts for the Mars Rover. A lightweight disc clamp machined from a solid aluminum block adds further stability, while an LCD display is shielded in the front section of the drawer (but still affects the sound, as described above). **WGW**

Specs & Pricing

Type of outputs: Single-ended and balanced

Dimensions: CD players, 11" x 2.75" x 9";

power supply units, 3.75" x 2" x 5.5"

Weight: 8.8 lbs. (each player)

Prices: CDP, \$13,495; CDC, \$14,995

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

MBL 1521 A CD transport and 1511 E

DAC; Redpoint Audio Model D turntable,

Tri-Planar Mk VII and Graham Phantom

B-44 tonearms, Transfiguration Phoenix

cartridges; Artemis Labs LA-1 linestage,

PL-1 phono stage, and SP-1 power

amplifier; Kharmia Mini Exquisite and

Verity Rienzi loudspeakers; TARA Labs Zero

interconnects, digital cable, Omega speaker

cables, Zero GX tonearm cable, The One

power cords, and AD-10B Power Screen;

Finite Elemente Spider equipment racks

Came So Far blues sampler, revealed that, indeed, the audibly lower noise floor quite dramatically lifts veils, improves detail, and simply sounds more natural and that much less like reproduced music.

Nagra's CDP and CDC clearly rank with the finest of today's ultra-pricey compact disc players. Which shouldn't be surprising, since Nagra's engineers (the same, by the way, who design the pro gear) do know a thing or two about how CDs are actually recorded. When compared to MBL's 1521 A/1511 E combination, the Nagras do not have the richness of tone color that practically defines the MBL sound (but then, what else does?). But that's more a matter of style and taste than superiority. Combine the Nagras' outstanding tonal purity, exceptional clarity and resolution, and sheer beauty of sound—not to forget their compact size and Patck Philippe vibe—and you've got to consider them among the coolest and most desirable of high-end CD players. **TAS**

How They Compare

In order to hear how Nagra's straight CDP player compares with the more costly but potentially more flexible CDC, I selected a single CD for comparison—Jeff Buckley's *Live at Sin-é* [Columbia]. This recording captured the late singer at his regular East Village café gig, at the very start of his short career. The disc has remarkable presence, an amazing degree of instrumental color and shifting dynamics, and a highly charged sense of ambience.

I started off driving the CDC with its variable out and volume control into an Artemis Labs SP-1 tube amplifier. The sound was good, but experience told me that the presentation was overly taut, lacking in ambience and "bloom," and not as immediate or rich as I'm used to. Reinserting the Artemis LA-1 preamp back into the chain confirmed this. Suddenly, the recording's venue seemed to gain width and depth, and the air was more charged with energy. Things got better still when I placed the CDP in the system. With its simpler fixed-output path, this player allowed me to hear not only the room's ambience but its dimensions, which became more clearly defined (you can actually hear the sound from Buckley's amplifier reverberate off the café's walls). The tone colors of his guitar emerged with even richer and more complex timbre, his singing became even more expressive, his overall performance that much more riveting.

The CDC will certainly satisfy those who seek the elegant simplicity of a high-quality CD-only system consisting of an amp and speakers. But the CDP is the way to go for those seeking the ultimate in what Nagra's single-chassis players have to offer. **WG**