



The Nagra CDP

By Jeff Dorgay

The Nagra CDP follows the same form factor as their PL-L linestage and VPS phono preamplifiers, (12.2 x 10 x 3 inches, 310 x 254 x 76mm) making for an extremely attractive addition to an all Nagra system. It also has the same high level of mechanical and electrical build quality as the rest of the components in the Nagra line.

Retail price on the CDP is \$14,295 and it comes packaged with the billet-like remote found on the PL-L, with a few additional buttons to control the CD transport. Those of you that would like a one-box solution can purchase Nagra's CDC player that has a built in linestage and Nagra's extremely stylish Modulometer for \$16,750. Adding this to your favorite power amplifier yields a very high performance digital-based playback system. My first exposure to the Nagra CD players was a couple of years ago with this player and Nagra's PSA power amplifier. As with all Nagra components, the system synergy between their components is phenomenal, yet works very well with other brands too.

I'm thinking now that I own more than two pieces of Nagra gear, I'm becoming a Nagraphile, so I must admit some bias towards the brand. Before you all scream conspiracy theory, you need to know that I'm much more demanding of my friends than I am casual acquaintances. In essence, I expect more from the things I truly enjoy, not less. The Nagra CDP came through with flying colors.

Precision throughout

Often, the American consumer still equates bigger with better. Count me out; I'll take the Ducati over the Harley any day of the week. Don't let the CDP's compact size fool you; this player is worth every penny asked. Removing the top of the CDP reveals 8x oversampling 24 bit DAC's from Burr Brown and all digital conversion circuitry is covered with a gold plated shield. The layout is tidy and purposeful, not a bit of space is wasted. Keeping the signal paths short has always been a Nagra hallmark, from their portable tape recorder days.

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Again, just like the other products in the Nagra line that share this casework, the power supply is external, so only 12vdc gets to the CDP. This keeps related noise to a bare minimum and further aids the compact design.

The minute you push the button to open the transport door the mechanical precision of this player can really be appreciated. Nagra gets their transport motors from the same company that equipped the Mars Rover, so you can expect phenomenal terrestrial performance. The sliders on the transport drawer have a two-micron tolerance and the magnetic weight on top of the transport has been precisely calibrated to provide the maximum in clamping force without overtaxing the motors or bearings. The brochure for CDP says “worthy of a Swiss timepiece”. Indeed.

In their further efforts to reduce vibration and isolating the transport from the rest of the CD playback system, the CDP’s transport is isolated by their “Alpha Gel” material that is now in their VFS (vibration free system) platform that was not

available at the time of this review. However, it is worth noting that the amount of improvement I was able to get in the areas of bass solidity, low level information retrieval and an increased soundstage in all dimensions, leads me to believe that adding a VFS to the CDP would offer an additional performance boost.

It took me a little while to get used to the fairly substantial “whirr” that accompanies the opening and closing of the disc tray. When heard from across the room for the first time, one might expect a much larger piece of gear than the diminutive CDP! It is built like a Swiss bank account, so after a couple of days it fades into the background of your consciousness.

Setup and Integration

Because I have an all Nagra system with the PL-L and the PSA, I started their first. As you would expect, this was a perfect match, stylistically and tonally. The CDP has an extremely neutral tonal balance that is perhaps just slightly

on the detailed side of neutral, much like their PSA and PMA power amplifiers. (Interestingly, the PL-L and VPS preamplifiers are just slightly on the warm side of neutral)

If you make the CDP a part of an all Nagra system, it will simply be plug and play, so the most you will probably have to worry about is which cables to agonize over. I had excellent luck with all Shunyata cables in this system, using the Antares series interconnects (balanced throughout) and their Orion speaker cables.

For those of you that use a preamplifier with balanced inputs, the CDP offers the option of fully symmetrical XLR output in addition to the single ended RCA analog outputs. It is worthy of note that three digital outputs are available (coax, toslink, and XLR), should you decide to use the CDP as a transport. As good as a one box player as the CDP is, it does have some proprietary circuitry from Nagra’s latest reference recorder, so it will make a first class transport as well.

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The Head of the Class

After spending a lot of time with the CDP in a few different systems, it is definitely at the top of its class in terms of musical reproduction. Just like with high performance sports cars or any other product, the sonic differences between the best players are not as wide as one might expect.

The Nagra's strength is its clarity and resolution. Should you have a lot of fairly well recorded CD's, the CDP will let you hear a bit further into the recordings than you might with something else. Again, this player is very neutral, so it will not embellish or romanticize the presentation. I should also add here that the CDP has no weaknesses in any way. I've spent the last couple of years listening to a lot of the top shelf digital players and always came away impressed after a listening session with this player.

Thanks to this neutrality, I think the CDP

would be especially pleasing to those having more acoustic music in their collection. It's not that you can't play Metallica with good results on the CDP, it definitely has the weight and dynamics that make heavy rock music fans happy, but the subtleties are always in the fine details. This is where the Nagra excels, offering up a lot of tonal details and shading that other players don't always have. There usually tends to be a bit more nuance in acoustic music that will really allow the CDP to shine through.

I was also very impressed with the sheer dynamic speed of the CDP. When listening to large scale orchestral music, the better a component (or a whole system for that matter) can keep up with dynamic swings, the more convincingly real a component sounds. Going through my favorites from Mahler, Shostakovich and Bax, I was not disappointed in the least. This extra detail that

the Nagra offers up is what helps to define the hall space and boundaries of where a recording was captured. I have to believe that Nagra's years of expertise building the analog and digital recorders has greatly influenced this.

In addition to superb dynamics and tonality, this player has a very airy, open presentation. As I mentioned earlier, it is very neutral sounding, but never sterile, harsh or etched. If you listen to anything with a lot of natural decay (again, that emphasis on acoustic instruments), you will notice that things have the proper amount of decay. Cue up your favorite solo piano record and listen to not only the richness of the strings, but the natural reverb as they fade into nothingness with a perfect smoothness. *Morph the Cat* sounds pretty darn good on anything, but it takes a masterpiece to sound great with violins and this is where the CDP is at the top of the class. (continued)

On one level, the closest comparison I can make to the CDP is not even in the digital domain, but the analog one. If you've ever heard the ASR Basis Exclusive phono preamplifier, it is very similar tonally to the Nagra CDP, it presents the truth, but neither adds nor subtracts anything. If that is your cup of tea, this player will offer digital bliss indeed.

The \$14,000 Question

We aren't even going to discuss the why of a \$14,000 CD player. If you are pondering making a jump this far up the ladder, I'm going to assume you have the room, system and recordings to handle it. From a sound quality standpoint, the Nagra CDP is one of the best players I've heard at this price point.

The other big question is whether you want a dedicated redbook player, or one that can accommodate other formats as well. With so many people jumping out of physical media and into the world of music servers and digital downloads, there has never been a better time to make a major addition to your CD library. Remember how everyone was giving their LP's away in the mid 80's? History is repeating itself, so if you want that last, great CD player the Nagra will not disappoint you.

Last but not least is the Nagra design ethos. I am sure that this player will still be spinning along 20 years from now just as well as it does today, and should it need any attention, you can rest assured that Nagra will be able to service it. So, whether you are adding the crown jewel to an all Nagra system, or just need a high performance CD player, this is one you can purchase with confidence. But I warn you, Nagra products are addicting. If your journey with them starts with the CDP, I guarantee you will not be able to stop there.

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The Nagra CDP CD Player MSRP: \$14,295

MANUFACTURER

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ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS

Preamplifiers: Conrad Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Nagra PL-L, BAT VK-32SE

Power Amplifiers: Conrad Johnson Premier 350, Nagra PSA, BAT VK-55SE

Phono Preamplifier: Nagra VPS, ASR Basis Exclusive, Rega Ios

Speakers: MartinLogan Summit, Martin Logan Descent i

Digital Sources: Naim CD555, Meridian 808, Sooloos Music Server, Wadia 581i SE

Analog Sources: TK Acoustic Raven Two turntable w/SME iV.Vi and SME 309 arms, Dynavector XV-1s and Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood cartridges, Spiral Groove SG2 turntable w/TriPlanar VII arm and Lyra Skala cartridge

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares, Audioquest Sub 3

Speaker Cable: Shunyata Orion

Power Cords: Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Anaconda Helix Alpha

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco & Dmitri

Room Treatment: GIK 242 panels, GIK Tri-Traps, Sonex Classic

Racks: Finite Element Pagode Signature

Accessories: Furutech LP Demagnetizer, Finite Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Shunyata Dark Field Cable elevators