

LISTENING TO LUXURY

NAGRA'S VPA AMPLIFIER IS ONE GLASS ACT.

BY STEVE GUTTENBERG PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST NEUFFER

ALTHOUGH SOUND QUALITY IS what inspires the continued popularity of the old-fashioned vacuum tube, Nagra's VPA amplifier seduces your eyes before it charms your ears. You notice the amplifier's chameleonic sound quality only after you tear your attention away from the luminescent beauty of its tubes. The VPA conveys the blistering drive of rock 'n' roll as adeptly as it expresses the fevered swing of jazz and the romance of classical music. My experience with countless high-end amplifiers could not prepare me for the musical epiphanies streaming out of the VPA. I am head over heels in love with this amp's astonishing sound and build quality.

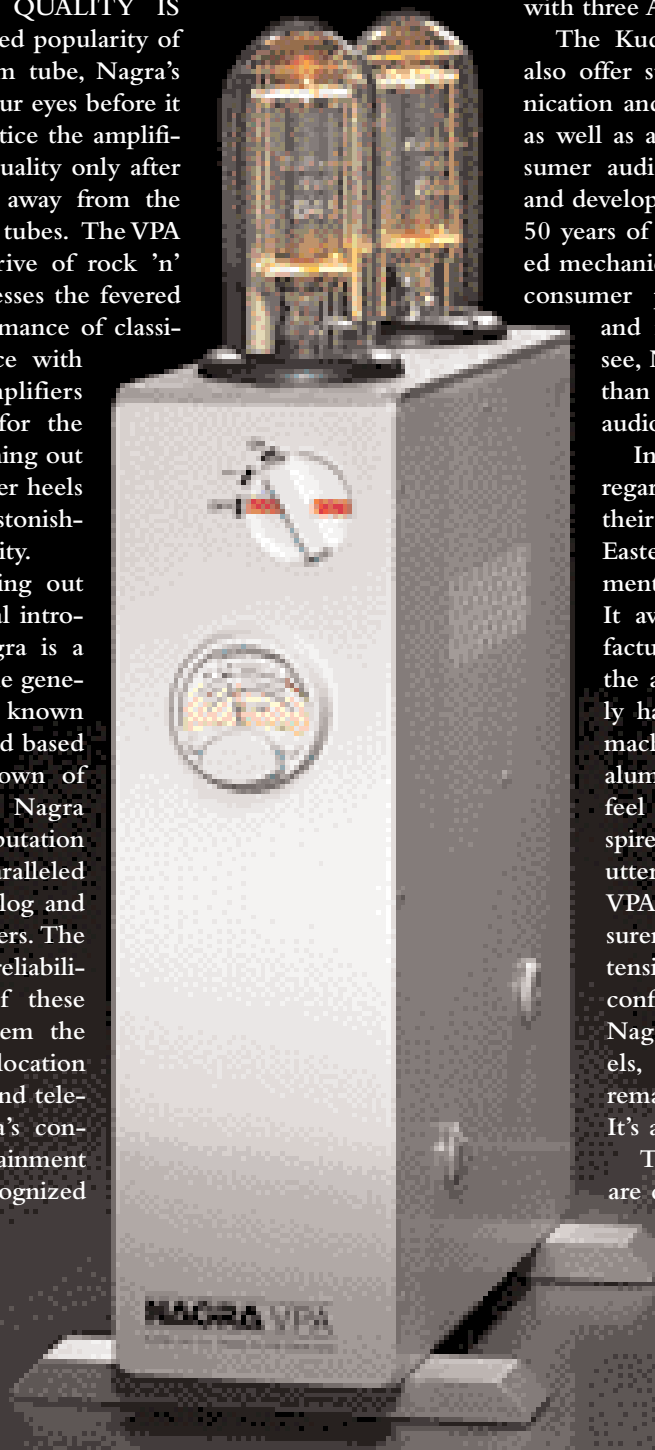
With my initial gushing out of the way, a more formal introduction is in order. Nagra is a decades-old enterprise, the genesis of a corporation now known as the Kudelski Group and based in Switzerland in the town of Cheseaux-sur-Lausanne. Nagra established its global reputation by developing an unparalleled range of professional analog and digital audio tape recorders. The legendary performance, reliability and sophistication of these machines have made them the industry standard for on-location sound recording in film and television production. Nagra's contributions to the entertainment industry have been recognized

with three Academy Awards and one Emmy.

The Kudelski Group's various divisions also offer state-of-the-art satellite communication and digital television technologies, as well as a range of professional and consumer audio products. Kudelski's research and development department has more than 50 years of experience building sophisticated mechanical and electronic devices for its consumer products, government security and military customers. As you can see, Nagra/Kudelski is more evolved than your average boutique high-end audio manufacturer.

In a time when even some highly regarded American brands acquire their products from faceless Far-Eastern factories, Nagra's commitment to quality is nearly unmatched. It avoids subcontracting the manufacture of the VPA's bits and pieces; the amplifier is designed and entirely hand-built in Switzerland. Nagra machines the chassis from hardened aluminum, and (sigh) even the tactile feel of the VPA's power switch inspires confidence. It is smooth yet utterly precise. Packed with each VPA you will find a test and measurement protocol documenting extensive laboratory evaluations that confirm the amplifier's performance. Nagra rarely introduces new models, so the VPAs will most likely remain in the line for many years. It's a safe investment.

The crisp Eurostyle VPA towers are designed to sound beautiful and

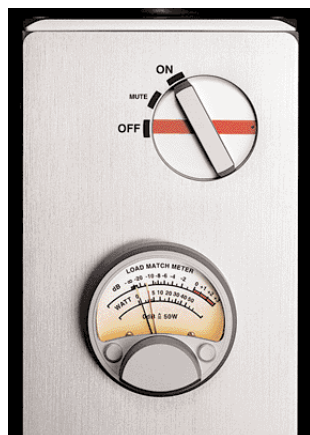


provide extraordinary sensory pleasures. The petite dimensions blessedly lack the imposing girth of more typically broad-shouldered high-end components. Each weighs just under 30 pounds and measures just a little more than 4 inches wide and 12 inches deep—about the size of a large dictionary. You can gauge the amplifier's voltage, current and power output from the Load Match Meter in front, or just enjoy the meter's cool looks and soft yellowish light.

The VPA's rear panel offers only basic connectivity: standard RCA and professional-style XLR inputs to interface the VPA with your preamp, and binding posts to attach your speaker cables. Yes, some elite amps flash superior specifications and many offer greater power output, but I assure you that none combine the VPA's exquisite build quality and pure sensuality. These Swiss amps have soul.

For this review, I am enjoying stereo music through a pair of VPAs. My mind reels at the thought of corraling a quintet of VPAs to form a complete home theater system.

Powering up the VPAs produces a light show: The tubes' interiors glow reddish-white as they reach their operating temperature of 535 degrees Fahrenheit. Concentric rings of stainless-steel rods encircle the tubes; the inner ring draws heat away from the tubes, while the outer ring protects the owner's hands from inadvertently touching the burning-hot glass. (The accompanying photos do not show the rings.) Despite these protective cages, this amplifier



The VPA offers no gratuitous features. The back panel (top) has only balanced and unbalanced inputs, and dual speaker outputs that facilitate the use of dual speaker cables for better sound. Since each VPA produces only 50 watts of power, you may want to monitor the Load Match Meter (above) on occasion to make sure that your speaker system and listening habits do not place undue strain on the amplifier's tubes.

should be sequestered safely out of reach of small children.


Of course the question arises: Why use vacuum tubes at all? Haven't transistors replaced that old technology? In most cases that is true, but many audiophiles prefer tubes' softer, smoother sound to the cool accuracy of solid-state electronics. And while the VPA's modest 50-watt power rating might be a concern for some potential buyers, I never sense a lack of oomph during weeks of listening sessions. In fact, the Load Match Meters never indicate more than 15 watts, even as I ramp up the volume level to annoy-my-neighbors levels. Even so, it would be safest to consult with your dealer or installer about mating the VPAs with speakers that can produce high volumes with relatively little power.

If the allure of these Swiss amps intrigues but you prefer a more powerful solid-state amplifier, Nagra offers the highly regarded 250-watt MPA series of solid-state stereo amplifiers. That said, I am seduced by the romance of this tube amplifier. For me, the VPA's sound is so much more like live music, while transistor amps inevitably sound more like hi-fi components *reproducing* the sound of live music. Of course these are subjective judgments, but if you would like to join me in my hedonistic voyage into the upper limits of sensual sound, the VPAs are the answer.

I never had the chance to see Jimi Hendrix, Charles Mingus or the Beatles in concert, but with the VPA I feel like I have at least approached the live experience. As I write this, Paul McCartney and his guitar hold court between my speakers. I swear, Sir Paul is *right there*. When the Nagra VPA breathes new life into familiar old recordings, the hairs on

RETRO BUT REFINED: The VPA's old-fashioned tube circuitry produces an almost incomparably lush sound.

the back of my neck stand straight up as I take it all in, spellbound by the enhanced realism.

Point is, the Nagra VPA will feed your soul. Technological trends come and go, but investing in a Nagra component is akin to buying a fine watch or camera—you will never think of it as a mere audio appliance. The Nagra VPA is likely to be a part of your life for a long, long time. Who knows, it may be the last amplifier you will ever buy. 

■ PRICE: \$15,000 per pair

■ CONTACT: 615.726.5191

www.nagraaudio.com