

Intimacy, Purity, and Clarity

NAGRA PYRAMID MONOBLOCK AMPLIFIER

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Like everyone from home builders to automobile makers, stereo designers have not been immune to the temptation of supersizing their products. From 150-pound amplifiers to nine-foot-tall loudspeakers, it almost seems as though audio manufacturers are trying to engage the muscles of their prospective clients as much as their hearing.

But just as slumping SUV sales have pushed car makers to rethink their direction, an intriguing development in high-end audio has led to a return by some manufacturers to the “small is beautiful” mantra. The 200-watt Nagra Pyramid monoblock amplifiers, which hail from Switzerland, are a case in point. Like many of the Class D switching amplifiers that have appeared in recent years, the Nagras (which are *not* switching amplifiers) are diminutive, run cool, and promise to pack a wallop belying their size.

When John R. Quick, Nagra’s astute and experienced sales and marketing manager, dropped the amplifiers off, he barely needed my assistance schlepping them in. You could almost hold one of the Pyramids in the palm of your hand. Still, the appearance of the Nagras is inevitably going to be an issue. This is a love-it-or-hate-it design. The pyramidal shape was developed to allow all four sides of the amplifier to operate as a heatsink. No matter how hard I pushed



Nagra Pyramid Monoblock Amplifier



these amplifiers, I could barely get them to become warm to the touch. The amplifier also sports blue LEDs that flash in brightness proportionate to the amount of power the amplifier is generating. Red, which I only managed to trigger once, signals that the amplifier is clipping. If the amplifier is unduly stressed, it will terminate operation before the loudspeaker is damaged.

Learning that I own Magnepan MG 20.1s, Quick called Magnepan's Wendell Diller before heading over to my place. Although he was a little nervous about the power requirements of the speakers, the Nagras were easily up to the task of driving the 4-ohm resistive load presented by the 20.1s. The PMA boasts sufficient power to drive the Magnepans and deliver a healthy amount of voltage. But because I enjoy bi-amping, we added a stereo PSA to power the Maggies' bass panels. (One interesting thing I learned from the flashing lights is that Maggies' ribbon tweeters appear to soak up more power than its bass panels.)

The technology inside the \$10,995-per-pair Pyramid is as unusual as the speaker looks. Drawing on Nagra's now-discontinued MOSFET power amplifier, it uses a switching power supply as well

as a patented Power Factor Corrector to allow it to use a mere two—two!—output devices to deliver 200-watts into an 8-ohm load. As seasoned audiophiles know, matching transistor output devices is something of a nightmare for equipment designers. The more output devices a designer uses, the more current an amplifier can deliver. But the trade-off is in having to match the output devices. It seems almost impossible to get transistors to work together perfectly, which is one of the reasons that tube aficionados like to grouse about a slightly hard, less than euphonic “transistor” sound.

The Nagra has none of that hardness. This is Swiss engineering to the max. Seldom has a solid-state amplifier possessed this kind of silkiness. When I first heard the Nagras on the Magnepans, it was with something of a gulp. My initial thought was that they sounded less etched than the Classé Omega monoblocks, which are some of the best solid-state amps I've ever heard. These unflappable amps are more powerful, go deeper, and throw up a bigger soundstage than the Nagras. They also cost three times as much. And while the Nagras don't wimp out on rock music, they aren't really designed to drive most loudspeakers to

ear-shattering levels. They specialize in something else—intimacy, purity, and clarity.

Take, for example, the much-heralded Magnepan ribbon tweeter. This revealing transducer—some would say excessively so—sounded close to flawless through the Nagras. There was never even a hint of shrillness, whether it was female vocals or a scorching jazz trumpet—except when the recording itself was flawed. The Nagra was also no slouch when it came to bass. I was mightily impressed by its pitch definition, most notably on Linda Ronstadt's affecting CD of Mexican folk songs, *Canciones de mi Padre* [Asylum], where the bass notes, perhaps a little wobbly with tubes, snapped into place as smartly as a military salute. And Ronstadt's voice never sounded less than immediate and soaring. The Nagras don't obtrusively remove veils from the music; they make music sound as though the veils never existed in the first place.

Throughout, the sound of the Nagras is distinctly on the cool rather than the warm and lush side. One might, at times, wish for a bit more harmonic richness. The VTL 750 amplifiers, for example, slather on layer after layer of overtones, particularly in the bass. The

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Nagras don't. This raises an interesting dilemma. I suspect that one reason that Class D amplifiers have evoked so much controversy in the pages of this magazine is because of a silvery sonic signature that I associate with switching amplifiers and, perhaps, amplifiers that have switching power supplies, like the Nagra. I can't really hold this sound against such amplifiers because I still can't figure out if that signature is the result of an absence of artifacts or a lack of bloom. What I do know is that the Nagras sound extremely linear for two reasons: First, they seem to be almost grainless in their presentation; and second, they never exaggerate any part of the frequency spectrum, endowing the music with an almost seamless presentation.

Another thing that stood out was the superbly low noise floor. In tandem with Balanced Audio Technologies' solid-state VK-42SE preamp, the Pyramids created a very finely etched soundstage in which details seemed to emerge from a black backdrop. This also contributed to a fine recreation of space. On the CD of Bruckner's Symphony No. 8 with the Vienna Philharmonic and Herbert von Karajan [Deutsche Grammophon], the soundstage was capacious and lifelike. And while listening to Thomas Quasthoff sing Schubert's "Schwanengesang" [DG] with fervor and panache, I was struck by how the Nagras separated voice from piano.

In many ways, these two pieces from Nagra and BAT prompted me to muse that solid-state amplifiers and preamplifiers have not only come a long way, but also that they aren't heading in the direction of a tube-like sound. Instead, they are making solid-state sound more solid-state—in the best sense possible. The Nagras had a precision when reproducing the initial attack of a note that I think tubes would find difficult to match.

Tube-lovers probably wouldn't flinch at the all-solid-state sound of the Nagras coupled with the BAT, but they wouldn't love it, either. They would complain about a lack of emotionality. Not me. The Nagra doesn't provide sonic heft, let alone bloat, but a precise and sophisticated sound. In sum, this is a cerebral amplifier

that dispassionately surveys the musical heights.

There's no doubt that a powerful tube amplifier will supply a more visceral musical experience. ARC, VTL, and so on offer more sumptuous and regal fare. These Nagras are at the other end of the audiophile spectrum. They don't want to be cuddled; they just want to be left alone. To go back and forth between the Nagras and VTLs is to be reminded of how superb both ends of the spectrum can sound, and, at the same time, the wackiness inherent in trying to reproduce the absolute sound—not that that's stopping anybody, or should.

Indeed, with its release of new amplifiers and several CD players, Nagra is part of a high-end renaissance that's been taking place for a while now. Its products provide superb performance at reasonable prices—at least by high-end standards. The Nagra Pyramids are further evidence that good things really can come in small packages. Sure, some of your friends may take a look at the amplifier and think that you've joined a Masonic temple. But they, like you, are more than likely to be entranced by the sound. **TAS**

Specs & Pricing

Type: Solid-state monoblock power amplifier
Power output: 200 watts @ 8 ohms
Frequency response: 10Hz–70KHz
Inputs: One RCA, one XLR
Dimensions: 14.9" x 11.8" x 14.9"
Weight: 22 lbs.
Price: \$10,995/pr.

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

EMM Labs DCC2 DAC and preamp, CDS transport; VPI HR-X with JMW 12.6; Messenger preamplifier and phonostage; Dynavector XV1-5 and Lyra Titan Mono cartridges; Magnepan 20.1 loudspeaker with Mye stands; VTL 750 monoblock amplifiers; Marchand XM-44 active crossover; Jena Labs cabling and power cords