

MM/MC PHONO STAGE NAGRA CLASSIC PHONO

The Ultimate Phono Stage



The legendary Nagra PL-P was a demonstration of the Swiss brand's know-how in tube phono preamps. It inspired its descendants, but this time, the Classic Phono aims to be its worthy successor, thanks to the correction based entirely on triodes, a technology that builds on the experience acquired with the HD series.

Designed in 1996, the portable Nagra PL-P was battery operated, not only as a phono stage, but also as a line stage with a tube headphone output. A very interesting article on its development appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue du Son* n° 214 (Dec. 1997), written by Jean Hiraga and Rinaldo Bassi. The current PLP-inspired VPS uses two tubes but adds a transistor gain stage. The Classic Phono is 100% tube, using four double triodes in a proprietary set-up. The lifetime of its Genalex Gold Lion tubes, specially graded for slope and noise by the Nagra laboratory, is estimated to be at least 5000 hours but could reach

10000 hours. Ideally, the Classic Phono will be placed on the optional VFS Source anti-vibration mount, made of solid aluminum and damped by small silicone pads. The Nagra will also achieve peak performance by connecting it to the optional Classic PSU power supply, equipped with supercapacitors.

CLASSIC BEAUTY

As part of the Classic range, its design is still as inimitable as ever, directly inspired by the legendary Nagra tape recorders. The modulometer is inherited from the Nagra II, the tape recorder developed by Nagra in 1952. It displays the output level, the 0 dB corresponding to an

Here the Nagra is installed on the VFS base. When switched on, the mono LED flashes for 2 min, the time for the tubes to warm up. The Mono switch is for playing mono discs with a stereo cartridge. For mono pressings played by a mono cartridge, which is preferable, the internal switch needs to be activated. The brightness of the modulometer can be adjusted to 7 different levels thanks to a toggle switch.

effective signal of 1 V/rms. The left channel is the black needle, the right is the red one. It is a marvel to look at, a testimony to the precision of Swiss machining, such as the source control: Off (standby), Mute (ON, audio signal off), Phono 1 (MC) and Phono 2 (MM). As an option, another MM or MC module can be obtained for installation on the desired input. The switch engages two output levels: Low = MM 37.7 dB and MC 53.9 dB. High = +10 dB in MM/MC. In order to reduce the path of the valuable signal to the shortest possible length, the settings are made inside the machine near the sockets, on a plug-in card per phono input, which must be extracted. It contains a block for jumpers to be moved to six positions per channel, and a slot for the RC load adapted to each cartridge. These small cards include five resistive loads (100, 180, 270, 470, 1000 ohms), and a capacitive load of 100 pF. Nagra also offers three modules for custom adaptation. The jumpers activate the following positions: 1/XLR or RCA inputs, 2/with or without additional load, 3/MC connection, 4/ MM connection, 5/transformer MC bypassed or not, 6/with or without 47 K on the tube grid, 7/stereo or mono switch. Another rare detail, the presence of three pressing corrections: RIAA, 1957 Teldec curve for German pressings, American Columbia LP (Long Playing) pre-RIAA. Since the time constants and pre-emphasis vary according to these curves, the Nagra can be adjusted for optimal compatibility with the pressing. The internal mono position makes it possible to fully appreciate true mono (horizontal) pressings with a mono, MM or MC cartridge.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Origin : Switzerland

Price : 19450 euros

VFS Source Support : 1950 euros

Warranty : 3 years

(tubes 6 months)

Dimensions (W x H x D) :

310 x 76 x 254mm

Weight : 5.4 kg

MM gain : 37.7 dB / 47.7 dB

MC gain : 53.9 dB / 63.9 dB

Frequency Response :

20 Hz to 50 kHz (+0.6 dB / -0.2 dB)

Signal-to-noise ratio :

> -82 dB (ASA A)

Crosstalk : > -75 dB (generally

> -82 dB)

Phase between channels : < 4 °

(generally 0.35° to 20 kHz)

Output impedance : < 500 ohms

Tubes : 2 x E88CC/ 6922,

1 x ECC81/B739, 1 x ECC83/B759





100% PURE NAGRA

The exceptional toroidal MC transformers are manufactured by Nagra, using the same cores as those of the HD Preamp. The wires are cryogenized, the gain being 16 dB. The mumetal shielding is furnace-annealed after machining. The respect of the phase is exceptional, as well as the response to square signals. In the input, the voltage gain is provided by a B759, a super ECC83 with helical filament, sorted by noise, followed by an ECC81 (B739) also sorted. The correction is of the RLC (resistor/self/capacitor) type, where the pre-emphasis is achieved by an original RL circuit with six custom-made inductors. The output stage uses one E88CC per channel as on the HD Preamp, whose 2nd triode is at the anode output, but with low impedance. The signal links are made by polypro capacitors according to custom specifications, and

at strategic points by tailor-made 0.0265 μF Jupiter Copper Foils. Extreme attention has been paid to the four-layer, special resin PCBs with gold-plated tracks and optimized ground plane. The high-speed (200 kHz) PWM switching power supply is dual-mono. The secret to its quiet operation lies in the decoupling by a large amount of polypro capacitors in parallel for zero AC impedance, maximum noise reduction and perfect transient response. An outstanding technical achievement.

LISTENING TEST

The Nagra Classic Phono was put through its paces in conjunction with a Thrax Yatrus turntable, a Schröder CB9 ebony arm and a My Sonic Lab Signature Platinum MC cartridge.

Timbre : After a warm-up period and the precise adjustment of the

The many SCR caps are essentially used for decoupling, so that the high voltage of each tube is insensitive to the impedance and fluctuations of the AC power supply. On the left front are the mumetal-covered MC transformers, on the right, the dual-mono switching power supply. The four sorted tubes are protected by external shielding.

RC load, which can vary a little depending on the cable used, there is no doubt that the Nagra Classic Phono is an exceptional device, among the elite of phono stages. Who would have thought that vinyl playback would ever reach this level? Its all-tube construction does not mean a colored and over-emphasised rendition; on the contrary, it offers an incredibly rich quality of timbre, providing a natural and neutral sound that is not synonymous with a lack of substance, but delivering almost matchless accuracy and delicacy. It is obvious that its DNA comes from the professional world, because the fidelity of the bandwidth is ultra-extended, right down to the extreme bass unheard of at this level of suppleness and note differentiation. The tonal balance is very faithful, demonstrating a level of definition in the mid/high range that provides a resolution of the highest order. Ben

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Harper's voice in *"Welcome to the Cruel World"* is formidable in its clarity and humanity, while the guitar develops sublime, lifelike harmonics: an admirable introduction.

Dynamics : Once the level is well adjusted, the Nagra comes alive on excellent pressings, such as our inevitable *Nuit d'Amour* by Bernard Lavilliers, the track "Night Bird" truly astonishing on the Classic Phono and its associated set-up. The lightning attacks, the impressive extreme bass for those who are prepared to pay attention, the frenzied dynamics, all in a variety of instrumental textures that are unique to vinyl played back by a top-quality cartridge, maximize the listening pleasure; one can only be open-mouthed at this amazing rendition. And it's the same story with our favorite Michel Portal album, *Turbulences*, which is a delight of unusual, flamboyant sounds, such as the bass clarinet, the soprano sax or Mino Cinelu's fine percussion that is both sparkling and delicate at the same time. Nagra's monitoring inspiration will not make a mediocre recording sound miraculous, but on an ECM like Anouar Brahem's *"Le Pas du Chat Noir"*, for example, you can expect the very best, in total silence thanks to the very low noise threshold.

Sound Stage : The Nagra Classic Phono is not just one of a number of hi-fi elements in a set-up; the image that it creates is truly holographic, thanks to its perfect respect of the phase. We religiously take out the repressing of the Rolling Stones box set, *Live in Brussels* from 1973, and let ourselves be transported by *"Angie"*, where the sheer emotion dredges up so many memories, all

On the right, the Lemo 12 V socket is for the optional Classic PSU power supply, as is the dedicated ground socket. Note that the XLR outputs are connected unbalanced, as are the RCAs; the two are not be used simultaneously. The Nagra comes with a pair of "Haute Horlogerie" microfiber gloves.

the more so since our Direct Drives of yesteryear never allowed us to listen to this track at this level of quality, which is totally unheard of. The image conjured up plunges you into the heart of the concert, something Nagra knows how to do better than anyone thanks to its legendary recorders. Small saturation flaws or clearly perceived reverberations in no way spoil the pleasure of being so close to the Stones and their screaming Fender Stratocaster riffs, or the sensual voice of Mick Jagger. No other source can bring you such emotion, where each element of the phono ensemble plays its part perfectly, under the Nagra's masterful conducting.

Value for money : The Nagra Classic Phono was designed by a team of engineers led by Philippe Chambon who possesses decades of experience in designing world-class audio products, and who invests countless hours in listening and fine-tuning. The attention to detail in the manufacturing process and the evident expertise are unheard of at every level, such as the MC transformers custom-wound in Romanel-sur-Lausanne. The Classic Phono is expensive, very expensive even, for the common audiophile, but it offers its share of the dream per-

petuated by the Nagra legend, whose design and musicality are on everyone's wishlist.

VERDICT

It's an immense pleasure to have the chance to listen to such a device, which will require being integrated into a set-up of a similar quality. It is capable of taking you off deep into musical nirvana, whether in stereo or in mono on the precious pressings of the 50s whose musical qualities it will bring to the fore as never before (try a Maria Callas in mono on the Nagra). Some current record pressings are also of remarkable quality, enough to feed your vinyl passion on your Classic Phono for a long time to come.

Bruno Castelluzzo

TIMBRES	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
DYNAMIQUE	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
SCENE SONORE	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
QUALITE/PRIX	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

LISTENING SET-UP

Turntable : Thrax Yatrus + Schröder CB9 ebony arm
Cartridge : MC My Sonic Lab Signature Platinum
Preamp : ATC SCA2
Amp : FM Acoustics F-30B
Speakers : PMC MB2 Se, Thrax Lyra SE.
Cables : Line + HP Esprit Lumina, power Nodal Audio PXX
Plug strip : Nodal Audio LMP2

