

FOLLOW-UP

Wes Phillips

Nagra CDP CD player

I tapped Send and sat back, content to have completed another review. Nothing beats the satisfaction of having written something—it almost compensates for the pain of having to actually do it.

Tink went my computer. (I know it said *tink* because that's what it calls that sound in Preferences.) I opened John Atkinson's e-mail, expecting an *Attaboy, Wes!*

Wrong. "Wes, I distinctly remember instructing you that Nagra requested you listen in single-ended configuration, since there's one gain stage fewer that way. Imagine my surprise to see you write: 'I used the CDP's balanced output connections, because that's how I normally connect my Ayre C-5xe universal player to the Ayre K-1xe preamp and MX-R power amps currently residing in my reference system.' "

Oops! Maybe they wouldn't mind too much, considering I deemed the CDP sonically top-drawer...?

"Still, I think it would be best if you listened to it the way they deem best and write a short 'Follow-Up,'" quoth the boss.

"That probably will be interesting," said John Quick, sales and marketing manager for the Nagra importer.¹ "But while you're at it, you probably should compare the output gains of 1V and 3.5V. We sent it to you set for 3.5V, and that could have contributed to the somewhat forward character you observed."

I'm so glad Quick suggested that, because it gave me a chance to dive under the Nagra's hood. Not only is the \$13,495 CDP drop-dead gorgeous inside, but it's made to be worked on. The rigid aluminum lid is held in place with four bolts. I carefully unhitched the flexible cable connecting the circuitry on the lid to a board on the chassis' bottom and set the lid aside. The transport sits in its own corral on the left, and the DACs are separated from the signal-carrying PCBs by a gold-plated (really!) shield. It's so very precise and, well, Swiss.

It was the work of an instant to

move the four jumpers from the standard output to the lower—a darn good thing, because I ended up doing it repeatedly over the course of my listening.

I chose three tracks for the comparison: "Get Happy," from Tierney Sutton's phenomenal *On the Other Side* (SACD/CD, Telarc SACD-63650), for its atmospheric, deeply detailed soundstage and Sutton's wonderful vocal tone; Dino Saluzzi and Anja Lechner's *Ojos Negros* (CD, ECM 1991), for its tonal sparkle and expressive silences; and John Atkinson's almost-final mix of Attention Screen's *Live at Merkin Hall* (CD, Stereophile STPH018-2), because I was in the process of writing the disc's liner notes and because its re-creations of Merkin's acoustic and the band's dynamic range were astounding.

Balanced. Single-ended. Balanced. Single-ended. I heard so little difference between the two that I'd call it a wash—at least, with any length of cable I had around the house. (Or should I say with any length of cable I had in both configurations?) If Nagra insists that SE sounds better, I won't argue, but I'm danged if I heard any difference worth getting het up over.

But the gain thing, *that* was interesting—if only because it prompted me to



remember that hi-fis are systems and systems have huge numbers of variables. With the Ayre K-1xe preamplifier, reducing the output voltage did indeed take a bit of the edge off. Yes, I matched the levels, so I'm not

talking about a difference in loudness.

In my office, driving the passive NHT PVC preamplifier and a pair of NHT M-00 speakers, 3.5V sounded better than 1V, hands down—there was more slam, detail, and spatial detail. Not surprising, but worth remembering.

The Krell Evolution 202 preamp revealed very few changes as I went back and forth. Its dead-quiet background wasn't fazed by 1V and it wasn't rattled by 3.5V. There was as little difference between these voltages as between SE and balanced—less, perhaps, because when I repeated the SE/balanced experiment with the Krell, I definitely preferred balanced. Maybe. A little.

Conrad-Johnson's ACT 2 preamplifier got along a lot better with the 1V output; 3.5V sounded harder and, yes, edgier.

Frustrating as it was to get different results with almost every system and configuration I attempted, I came away from the experience with greater appreciation of the Nagra CDP than I'd had going in. The level of performance I'd experienced during my initial listening was the baseline through all my jiggery-pokery. However, the Nagra's ability to run both balanced and single-ended cables means it has flexibility—and in RF-laden studio environments and situations where extremely long cable runs are required, balanced operation may offer performance advantages not evident in my home listening room. It's nice to have the option, and I couldn't detect either choice as meaningfully worse than the other.

As for the gain change, it, too, offers another level of flexibility. Jolly good show, Nagra.

—Wes Phillips

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

PREAMPLIFIERS Ayre K-1xe, Conrad-Johnson ACT 2, Krell Evolution 202, NHT PVC.

POWER AMPLIFIERS Ayre MX-R, Krell Evolution 600.

LOUDSPEAKERS Wilson Audio Specialties WATT/Puppy 8, NHT M-00.

CABLES Interconnect: Shunyata Research Aries & Antares. Speaker: Shunyata Research Lyra.

ACCESSORIES Furutech eTP-609 distribution box, FP-20A(R) duplex outlets, RDP panels; OSAR Selway/Magruder equipment racks; Ayre Myrtle Wood Blocks.

—Wes Phillips

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