



Swiss Timing

NAGRA AUDIO CDP (£8500)

Legendary Swiss-based Nagra is on a roll with not just one but three variants of its costly new high-end CD player



Predisposed as I am toward Nagra, the long-awaited CD player presents a quandary: Although this brand has a hold on my heart – I would gladly live forever with their valve electronics – I am increasingly distressed by the ever-spiralling pricing of high-end audio. Nagra, being both Swiss and high-end, is as guilty as any of widening the chasm between reality and sanity. £8500 for any CD player is to take the mickey. Yet something so ‘right’ about the wee Nagra CDP almost makes me want to forgive the pricing.

TWO REASONS TO BUY

Offensive price or not, the CDP looks almost underpriced when compared to other high-end CD players, so it evens out, and for two reasons. First is the sheer joy of owning a Nagra product. Second? It sounds wonderful.

Because it’s designed to operate with a Nagra preamp [see boxout, below], it shares the same dimensions as its PL-L and PL-P and is therefore smaller than the 430mm norm at 310 x 77 x 255mm (whd). This in itself is a boon to those who are not impressed by sheer size. Machined from a block of solid aluminium, it still weighs 4kg, attesting to filled innards. And that’s with the 12V DC power supply relegated to the outside, which better isolates the unit from the mains.

Like, I believe, certain older Meridian players, the CDP is a front-loader with the ‘playback module mounted securely in the CD drawer’. This ensures greater stability, the disc held in place by a magnetic puck. And Nagra, its conservatism no doubt leading to its protracted entry into CD player manufacture, eschews upsampling and other digital prestidigitation.

ROTARY CLUB

Nagra has its own world view, so the controls are not intuitive to anyone other than a veteran Nagra user.



TRANSPORT, PLAYER OR PLAYER/PRE?

Nagra always designs flexibility into its wares, so this basic CD platform is available in three forms – but I would dismiss the transport-only CDT which sells for £7500. Why forego the CDP’s dedicated DAC for only £1000 more? But then we come to the CDC (or ‘CD Concept’): for only £800 more, you get a volume control for direct connection to your power amps, and a proper headphone amp, plus something which Nagra should be ashamed of omitting from the CDT and CDP: a Modulometer. Who cares that it simply monitors the signal as recorded on the disc? What Nagra doesn’t realise is that people who buy Nagra expect a Modulometer in the same way that Ferrari purchasers expect a yellow badge with a prancing horse. If you decide to commit to a Nagra, buy a CDC. To any dyed-in-the-wool Nagraophile, the Modulometer alone is worth that bit extra.



I mean, how many CD players have rotary transport controls? Or a special position of the knob for remote control operation? A teensy toggle switch to open and close the drawer? Some might argue that it’s worth the extra money to have such a different experience controlling a CD player – like buying a car just because it has a starter button.

Nagra positioned the back-lit LCD display on the front of the transport tray, while the rest of the fascia needs only to accommodate the traditional Nagra rotary control for transport functions and two toggles: one for dimming the display and one for opening and closing the drawer. The back provides selection of one pair each of single-ended phono and balanced XLR analogue outputs, plus coaxial S/PDIF, AES/EBU and Toslink S/PDIF digital outputs. Using Yter’s new XLR wires, I fed the CDP to the McIntosh C2200 preamp, MC2102 and Quad II-eighty power amps; speakers included Sonus faber Cremona M and Guarneri, and Rogers LS3/5A.

ABOVE: Connectors include electrically-balanced XLR and unbalanced phono, with digital outputs on phono, optical Toslink, and AES via XLR. Note Power In connector for external 12V DC PSU (not shown)

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SHEER SEDUCTION

Forgetting the reasons I wanted this player even before switching it on – the construction, the feel of the controls, the Nagra badge – and trying hard not to be seduced by the operation of the tray, I knew this player would hit me as hard as Liv Tyler in a sheer negligee. Sometimes, you just sense what’s going to happen. It only took the glorious, open, smooth and enveloping sound of Mofi’s new gold CD of Marc Cohn’s eponymous debut to demonstrate the CDP’s worthiness as part of the Nagra family.

In direct contrast to Chord’s impressive but aloof Red Reference, the CDP was as lush and natural as my beloved Marantz CD-12/DA-12. Cohn’s delivery, especially on his signature tune, ‘Walking in Memphis’, was as convincingly present in my room as ever I’ve heard it. With LS3/5As or Cremona Ms carefully focused, the presence was eerily palpable. It made me want to grab the first schmuck I could find with an iPod to show him what he’s missing.

Discs were flying everywhere: power pop from the Raspberries was punchy and tight, live Hendrix (from Monterey) had that distinctive stretched-string whine nailed down. ‘The Wind Cries Mary’ drew a lump to the throat, while a mere 60 seconds’ worth of ‘Like A ☞

AUDIO FILE

Front-loading CD player with remote control and balanced outputs

Price: £8500

Made by: Nagra Kudelski Group

Supplied by: RT Services

Telephone: 01235 810455

www.nagraaudio.com



ABOVE: Nagra describes its disc transport as the 'Nagra monoblock tray', using a Philips CD-Pro2 mech. The yellow LED lighting assists disc loading in low-light conditions

Rolling Stone' convinced me that Hendrix's take is the best Dylan cover ever. The attack of the plucking, complementing his distinctive vocals, the sheer power of his rhythm section – 40 years old the recordings may be, but the Nagra delivered them as fresh as this morning's croissant.

THE REAL THING

It got down to one thing: whether the measurements identify it or not, something about the Nagra grabs your attention. The soon-to-be-overused word 'authenticity' applies here in its original rather than commercial sense: there's simply as little artifice as can possibly remain when using a digital source. Which brings us to both Nagra's late entry into CD player production, and the recent arrival of other costly machines.

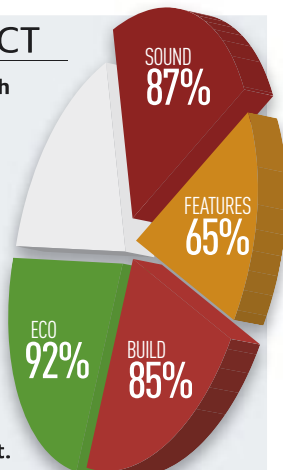
Clearly, CD's days are numbered. If you doubt for a minute that a hugely successful format can be flushed down the toilet in record time, just look how quickly VHS, cassettes and film photography were relegated to the trash bin. CD, though, retains a foothold in the PC world, and lots of people who steal music still burn CDs instead of simply downloading to memory cards. But the end will arrive sooner than you think.

What players like the Nagra demonstrate is that CD 'done right' doesn't 'suck' in the way that its detractors argued long after the first-generation machines were forgotten. Nagra, though, took its time, emulating Quad's and McIntosh's cautious entries into CD manufacture, but dragging it out to the extreme. It waited even longer than Peter Walker took to produce the ESL-63. But the CDP was worth the wait.

If, that is, you have a huge library of CDs you have no intention of replacing, and the urge to buy what might be the last player you'll ever need. ☺

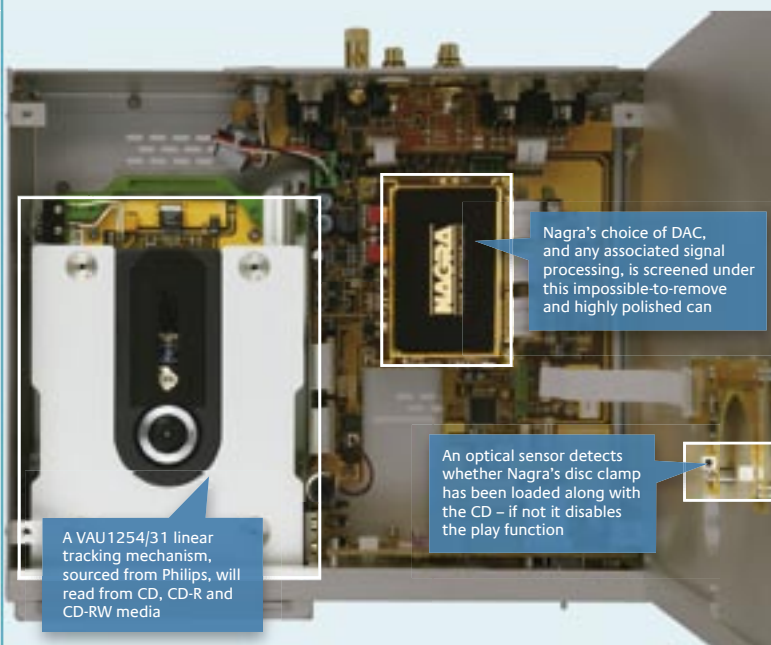
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Minimalist to a fault, but with operational behaviour that makes gadget-heads swoon (once that tray slides out, you're hooked), Nagra's CDP is so achingly desirable that it makes the iPhone look like a piece of plastic crap. It sounds terrific, it's a joy to use, its operational quirks, like a manual setting to use the remote, are endearing rather than annoying. If you have the money, just go for it.



NAGRA AUDIO CDP CD PLAYER / £8500

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RESULTS



Nagra's choice of DAC, and any associated signal processing, is screened under this impossible-to-remove and highly polished can

An optical sensor detects whether Nagra's disc clamp has been loaded along with the CD – if not it disables the play function

A VAU1254/31 linear tracking mechanism, sourced from Philips, will read from CD, CD-R and CD-RW media

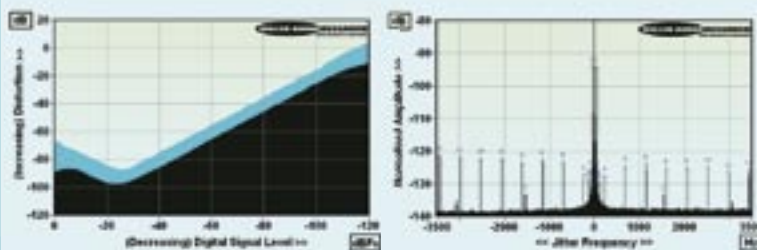
HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

I would like to tell you more about Nagra's choice of core digital ICs, but its engineers have remained resolutely tight-lipped in response to my requests for specific information. I shared my test results with Nagra, however, and the company succeeded in reproducing my jitter measurement (see graph, below right).

Nagra's specification for jitter is <math><200\text{psec}</math>, which is true for the $\sim 110\text{psec}$ of residual data-induced patterns related to the 16-bit code used for the test, but not for the $\sim 1200\text{psec}$ of low-rate jitter caused by a very specific modulation at 44.3Hz. This is revealed by the two spikes (marked as '1') that shadow the central peak. Experience suggests this will be caused by the intermodulation of clock(s) or processes within the CDP and will be specific to the design. Subjectively, this is often tied into

the impression of some slight vagueness or fattening of stereo images, but the impact depends upon the sensitivity of the listener and system.

Otherwise, the CDP gets close to its 108dB A-wtd S/N ratio and distortion of <math><0.003\%</math> although the best figures are not obtained at its peak 3.4V/0dBfs output but at -25dBfs where it falls to $\sim 0.001\%$ through the midrange and 0.0045% at 20kHz. The graph showing distortion vs digital level (below, left) clearly illustrates that THD is uniformly higher at 20kHz (blue infill) than 1kHz (black infill). You might care to compare this with the same plot for the other CD players measured in this and earlier issues. Readers may download a full QC Suite report for the Nagra CDP CD player by visiting www.hifinews.co.uk and following the links to our Test Reports. PM



LEFT: Distortion versus digital signal level at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue); RIGHT: The 1200psec of jitter is dominated by a low-rate effect at 44.3Hz, subsequently confirmed by Nagra

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (XLR balanced outputs)	3.4Vrms
A-wtd S/N Ratio	106.5dB
Distortion 1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs	0.0037% / 0.0035%
Distortion 20kHz, 0dBfs	0.035%
Frequency response, 20Hz-20kHz	+0.0dB to -0.78dB
Digital Jitter	1245psec
Resolution @ -100dB	$\pm 0.2\text{dB}$
Stereo separation (20Hz-20kHz)	>79dB