



MAY 2010



NAGRA BPS

Reviewer: Frederic Beudot

Financial Interests: click [here](#)

Digital Source: Esoteric X-03SE

Analog Source: Acoustic Solid Classic Wood, AS WTB211, Grado Reference Sonata 1, Denon DL103, Clearaudio Nano, Ray Samuels F117 [in for review]

Pre-amplifier: Wyred4Sound STP SE

Amplifier: Genesis Reference 360, McIntosh MA2275, Yamamoto A08s, First Watt F5, JAS Bravo 3.1 [on loan]

Speakers: FJ OMs, Rogers LS 3/5a, Zu Essence

Cables: Zu Varial, Zu Libtec, Slinkylinks RCA, ASI Liveline interconnects & speaker cables [in for review]

Power Cords: Zu Mother, ASI Liveline power [in for review]

Powerline conditioning: Isotek Nova [on loan]

Sundry accessories: Isolpads under electronics, ASI resonators and sugar cubes, ASI HeartSong racks

Room size: 21' x 13' x 7.5'

Review component retail: \$2,399



Everybody in our hobby knows Nagra. Their phenomenal professional tape recorders are probably what brought them to everybody's attention decades ago - and more recently the more controversial pyramidal amplifiers. If you want to know the skinny on the company and their production facility, Srajan's [RoadTour](#) is certainly the place to start. What brought Nagra to *my* attention first were two other pieces of equipment though, their top-line PL-L preamplifier and VPS tube phono preamplifier. I am one of those who responds positively to their unusual aesthetics reminiscent of Nagra's tape recorders replete with laterally located connectors. But what really grabbed me about those two was how they sound.

There is a house sound to Nagra that's stronger and more easily defined than that of most high-end brands. It is inherited from their rich analogue recording history, a sound first deep and rich yet also resolved, supple and dynamic. At least to my ears, Nagra has on occasion also lost sight of this grail and veered heavily towards the warm and rich to forget the supple and dynamic part of the equation. Up to now the two components which exemplified for me all the best qualities of the Nagra sound were the PL-L and VPS. I can now say with certainty that the BPS can be unequivocally added to this list.



Nagra's BPS is their tiny solid-state battery-powered phono stage - with two twists. The first is that when I say battery, I mean a single disposable 9V battery. Without charger or wall connection, the BPS sits on a shelf completely isolated from the rest of the world except for the turntable input and preamp output. I am in general ambivalent about battery power for musical reproduction, especially in amplifiers where perhaps I have not yet heard the right ones. When it comes to phono stages and their micro-volt signal however, there's simply nothing better for ultra-quiet operation and extreme resolution.



The second twist Nagra implemented in their tiny enclosure—4.25" x 9.06" x 6.25" or 27 x 160 x 110mm and 16.9 oz or 480 grams—are their proprietary MC step-up transformers otherwise found in their far pricier top-line products. According to Nagra, the entire BPS circuit is actually lifted from the bigger VPS, simply omitting valves to run a solid-state final gain stage instead. This thrifter solution allowed battery power which reduced enclosure size to barely more than two stacked CD cases although weight is far more substantial than two CD cases. When you buy Nagra, even with their entry-level phono preamplifier there is no compromise on vaunted build quality.

The review sample was from the initial production run and only offered fixed 64dB gain but future production will offer jumper-set 54dB and 64dB. This gives greater headroom in systems with enough gain throughout to not need the full 64dB from the source.

Lifting the hood allows loading changes, with various options provided on small circuit boards to be screwed right behind the input connectors. Initially Nagra provided boards with a variety of resistance and impedance combinations but quickly realized that users did not really want the various impedance options. Current production provides only 100pf impedance but more resistive loading values (100, 150, 220, 330, 470, 1,000 and 47,000 ohms). This is a smart move. I have yet to hear the effect of MC impedance loading but can clearly hear the effect of fine-tuning resistance, especially with step-up transformers which seem to me even more sensitive to it than transistor gain stages.



If you've read previous installments in my series of phono stage reviews, you know that I am not too kind to manufacturers of pricey phono stages which don't grant access to those settings on the fascia. It's all done in the name of sound quality as though that required taking a preamp apart to fiddle with minuscule dip switches or jumpers. As aptly proven by Esoteric and others, it's well possible to make a phono preamplifier that is far more convenient *and* sounds great.

Yet here I am about to cut the Nagra BPS a little slack. Yes, one has to dive inside to change loading boards but considering the size of the enclosure, the fact that it holds two step-up transformers and at what price it is offered, this concession may actually have been necessary – even though the next in line Ray Samuels F117 phono preamplifier is even *smaller* yet offers double-mono gain and loading controls with rotary front-panel knobs (but no step-up transformers).

While still inside the Nagra, you can move three of those dreaded jumpers between MM, MC single-ended and MC balanced operation. Nagra recommends single-ended MC unless you have noise or hum. I went single-ended as recommended and operation was so silent that I forgot all about this option until I checked the manual again to write this review. It's nice to know it's there but I didn't need it.

To round out introductions, the front switch turns the unit on when flicked up and confirms whether the battery is fit for operation when pushed down. A small red light confirms that the unit is powered up but it is *very* easy to forget to turn off the BPS afterwards. I *guarantee* that you will come back to your system more than once to find a dead battery - unless you are used to turning off all your gear when not in use. I am not.



The back panel has high-quality RCAs; a tiny ground post which wouldn't accommodate the normal-sized fork on my Acoustic Solid tonearm cable; and a power input. What does a power input do on a battery-operated device? The primary recommended use is a compatible wall wart. Have the unit plugged in when not in use to keep the circuits charged without depleting the battery. With no appropriate transformer on hand, I did not test this. Neither did I try powering the Nagra with an external battery like a Red Wine Audio Black Lightning box to completely transcend 9V disposable battery inconvenience.





I would really like to see Nagra offer a rechargeable battery option in the future, either internal like Ray Samuels did in the fabulously easy-to-use F117; or even external in a matching enclosure. Who'd want to see a pedestrian black shoe-box battery pack sit next on a shelf to the slim silvery BPS?

Overall the Nagra is superbly built and despite diminutive dimensions offers all vital adjustment options to be bona fide high end. Ease of use could be improved a bit. Others have done it and no doubt Nagra can too. Their tape recorders are vaunted not only for sonics but also for how well thought-out their use is in the field. In the end, when it comes to high-end audio, sound remains the primary factor and rightly so. As hinted at already, the Nagra BPS performs at a level of musicality and quality that should make the brand proud. The BPS sound is firmly anchored in the house tradition – warm and rich yet excellently resolved and dynamic. I had concerns on dynamics from a single 9V battery power supply but should not have. The BPS delivers huge swings while preserving the bristling life of micro dynamics thanks to absolutely quiet operation and superb transparency.

When I speak of warmth, I really refer to two main aspects of sonic character. The first is a slightly emphasized upper bass and lower midrange; the second a propensity for slightly rounding over transients. Warmth can also derive from foreshortened treble or distorted bass but not here. The BPS delivers a very large helping of tube impressions without their limitations of higher noise and distortion. As can be expected from Nagra, tonal intensity is simply exceptional and here fully supported by transparency which beautifully reveals texture and micro detail. String instruments have richer wooden body, clarinets are more reed than wind, the blowing noise of flutes becomes more obvious – in short all the little details that make up the unique harmonic structure of an instrument are fully revealed. Because of the slightly softened leading edges, the Nagra is not as zippy on pinched strings of medieval guitars as an Esoteric E03 or Ray Samuel F117 but neither of those reach the Nagra's level of tonal complexity.



Speaking of comparisons, since I have reviewed quite a lineup of phono preamplifiers over the past year, how does the BPS stack up? Against the truly unique and twice-priced Esoteric E03, the Nagra is not as resolved. The E03 reveals small details at stage back that the Nagra misses. The E03 also goes deeper and tighter in the bass and transients are much faster and more explosive. On the other hand, the Nagra is more forgiving of poor records, making them enjoyable when the E03 only reveals their flaws (especially obvious on how different ticks and scratches appear through both machines). The BPS is also far quieter and goes further in showcasing instrumental tonal hues. The Nagra's slightly enhanced upper bass is a double-edged sword, great with gear that could stand some enrichment in that range like the JAS Bravo 3.1 monoblocks and clearly overkill for gear which does not (the Genesis GR360 amplifier). That however was easily addressed with a leaner interconnect like the pure silver Slinkylinks. Those removed any hint of overweight when the Genesis was in the system. With both the Yamamoto A08's and FirstWatt F5 amplifiers, I liked the slight weight gain of the Nagra. It provided more musical gravity and better grounded the soundstage which was as wide as the E03's but not quite as deep though close. The E03 being the best I've ever heard in that department, this is quite a compliment.

Compared to the ASR Mini-Basis Exclusive, I'll have to go from memory. I never had both in the system at the same time. My impression is that the ASR felt a lot drier and sharp and was tonally not nearly as developed while the Nagra is every bit as dynamic. To be blunt, the ASR failed to convey emotions while the Nagra never missed. Compared to the NAT Signature Phono, the Nagra offered similar textural and tonal transparency but added quite a bit of extra dynamics and bass weight which are the only relative weaknesses of the NAT. If size and weight matter, the Nagra delivers everything in a tiny fraction of the space the bulky NAT would occupy. The Signature Phono retains the edge on fluidity and openness thanks to its triodes but at less than half the price, the Nagra was otherwise a match and in some cases better.

I won't go through a detailed comparison with the Clearaudio Nano. Although both machines have similar sonic signatures—warm and easy to enjoy—the semblance stops there. The Clearaudio was bested by the much more expensive Nagra in every single aspect of dynamics, transparency and *spatialization*. That's just as it should have been. Nagra's warmth does not detract from the music unless it has very sharp transients whereas the Nano overlooked a lot of information passed on by the cartridges.

Compared to the Audia Flight Phono and just as with the Esoteric, it will be more a matter of taste and priorities than which is truly better. I think the Flight Phono is overall slightly more dynamic. It has better bass control and is almost as silent as the Nagra. This should indeed make it the better phono preamp if price were no factor. Yet Nagra's midrange beauty and unique ability to showcase instrumental hues can make it preferable to those who listen primarily to acoustic un-amplified music - especially opera where the Nagra plain shines. The Flight Phono is more polyvalent as it does not round transients over as much but for classical music lovers—like me—the Nagra is enticing. A detailed comparison to the Ray Samuel F117 will have to wait until after I have fully evaluated the latter. Initial impressions indicate that the F117 operates in a realm far more exalted than its price would indicate. Compared to the Nagra, it seems a fight amongst equals - very different *sounding* but equals nonetheless. The F117 costing \$800 to the Nagra's \$2,399 should be indication enough of just how exalted I believe it to be. But that's a tale for another day.



Speaking of various musical genres, let's start with Johnny Cash's last record *American VI*. "Ain't no grave" is a tale of sadness and deep sorrow with rare interspersed hints of humor. His voice is of rare intensity and even greater urgency than any of his other studio recordings as though he knew all too well that his days were numbered. The voice is aged and thinner but simply grabs hold for attention. One knows Cash wanted one to listen - intensely. Of all the phono preamps I tried this album with, only two conveyed this sense of urgency to the extreme. One was the Esoteric E03 by offering a bare-boned intensity of Cash the man. The other was the Nagra, not as untamed and naked but by focusing on Cash's voice, preserving each little inflection and adding greater weight.

On *Ella & Louis*, Fitzgerald's voice perhaps wasn't as open and pure as usual but Louis' trumpet became more golden and intense. Ella's voice darkening just a shade brought out even more sensuality and presence to her vocalizing. Not a bad trade-off depending on your system. One of the areas where I felt the Nagra to fall just a bit short was primarily on Rock. The upper bass boost added weight and kick but a lot of those recordings—be they James Brown's *Live at the Apollo*, U2's *How to dismantle an atomic bomb*, the Beach Boys' *Endless Summer* or the Police's *Certifiable live in Brazil*—suffer some level of dynamic compression. The Nagra's slight softening of transients reinforced that. Played through the Esoteric, those discs feel more alive and uplifting. While the Nagra preserves the macro dynamics fully, micro dynamics are fairly good but do incur a slight sense of blurring around the edges. When you go from the E03 to the BPS, you leave raw and primal and move into polished and refined. It's an amazing combination for Beethoven's *Sonatas for violin and piano* but not as thrilling on ZZ Top's *Tres Hombres*.



On large orchestral pieces like Mahler's *First Symphony* under Solti, I was initially afraid that the slight leading-edge reticence would rob it of some life but if it did, I could not hear it primarily because the tonal resolution on massed strings is simply phenomenal over the Nagra. While string attacks are a little less precise, all the artistic nuances and harmonic complexity are much better revealed. Over the past few weeks I went back to this disc over and over again for its huge soundstage, powerful foundation to the orchestra and incredible instrumental colors as painted by the Nagra. Although the FirstWatt F5 amplifier is no stranger to this startling realism, the Nagra did the final seasoning and I liked what the chef was cooking up.



Or take the Quatuor Amadeus playing Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ*. If you want to know why the Amadeus are so famous, this is one great recording to find out. Compared to a more modern interpretation, this disc seriously lacks in urgency. The pain supposedly infusing the work is plain absent. Yet if you want to hear the full palette of nuance a string quartet is capable of, this disc over the Nagra can't be beat. You won't feel rushed and might even snooze between passages but string resolution and realism of wooden harmonics are without peer. You will hear bow pressure and how it modulates string action. The Nagra is *that* good here.



On *Tarentule, Tarentelle* the conclusion was identical - more wood, less speed but a chance to hear all the nuances between instruments. Which sounded better, the richer more tonally varied Nagra or the faster leaner Ray Samuels F117 which seemed more resolved but not as timbrally elaborate? Over the years I have become more of a fast transient quick reflex type listener. Still, I can't renounce my roots as a classical and vocal music lover. When a component like the Nagra shows up in a more adrenaline-tuned system like mine, it seems to return balance to things.



I need to point out that my comments were based on the Denon DL103 cartridge. I tried the Nagra with my Grado Sonata Reference 1 but they two were too much alike - same upper bass boost, same focus on tone over attack, same warmth for the same reasons. All in all, if I appreciate this tonal enhancement from one component, two went too far for my taste. If you like a lot of sugar and no lemon in your ice tea it may work but it wasn't a good match for me.

When I review the past year, I tested two other phono preamplifiers that were priced like the Nagra. These were the ASR Mini-Basis Exclusive and the SoundQuest Ph1-t with NOS tubes and aftermarket power cord - one transistor, one tube. The Nagra was simply a class above and a much better investment if you desire that touch of tube flavor from a transistor unit. Actually, the Nagra in many ways comes close to the best two phonostages I know, the Esoteric E03 and Audia Flight Phono. In some cases it even bested them and certainly makes for a more sensual reading than Esoteric's primal presentation. In addition, if you believe as I do that step-up transformers have a way with MC cartridges that no transistor gain stage will quite match, the Nagra becomes the completely obvious choice for the money.



If you do not want its touch of warmth, are after utmost neutrality and resolution but can't justify the cost of the E03 or the more civilized Flight Phono, wait until my review of Ray Samuel's F117 hits. It's the perfect answer to your desires.



Should you listen primarily to acoustic instruments or simply desire one of the richest most refined tonal presentations without tube artifacts for under \$2,500, then the Nagra BPS tops that list. It actually stands so far on top that it walks away with a Blue Moon award, keeping in mind that it won't suit everybody's biases and systems. Inasmuch as the Esoteric E03 is the best I know of today in the highly resolved energized category, the Nagra VPS is best of class and value for tonal saturation without the limitations of tubes. True, you'll need to stock up on 9V batteries for those times when you forget to turn it off. But that's a small concession to make in light of its colossal musical performance.



Quality of packing: Excellent. Little suitcase should last forever.

Ease of unpacking/repacking: Light and easy, a real travel phono preamp to take everywhere and educate friends with about quality analog playback.

Condition of component received: Flawless.

Quality of owner's manual: Good and detailed.

Website comments: Minimal available information.

Human interactions: Helpful and prompt.

Suggestions: New production has 2 gain levels which will be helpful. What Nagra needs to develop now is a rechargeable battery system as convenient as Ray Samuels'. Having to remove a screw to change a 9V battery every few weeks when not left on, though not difficult, is not necessarily fun and can get frustrating when you forget to buy new batteries.

Remark: Stock up on 9V batteries as you *will* forget to turn the little thing off occasionally. This is a foregone conclusion. The good news is that you can buy a heap of 9V batteries for the price of one of those fancy aftermarket power cords you won't need.

Frederic Beudot



ΠΑΓΡΑ BPS

*A petite reference phonostage with
class-leading tone density and
absolutely silent operation*

2010

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