

# hifi & records

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»Showpiece«:

# Nagra Classic Phono

Everything's a matter of time. After more than one decade, Nagra now supersedes their »Valve Phono Stage«, or VPS, to soar to even higher sonic realms with the Classic Phono. To reach this goal, the new phono pre is equipped much more generously than its ancestor. The front panel already testifies to these alterations. For example, the Classic Phono now sports the »modulometer«; this characteristic instrument is to display the output level of both the left and right channel. It's adjustable to the ambient light in seven brightness levels. Those who feel annoyed by it will simply leave it off. In the standard version the Classic Phono has one MM and one MC input, a second MC input can be ordered for an extra charge. With a front side switch the gain factor can be boosted by ten decibels; the correct setting is confirmed accordingly by the modulometer. Nagra owners can also select between mono and stereo sound for the XLR or RCA outputs. Nagra advises against running the two line-level outputs in parallel.

Due to lack of space, the amplitude is reduced at low frequencies and increased at high frequencies during the record cutting process. Most common is the equalization curve of the »Recording Industry Association of America« or RIAA. For phono amplifiers the maximum deviation from the equalization curve is therefore often specified in decibels. However, not all records are cut according to the RIAA standard. Therefore the Swiss also offer the correct equalizations for Teldec and Columbia LPs. Owners of corresponding vinyl from these labels can consequently dial in the correct equalization on the Classic Phono.

For the input signal gold-plated RCA sockets have been provided. Beside the ground terminal for the turntable is another clamp right next to the IEC mains socket. In case of hum interferences this is a remedy to eliminate them. Yet in this respect I had no problems at all, i.e. neither with noise nor with low-frequency rumble. It's a well-known fact that at Nagra we're dealing with absolute

professionals. But it rarely happens that you're invited in such an offensive manner to convince yourself of it. For instance with an eye to the electric adaptations for the pickup system(s). On the actual device there are no buttons to set the values, and one will also look in vain for the usual set of DIP switches. Thus the Classic Phono will have you take off the lid for this purpose.

On this occasion a closer look at the complex interior of the phono stage is equally worthwhile. Eight black capacitors, each labelled with the Nagra logo, stick out because of their size. They're made at SCR Audio to the specifications of the developers and definitely no bargain. This is what I love about Nagra: When it comes to ultimate sound quality, there will be no cutbacks whatsoever in the design phase. That's equally true of the four valves. The dual triodes E88CC as well as the ECC81 and ECC83 are strictly selected. Yet unlike other makers who also perform a measure and match procedure, by far not every valve is employed at Nagra. Which costs money, too. According to the manufacturer the service life of the valves is a good 5,000 hours, but quite often twice the operating time is achieved.

But now let's take a look at the pickup adjustment: values between 100 and 1,000 ohms are set by mounting a little plug-in board which is to be fixed with a screw pin. At the same time you'll get a chance to feel the awesome quality of workmanship with your own hands. And why is this effort necessary at all? For reasons of sound quality, the signal path shall be kept as short as possible. But there are still more options to discover. Via smaller jumpers some additional, but rarely needed adaptations can be made. In an act of courtesy Nagra even apologises to their clientele for the work that's to be done.

Having taken these steps, the rotary control on the front panel may finally be set to »Phono 1«. The valves require two minutes of warm-up time until the signal is connected through. Once the Classic Phono has been thoroughly broken in – Nagra quotes »several hundred hours« for this purpose –,

Review: MM/MC preamplifier Nagra Classic Phono

With the valve-loaded Classic Phono Nagra defines a new benchmark in MM and MC preamplification.

# Showpiece



it achieves its top performance after a good 15 minutes. Of course, the Nagra can only equalize and preamplify what the pickup delivers. So this review demands even more diligence than normal. For the source I used the Kuzma Stabi R record player, equipped with Stogi S and the 4Point 14-inch tonearm; on both arms EMT-JSD pickups were mounted. The XP-22 and the X 250.8 a pre/power amp combination from Pass provided an adequate amplification while the Dynaudio Confidence 30 served as, to my ears, excellent sounding transducers.

Orange vinyl is rotating on the platter: after five decades Lee Ritenour has published a solo guitar album called »Dreamcatcher«. He now impressively demonstrates what tonal registers and

moods can be created on merely six strings. Already at this point the Classic Phono sets itself clearly apart from the majority of the phono pres I know by its natural imaging. Pure self-evidence is spreading in the listening room, Ritenour is on a visit and plays a few songs for me alone. An interesting fact is the light it sheds on acoustic details that

intensity of which, however, sets a new standard over the Classic Phono. They don't just hear the drumkit – in fact the drumsticks are literally visible, and one can distinctly hear a second musician playing bongos as well. The background choir is a perfect complement to Benson's voice. And then this guitar riff that doesn't sound like amplified canned

would otherwise seem to sink into randomness. Imagine you were hurrying through a station to catch the train. Upon arriving on the platform you suddenly realise that you were just passing dozens of people. Do you remember more than one face? With the Nagra no acoustic detail will run past just like that, everything is important, nothing gets lost. What other phono preamps disguise unintentionally, the Classic Phono puts it in perspective.

»Weekend In London« is the name of George Benson's latest live album. »Give Me The Night« is brought to life by the Swiss phono amp with accentuated rhythm. Record listening is rather rarely associated with tonal nuisances. The music is flowing, the listeners become part of this stream the





music nor appear like a projection onto a screen, but sounds so convincing as if it were created right now in real time.

»1/I« is the title of a weird, interesting album recorded by Moritz von Oswald and Nils Petter Molvaer which is worth



## Nagra Classic Phono

WxHxD	25,5 x 8 x 31 cm
Warranty	3 years
Price*	19.500 euros
Distribution	Gaudios Polzergasse 14 A-8010 Graz
Phone	0043 316 - 33 71 75

\* second MC input: 5.000 euros

listening to. Due to the long reverberation one gets the felling of sitting in a cave. That way short trumpet notes can be followed over a very long time. These are supplemented by Oswald's electronic sounds that can be really deep and powerful. Here, too, the Classic Phono is sliding very close to the two musicians. Never before have I heard so many details in this phantastic resolution as I hear them now. Of course, I may not spare myself the crosscheck with my hardware references. The far less expensive PH-79 II from Echo Diastasis sounds more uninvolved, it also seems to deliver the dynamics with reduced intensity, and there is not so much left of the Nagra's resilient bass on »Development«, either. Then I put on »Signs Of Life« by Pink Floyd, and with the first oar strokes hitting the water it becomes clear that this representation is incredibly realistic. And it gets even better: Nick Mason's electronically alienated voice is clearly audible, and every single tone of David Gilmour's guitar sounds like a drop falling gently into the water to create a circular wave propagation. This high degree of subtlety is absolutely amazing.

When Annie Lennox interprets »Summertime«, we are witnessing a musical revelation. Accompanied at first by a piano only, her voice sounds exactly as I know it from high-class phono stages in at least a similar way. But over the Classic Phono it's a different story, the emotional distance to the singer is vanishing, and in the twinkle of an eye we're hopping from the cheap to the expensive seats. Lennox's voice is standing out more clearly in front of the dark backdrop, the contrast is higher. Moreover, her way to perform this song, which has been covered countless of times, is rather melancholic – and this is what the Classic Phono transports like no other.

## Result

It was probably just a matter of time until an analogue sound experience of such a high intensity would happen to me. The spectacular thing about the new phono stage Nagra Classic Phono is that it preamplifies the music the way it was cut into the groove. Sounds trivial, but is seemingly an art that almost nobody can master so well, except for the Swiss.

Olaf Sturm ■