

## The Nagra Classic Preamplifier Classic Indeed!

By Jeff dorgay



It's no secret that I am a big fan of Nagra products. I can't hide that from you and keep a straight face. But the admiration is for a good reason – they make fantastic products. Having been to their factory several times now, the team at Nagra is a group dedicated to excellence in every aspect, from design through final build. And their heritage is second to none.

Some American customers bristle at the classic form factor of Nagra Classic components, but I love the simple, compact elegance they offer. Not everyone wants a massive rack of audio gear in their environment, but they still crave high sonic achievement – precisely who the Classic series is for. Those wanting even more performance and a more full-size chassis can step up to the HD series of components – considered some of the world's absolute finest by recording engineers and audio reviewers the world over.

Just as I would rather have a 1988 Porsche Carrera instead of the new 991 model, I prefer the Classic Line. I like the more straightforward presentation. I love the way a small group of Nagra Classic components disappear in a room, instead of drawing attention to themselves. Yet when you do notice them, and move closer to inspect, the careful attention to every detail that makes a Nagra a Nagra becomes apparent. The smoothness of the controls, the perfection in the details of the casework, and of course, the famous Nagra Modulometer – homage to their decades of building pro gear and recorders lights up the quality center in your brain.

### **It gets even better when you play music.**

Pairing the Classic Preamplifier initially with a Nagra Classic DAC, power supply, and a pair of Classic power amplifiers, operating in bridged mode, is a prodigious combination. Even though the HD series reveals still more music. The Classic line should not be mistaken as “entry-level.” This group of components in place of my standard reference stack of Pass and dCS gear is incredibly musical and does a fantastic job in every sense of the imagination. But for now, we are merely talking about the preamplifier.

The Classic Preamplifier tips the price scale at \$17,900. You can add the Nagra VFS base (\$2,000) and the Classic PSU power supply (\$11,000) to take the performance of the Classic Preamplifier to an even higher level. The PSU power supply does add a greater degree of musicality, with more dynamics, increased bass slam, and definition. It also generates a larger, more three-dimensional soundfield, but it is costly if you own only one Nagra Classic component. This upgrade may not be for everyone. Should you have the tube DAC the power supply is required, and there is an additional output for a Classic Preamplifier and a Nagra VPS two-input phono stage as well.

Powering a single component may be tough to justify, but the power supply is a bargain if you have all three components or plan on adding them soon. For the rest of this review, we will concentrate on the Classic Preamplifier as a standalone component -with the VFS (but without the power supply.) I feel the VFS base makes enough of an improvement in noise floor and focus that it is essential to getting the most out of your Classic. As with nearly every vacuum tube component we’ve reviewed, vibration control platforms/devices usually show more effect with tube gear. Should you already possess a world-class rack, the VFS [ADS1] is not necessary, but it still looks fantastic and complements Nagra’s design ethos perfectly.

### **Road-tested functionality**

For those not familiar with Nagra’s 70 years of experience in designing audio gear, primarily for the pro sound environment, this is where the form factor originates. Their recorders, like the Nagra III pictured here, feature a compact shape and the large, perfectly calibrated Modulometer – a Nagra trademark to keep levels accurate.

When Nagra began to design audio gear for the home environment, it made perfect sense to their engineers to keep things compact. The meter continues to be produced, and Nagras assembly team pays careful attention to their construction and calibration. Illustrated is the test bench where every piece of Nagra gear goes before heading out to you, with multiple, sophisticated checks along the assembly process.

The term “Swiss made” is often associated with the Swiss watchmaking industry. Still, every bit of meticulous detail that you would apply to any top Swiss watchmaker takes place inside the Nagra factory. It is clean, quiet, and highly organized. Walking through the factory as I have done a few times now, the vibe is calm, and the people building your Nagra are friendly but highly focused. This level of focused excellence is what gives Nagra components such a high level of mechanical and electrical quality. I’m sure that somewhere a Nagra component has failed, but in my 15 years of using Nagra components as reference pieces here at TONE, and among my friends that own them, no one I know has had a Nagra component fail.

This is a must if you are recording on location out on the edge of civilization, or capturing a legendary performance at the world-renowned Montreux Jazz Festival (where Nagra gear is used exclusively to record every performance.). The Nagra SN was used by NASA on later Apollo to capture those legendary events. [ADS2] It is still a big bonus knowing that your home audio system will always be there to fulfill your musical desires.

### **New yet familiar**

While the casework, layout and form factor will be familiar to those using the Nagra Jazz preamplifier, and if you happen to be stepping up from the earlier PL-L or PL-P preamplifier, you'll note the inputs and outputs are now all on the rear panel. Again, the side inputs of the PL series are an homage to the pro side of Nagra, but the rear inputs certainly make it easier to integrate the Classic into a home system. Let it not be said that the Swiss are inflexible.

The rest of the inputs are also similar to Nagra's past, as well as the other components in the Classic lineup. There is a switch for volume, an input selector and to the far right, a large dial that powers up the Classic Preamp, allowing it to be fully on, in standby, or by using the selection marked "R," controlled by the handy (and equally compact) remote control. Somehow as easy to use as the remote is, I always find myself getting up to manually adjust volume just because I like the feel of Nagra gear. It is unique and like no other.

The Classic preamplifier has four sets of RCA inputs and a single set of XLRs, while the output has two sets of XLRs and one set of RCA. Either way, it should be more than enough for any system.

Around front, there is a small switch for XLR, RCA, or headphones. That's right, headphones. Part of the increase in price from the Jazz is the built-in headphone amplifier, which is excellent in its own right. Spending a fair amount of time using the headphone jack with phones ranging from a pair of Grado SR60s all the way to the Focal Utopias, the verdict is top-notch. Some of the world's finest (and most expensive) dedicated headphone amplifiers offer a little bit more resolution and dynamics, as they should. Still, the headphone amplifier in the Classic is outstanding.

### **Neutral in more ways than one**

The overall sound of the Classic builds upon the evolution of the Jazz and the PL-L/P before it. This is still a three-tube design, with a pair of 12AU7s and a 12AX7, but the newest preamplifier is quieter, more dynamic, and more refined at both ends of the frequency spectrum. As we happen to have a Jazz here to make a comparison, the first thing that comes to mind is if you have a Jazz, you will definitely be able to experience more music with the Classic, but the flavor and voicing of your Jazz is nothing to hang your head over.

Listening to the opening track on St. Vincent's *Love This Giant*, the big bass drum is more robust, more locked down with the Classic. Rolling through a long playlist of bass-heavy tracks, it's easy to hear that there is more texture, life, and definition, along with a little more speed to the bass line. Nagra has done a lot to update the power supply in the Classic, so this makes perfect sense.

Switching to vocal tracks and music showing off the other end of the frequency scale, the same observations are made. Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Elish both come further out of the speakers, feeling more convincing and natural. Cymbals have more sheen, and the soundfield created by the Classic is larger in all dimensions. The Jazz feels a little small when you go back to it, but still very listenable. However, those asking the familiar "should I upgrade to the new box" question, I'd say that if it doesn't cause any undue financial strain, it's definitely a worthwhile upgrade. Sell your Jazz to a friend that isn't versed in the way of Nagra yet!

Another aspect of the Classics performance that shouldn't be overlooked is its compatibility with other amplifiers, tube, or solid-state. I made it a point to use about ten different amplifiers with the Classic, and there were no issues, and it's neutral tonal balance carried through to reveal the signature of the power

amplifier used. Even the RCA outputs had no problem driving a 25-foot pair of Cardas Clear cable between amp and pre.

I'm sure that Nagra people would love you to have an all-Nagra system, but we all start our journey somewhere. The Nagra Classic preamplifier works well with whatever components you choose to mate with it. Very Swiss Indeed.

### **The Nagra Classic Preamplifier**

MSRP: \$17,500

[www.nagraaudio.com](http://www.nagraaudio.com)

### **Peripherals**

**Amplifier** Nagra Classic

**Digital Source** Nagra Tube DAC

**Analog Source** GrandPrixAudio Parabolica Turntable/TriPlanar Arm Koetsu Jade Platinum

**Speakers** Focal Stella Utopia EM

**Cable** Cardas Clear, Tellurium Q Reference