

Nagra Compact Player: a streaming solution that delivers

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Nagra Compact Player network streamer

Nagra has some claim to being the OG high end audio brand, it's hard to think of another that has been making such well built and regarded equipment for longer. The brand's origins lie in tape recorders, both full size studio machines and portable examples that are among the most desirable objects in the world of audio electronics. The latter were being built for decades before Nagra entered the crazy world of high end audio, being made in Switzerland they were never cheap but the fact that so many reporters used to use them suggests that they weren't exorbitant either. I am sceptical however about the young postman who uses one to record his favourite opera singer in the 1981 movie *Diva*.

Today Nagra makes a range of electronics specifically for the high end audio enthusiast, with tubes/valves being a common element in their design. There is even a Nagra turntable of suitably high mass and asking price. The Compact Player is therefore something of an anomaly, it is not large and it

doesn't involve multiple elaborate elements. The Compact Player is pretty well what it says on the tin, except it doesn't say that it plays streamed audio, but that's pretty much a given today.



The Compact Player combines a streamer with a DAC in a box that's only 18.5cm (7.2") wide and 1 1/2 inches high on when standing on the tips of its spikes. You can add a dedicated Compact VFS isolation base should you wish and there is option to add an upgraded power supply, simply called the Compact PSU, but neither is essential. The connections extend to an RJ45 socket for ethernet, RCA output sockets and a USB A port for a hard- or thumb drive. The only unusual connection is a ground point, this is probably the most high end feature on the Compact Player and allows the chassis to be connected to a proprietary grounding device, something that pretty well always enhances performance by lowering the noise floor.

Given that the Compact Player looks as if it was designed for the more casual user or for enthusiasts looking to stream in a second room it's surprising that it doesn't offer wireless internet access. I guess an aerial would have spoilt the purist aesthetic.

It is a very attractive piece of kit, machined from aluminium and beautifully finished with no switches or displays to undermine the clean lines, the Compact Player is a purposeful streamer that needs no more than its a small LED to tell you when it's connecting to the network and powered up.

As Nagra fans will be aware it's far too affordable to contain the company's proprietary digital to analogue architecture so instead opts for a more conventional DAC on a chip selected through 'extensive evaluation and listening'. Nagra has of course paid close attention to all aspects of the design, using a multi layer PCB and maximising the performance of the clock and power supply.

Rather similar internals can be found in any number of competing products but the majority of them seek to impress with features and buttons, inputs and outputs. By keeping things simple and sticking to its high quality build Nagra has carved out a niche for the Compact Player that holds it in good stead beyond the cache of the brand.

Nagra have done a good job of integrating streaming services into the Compact Player, not only do the likes of Qobuz Connect and JPlay work natively with it but they offer volume control over the outputs



too. All you need therefore is a power amp and speakers or active speakers, which cuts the box count down even further. It is also ready to work with Tidal and Spotify Connect, Airplay 2 and Roon, it even 'Plays with Audirvana'. For those on a budget the free mConnect app is available and while the interface isn't as slick as the subscription based alternatives the sound is unlikely to suffer and in some instances might be better.



Our review sample was supplied with a Compact VFS isolation base that consists of two aluminium slabs with compliant material in between and similarly soft but small feet. This is designed to accept the spike feet that are supplied with the Compact Player and elevates it by about 30mm. A Compact PSU was also supplied as an alternative to the wall-wart, this has a slightly taller case than the Player and weighs notably more, it comes with a good quality supply lead.

Sound quality

Perhaps its the relatively high mass of casework relative to electronics but it takes the Compact Player a little while to warm up and give of its best, once this has happened you get a notable uplift in timing and scale of image. This is an even handed and relaxed sounding streamer that works well with a range of material, I enjoyed Flea's solo album *Honora* and especially his rendition of Maggot Brain, where his trumpet takes the place of the original guitar and is delightfully eloquent and restrained over a melodic backing. The Nagra also does a good job with timing for a single box streamer, it's not quite as tight as separate streamer/DAC combinations but keeps you interested when the music is up to par. I got into Arild Andersen's *If You Look Far Enough*, an ECM album from a while back that proved very engaging thanks to his bass playing, Ralph Towner's guitar and Nana Vasconcelos' percussion.



The Compact Player's balance is a little bit eager compared to more expensive alternatives but that is preferable to overly laid back, and it doesn't get in the way of Angine de Poitrine's complex time signatures and intense playing. This is the sort of music that can all too easily sound aggressive and tiring but the Nagra has what it takes to deliver the microtonal, multi-layered guitar and drums in coherent even thrilling fashion. I particularly like the chunky bass guitar sound on their tune *Sarniezz*. It becomes clear that everything with a kick in it kicks, this is equally true of upbeat tunes like *In My House* by Kendra Morris where there is energy aplenty yet it's not difficult to follow the instruments and voice in the mix.

Adding the Compact PSU to the mix brings more detail to the presentation by lowering the noise floor, essentially you can hear quieter sounds more easily and as these include things like harmonics and reverb which enrich the tonal experience. It also enhances imaging, giving the Compact Player's presentation more depth and height, timing remains much as before but the music is a little more easy on the ear, saxophones are not as forward as they are without it but still have plenty of bite.



The Compact Player/PSU pairing brings out good dimensionality in all manner of material but it was Cleo Reed's *Women Are at War* that caught my attention. Here there were facets of the performance that aren't usually obvious, it also has some heavy bass on it that doesn't normally make itself known. This may be Nagra's most modest source component but it offers a good degree of insight into recordings if the amp/speaker is up to the job. That also proved to be the case with the Johan Lindvall Trio of piano, bass and drums which sounded vital and assured at the same time which is an engaging combination. You want the energy of an acoustic band like this but it needs to be controlled and clean and the Compact Player sounds very controlled without squashing dynamics.

Conclusion

It can't be easy for a company that's used to making cost no object equipment to go the opposite way with a single source unit like the Compact Player. However, by keeping the casework as clean as possible and eliminating unnecessary features like displays and multiple connections they have managed to produce a one box streaming solution that delivers musical engagement in a discreet and attractive form at a sensible price. There is plenty of competition in the form of relatively insubstantial and feature

heavy designs that are made in the far east but those looking for purity of form, ease of use and high build quality could do worse than consider the Compact Player – it's not just a good looking metal brick.



Pros

- Beautifully engineered compact design with premium aluminium casework
- Excellent musical engagement with strong timing and controlled dynamics
- Clean, minimalist operation with wide streaming platform support
- Optional PSU upgrade brings greater detail, depth and refinement
- High-end sound quality without unnecessary features or clutter

Cons

- No built-in Wi-Fi despite compact lifestyle-friendly design
- Limited connectivity compared to many rivals
- Requires warm-up time to perform at its best
- Optional PSU and isolation base add to overall cost

Specifications:

- Type: network streamer with DAC
- Streaming inputs: Tidal Connect, Qobuz Connect, Spotify (Connect), vTuner internet radio, Airplay 2
- Network connection: ethernet RJ45
- Analogue outputs: single ended RCA with volume control
- Digital inputs: RJ45 ethernet, USB drive
- Digital outputs: no

Resolution: not specified

Supported digital formats: not specified

Output voltage: not specified

Headphone output: no

Control software: UPnP, DLNA, Roon, Audirvana, JPlay

Dimensions HxWxD: 41 x 166 x 185mm

Weight: 1.9kg

Finish: silver

Warranty: 2 years

Price when tested:

Compact Player £5,798

Compact PSU £3,650

Compact VFS £1,350

Manufacturer Details:

Audio Technology Switzerland

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Type:

network streamer

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