



MARCH 2013



JAZZ

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



SWITZERLAND

Reviewer: Srajan Ebaen

Financial Interests: <http://www.6moons.com/financialinterests.html>

Source: 27" iMac with 3.4GHz quad-core Intel Core i7, 16GB 1.333MHz RAM, 2TB hard disc, 256GB SSD drive, ADM Radeon HD 6970M with 2GB of GDDR5 memory, PureMusic 1.89b in hybrid memory play with pre-allocated RAM and AIFF files, hog mode and 24/176.4 NOS-style upsampling; Audirvana 1.4 in direct/integer mode, Metrum Hex, SOTM dX-USB HD with Super-clock upgrade & mBPS-d2s

Preamp/Integrated: ModWright LS-100 with Psvane tubes, Esoteric C-03, Bent Audio Tap-X, TruLife Audio Athena, Bakoon AMP-11R, *Octave HP300SE* [on review], *Thrax Dionysos* [on review], *Wyred4Sound mPRE* [on review]

Amplifier: First Watt SIT1, FirstWatt SIT2, ModWright KWA100SE

Speakers: Aries Cerat Gladius, Boenicke Audio B10, Zu Druid V, Zu Submission, AudioSolutions Rhapsody 200, *soundkaos Wave 40* [on review], *Aries Cerat Stentor* [on review]

Cables: Complete loom of Zu Audio Event, KingRex uArt USB cable

Stands: Artesania Exoteryc double-wide 3-tier with TT glass shelf, Rajasthani solid hardwood console for amps

Powerline conditioning: 1 x GigaWatt PF2 on amps, 1 x GigaWatt PC-3 SE Evo on front-end components

Sundry accessories: Extensive use of Acoustic System Resonators, noise filters and phase inverters

Room size: 5m x 11.5m W x D, 2.6m ceiling with exposed wooden cross beams every 60cm, plaster over brick walls, suspended wood floor with Tatami-type throw rugs. The listening space opens into the second storey via a staircase and the kitchen/dining room are behind the main listening chair. The latter is thus positioned in the middle of this open floor plan without the usual nearby back wall.

Review Component Retail: €10.750, add €1.450 for two XLR input transformers; VFS isolation platform €1.650, tube replacement kit €230 - all prices include VAT



Nagra have changed. In a reversal of Esoteric stripped of independence and reabsorbed by Teac, the Kudelski Group divested itself from the audio subsidiary in early 2012. Reborn as *Audio Technology Switzerland*, this new entity must now continue terra forming planet Nagra without the mothership's looming shadow and fiscal benevolence. But it's still firmly in the family. Marketing manager Matthieu Latour's bid to acquire Nagra was denied. Blood proved thicker than water and Kudelski members led by Marguerite Kudelski and brother-in-law Pascal Mauroux became the new owners.



Daughter of founder Stephan Kudelski who passed away on January 26th of this year, Marguerite is a full-fledged engineer in her own right albeit not of audio. She holds an EPFL doctorate in Microtechnology and now oversees R&D. Pascal is another Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne graduate engineer with an MBA from the city's Haute École de Commerce. He previously held international positions in industry and at Nestlé. He is Nagra's new manager. Marguerite practically grew up around the legendary Jean-Claude Schlup who had fronted Nagra Audio prior to the reorganization. Many Nagra products of that era—I'm thinking the pyramid monos and 300B integrated or details like ejecting complete transports for CD players—probably got their launch not because the market clamored or dealers begged. They launched because Schlup wanted them to. With continuity of tradition assured by family ties and great

respect for the former head of engineering, exactly how much change will manifest and how far it might reach remain open questions. For now.



That numerous changes are afoot is signaled by the new Jazz* valve preamp and €6.500 solid-state Melody sibling. Both overhaul Nagra naming convention—no more 3-letter acronyms—and place all connectors on the rear panel where they belong. Design, trademark modulometer and non-standard footprints remain carryovers. But when dealers vetoed the RCA sockets at the HighEnd Munich 2012 launch, Nagra responded flexibly and refitted the requested WBT Next-Gen on 120 units already built. Drawings for future models drafted by an industrial designer formerly of Nestlé Nespresso indicate more significant exterior changes to come. Those struck me as a very successful tightrope walk between looking recognizably Nagra (what's a Merc without three-pointed star after all?) whilst growing more contemporary, normal sized and—vital for the firm's future as a competitive Swiss vendor—becoming far easier to assemble.



Nagra Jazz and Melody above. Open Nagra Melody below with the optional phono stage installed.

The Melody is based directly on the Jazz circuit but executed with the same professional bipolar transistors which already featured in the firm's legendary analog recorders. The Melody can be upgraded with the external power supply of the Jazz or like the latter run off the newly developed MPS *multiple power supply* below.



* The Jazz is obviously named for the Montreux Jazz Festival which Nagra has sponsored for many years and which annually brings about 200.000 visitors to this small lake-side resort. The event was founded by Claude Nobs who at 76 died this year in a Lausanne hospital.

The MPS is designed to power up to four line-level Nagra components simultaneously. This includes the forthcoming DSD-ready valve-powered D/A converter. Connection to the MPS is via fully shielded short umbilicals to minimize RF pickup. The four power feeds run off discrete secondaries from a central power transformer. One of those outputs is in fact battery operated, giving an average playtime of 5-7 hours depending on component. The MPS modulometer shows input voltage and battery charge. The four power feeds are time-sequenced to start up and power down a connected Nagra system in the proper order.



Matthieu Latour opined that the stock Jazz supply is of such high order as to make the 'upgrade' to the MPS nearly academic and of interest probably only to the most seriously committed unless one powered more than just the Jazz with it. For the older PL-L meanwhile the MPS difference is said to be dramatic and the Melody's shielded SMPS is likewise claimed to be quite transformed.



Today's Jazz might be regarded as a legacy bridge product. It's already produced on the new assembly line in the new building in Romanel-sur-Lausanne which shares space with a thriving repair factory for *all* of Switzerland's capsule-based coffee machines (König, Krups, DeLonghi et al). It's made to the same high standards as it always has. True, the staff has shrunk after layoffs. And demands for sufficient turnover and self-sustaining profitability must be starker now that the umbilical with the mothership is cut.

Thus future models must ask the tough questions. They no longer can be about what Nagra wants to build because they can. They must be about what the market wants. One thus expects a comprehensively featured top-class DAC, an integrated amp, true high-power amps of the 200wpc+ variety and perhaps even upscale class D. One would *not* anticipate a turntable of any sort. Or yet another low-power valve amp with transistor drivers just because an insufficient but fixed footprint left no room for small bottles, never mind that it enforced stacking two toroids so tall that safe shipping demanded they be physically removed. It's overcoming such costly self-inflicted engineering challenges that with Swiss Audio Technology probably shouldn't continue.

Breaking with tradition to renew tradition is of course one bloody hard endeavor particularly when a brand enjoys the nearly iconic stature Nagra does. Those queasy over any pending strategic brand renovations will embrace this Jazz with fondness. Aside from the name, it's a prototypical laboratory-look Nagra replete with motorized volume pointer, motorized balance control, motorized rotary block selector

aka power mains with its trademark red bar concealed at off should you have extinguished the modulometer backlight to be unsure whether the machine is actually on or not.



There's the usual outboard power supply, an unusual but useful stereo/mono toggle, a mute toggle, a 0/12dB gain toggle, selectable XLR/RCA outputs (the latter as two paralleled pairs, the former true transformer balanced just as the single XLR input) and five RCA inputs. The famously ergo-aggro metal remote is finally history and the new one a plastic but wonderfully ergonomic job shared with none other than Swiss competitor



Solution. And the sound? We're promised quite an improvement over the former PL-L which since has been discontinued together with its ergonomically nightmarish socketry mounted on either cheek. Improved S/N specs for the Jazz even made its battery supply redundant to now go regular AC.



From a 21st-century convenience perspective, the only note which Nagra's Jazz might at least for some play slightly out of tune is the lack of a numerical volume readout. The legacy laboratory aesthetics and modulometer conspire against it. But today's shopper could expect and demand the convenience of volume settings which are *precisely* repeatable from the seat. That requires a numbered display as offered by competitors from ARC, BAT, Conrad-Johnson et al. However offerings from Lamm, ModWright, Octave and Rogue side patently with Nagra. This would make desirability or need of this feature a split vote. All other basics the Jazz neatly ticks off.



On tech specs, essentials for a modern tube preamp are wide bandwidth, low noise and low output impedance. Here the Jazz might strike some as a mixed bill on the first count. Response $\pm 0.5\text{dB}$ is just 10Hz-50kHz where something like Octave's entry-level €3.850 HP300MkII hits a stout 1.5MHz at -3dB or 200kHz at -0.1dB. Channel crosstalk for the Jazz is $>78\text{dB}$. Where paper begins to positively shout is on dynamic range. Think $>112\text{dB}$ in the high-gain setting. In fact the unit-specific 4-page bill of health accompanying my loaner showed a colossal measured 117dB for each channel referenced against a full 4V output. Hola! Such numbers promise impressively low-noise performance. It's partially tweaked with Nagra's very stringent in-house tube selection/testing. It makes for a very high 60% rejection rate. Inveterate rollers might remember that. Output impedance is a very jazzy 50Ω on both XLR and RCA. Maximum input level to hit 0dB in either gain setting is 0.25Vrms . Without the external PSU, all of this tech occupies a compact footprint of 310 x 254mm (12.2 x 10") with a low height of 76mm or 3 inches. Weight is 3.3kg or 7.3lbs.

For circuit and control basics,

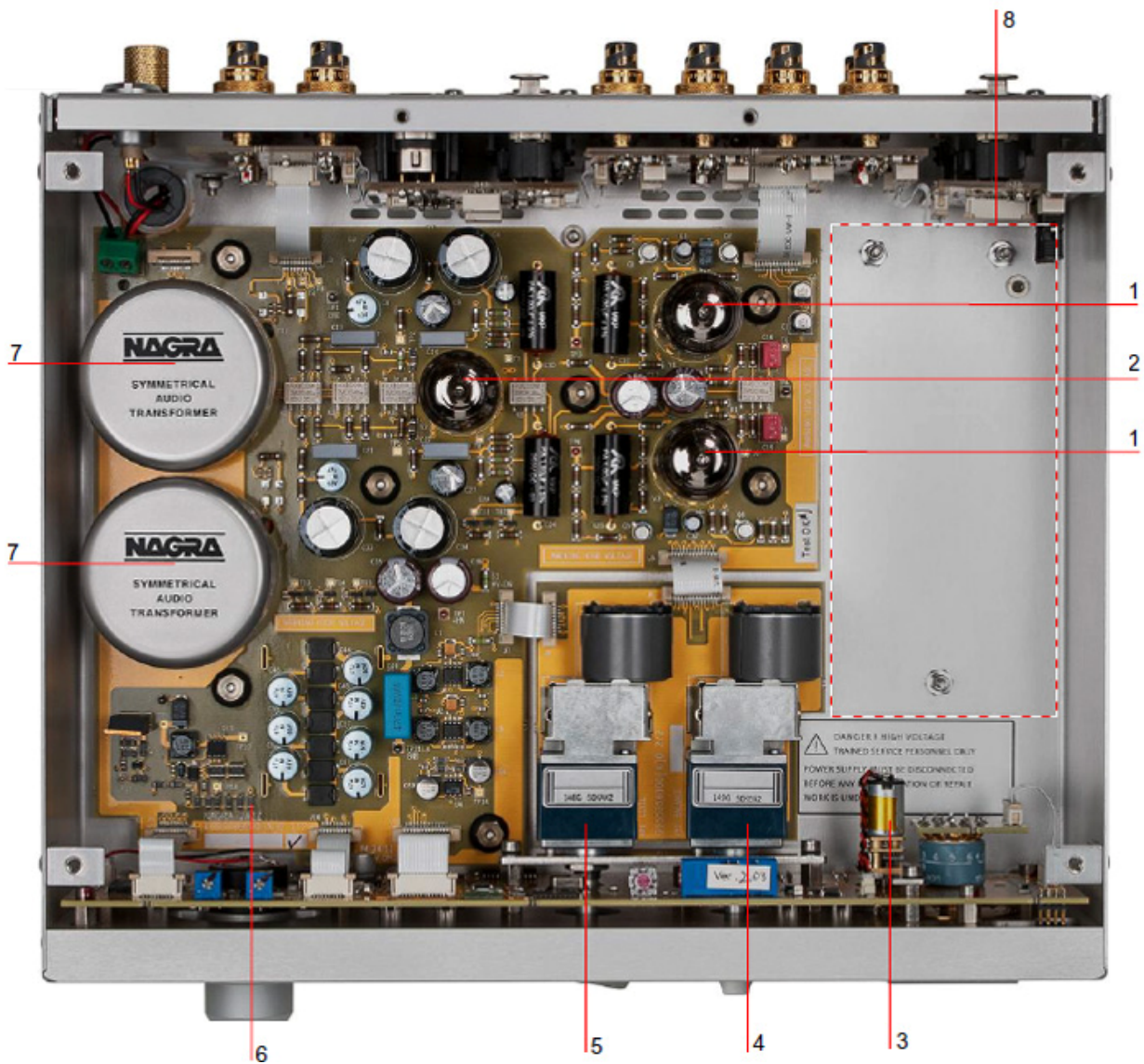
1 shows the l/r channel first-stage 12AX7/ECC83 double triodes configured in differential topology and polarized by transistors.

2 is the second-stage 12AT7/ECC81 responsible for most the voltage gain which is then trimmed via a series of resistors in the feedback loop to vary the selectable amplification factor from 0 to 12dB.

3 is the motorized power switch and input selector.

4 is the motorized Alps Blue Velvet balance pot without center detent.

5 is the motorized Alps Blue Velvet master volume pot.



6 is the high-voltage 200V supply which powers the valves' anodes via a turn-on time delay of multiple minutes.

7 are the balancing transformers for the XLR outputs (one per channel).

8 is space for the optional XLR symmetrical input circuit with Nagra transformers which insures that truly balanced sources like those from dCS don't encounter a shorted XLR pin which could cause distortion.



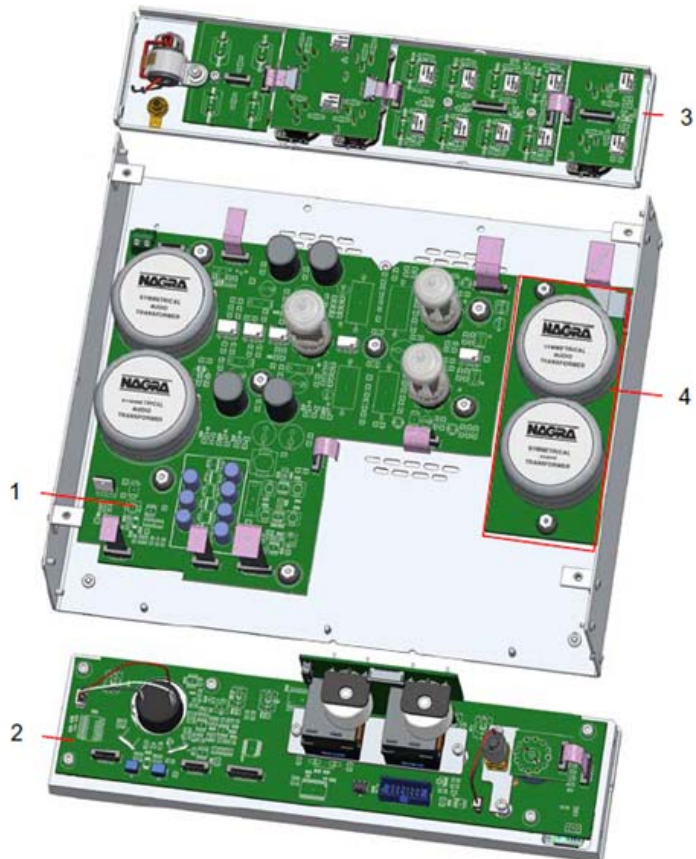
The supplied tubes are gold-pin ElectroHarmonix from Russia.

The basic Jazz board architecture consists of three or four main PCBs as shown in this breakout drawing.

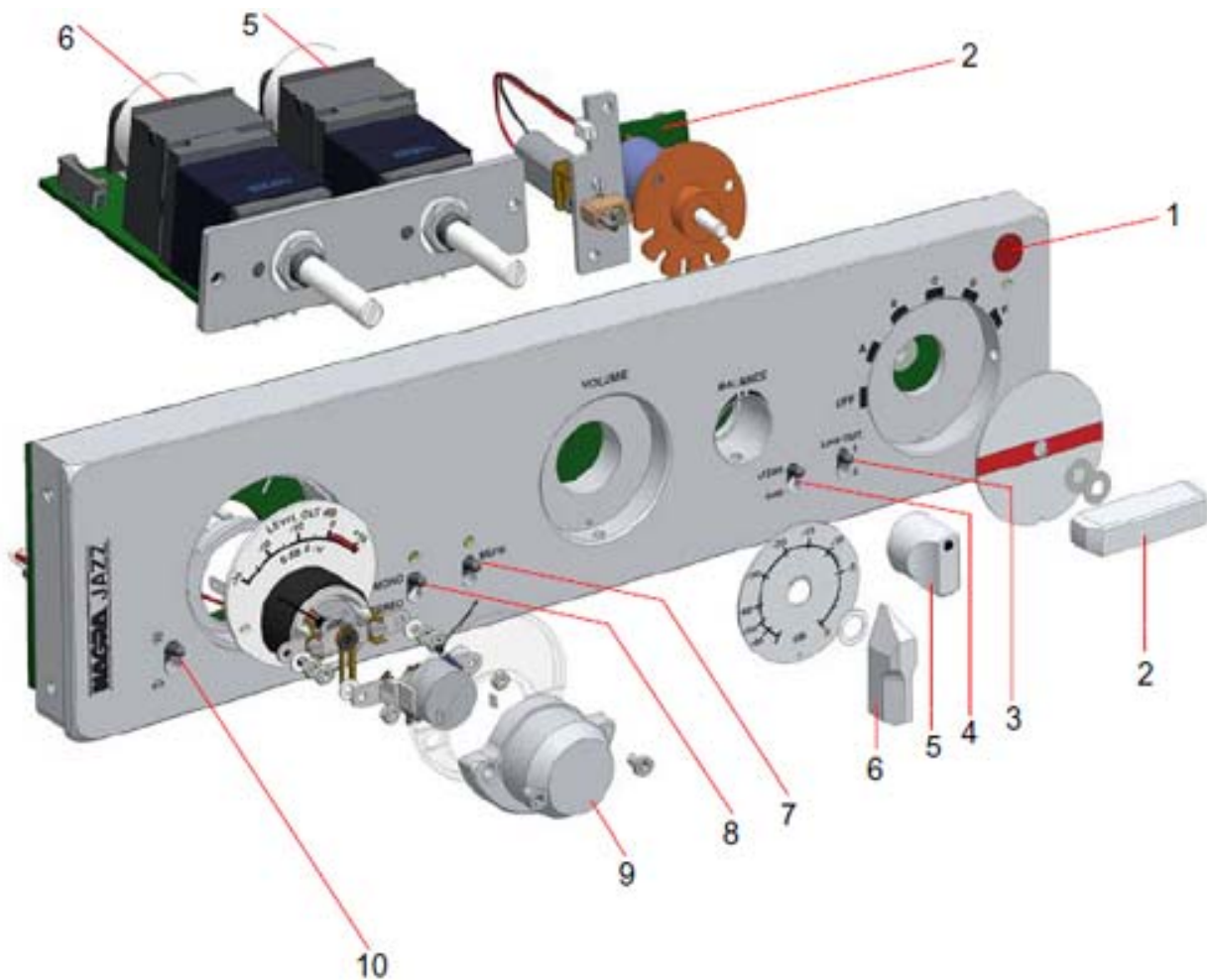
- 1 is the motherboard,
- 2 is the 4-piece board for the user-controlled circuits behind the front panel,
- 3 is the 2-piece rear-panel board for the i/o socketry circuits and
- 4 is the optional symmetrical input circuit board with Nagra transformers.

All inputs use a floating system to allow for pseudo-symmetrical signal management prior to the gain circuit. Only the ground of whatever input is active gets connected. All others are switched out of the circuit altogether. This effectively kills potential for static ground loops. The XLR-only signal-path bypass loop for home theater applications (input to output) is active even when the Jazz is powered off. This avoids redundant tube wear.

The optional VFS platform shown on the previous page combines two layers of clear-anodized 7mm aluminium with embedded Alpha-gel pellet decouplers whilst the Jazz itself gets upgraded to pointy footers machined from amagnetic copper-nickel-zinc non-ferrous alloy with embedded Delrin ball



ends which sit in precisely machined dimples of the upper VFS plate.



On the milled front panel

1 is the infrared eye with a yellow control confirmation LED below it.

2 is the signature motorized power and input selector.

3 is the output selector for XLR or RCA.

4 is the 0/12dB gain level selector.

5 is the motorized balance pot.

6 is the motorized master pot.

7 is the mute selector with yellow LED where flashing indicates that the Jazz is inside its soft-start phase.

8 is the mono/stereo selector

9 is the modulometer showing output level and 10 is the dimmer to lower the modulometer's backlighting in 7 discrete steps.

Having divested myself of all remaining valve amp inventory over the preceding six months—Octave MRE-130 monos for high-power push/pull, Yamamoto A-09S and Woo Audio Model 5 for low-power single-ended—my personal focus of interest for 2013 were valve *preamps*. After years of amusement mating power tubes to speakers via output transformers, I'd found more satisfaction with single-ended transistor amps from Nelson Pass. Still I admire particular tube contributions. Enter low-level circuits. My

6SN7-based ModWright LS-100 with select Psvane CV-181 and TruLife Audio Athena with 6H30 do exactly that downstairs and upstairs. A short-term reader loan of a €24.000 Concert Fidelity CF080-XLS with Psvane 12AU7 had introduced me to even more exciting performance—from a tube type no less which earlier hadn't impressed—albeit at a criminally excessive price and for that seriously underfeatured.



With Nagra's friendlier Jazz, a simultaneously arrived Octave HP300SE from Germany and a Thrax Dionysos from Bulgaria, I had my first *broad* opportunity to explore specific flavors of various small-signal tube types and associated circuit choices within my favored valve-pre/transistor-power-amp scheme.



with optional footers and two-tier elastomerically decoupled VFS platform

In use. The only possible points of contention are four. One, the $\pm 6\text{dB}$ balance control has no center indent. This should bother only career analysts or those too lazy to return to zero manually. Two, the XLR and RCA outputs can't be used together. This one folks with XLR-only amps and RCA-only subwoofers will feel. Three, the home-theater bypass loop is specific to XLR to likely reflect that balanced outputs on surround-sound processors have become more ubiquitous. It simply leaves out those without. Four, the power umbilical on the external PSU exits in the front. If you mean to place the PSU next rather than behind the Jazz, you'll be looking at bits of the umbilical. This seems strangely inelegant for a machine which clearly benefited from tremendous attention to detail.

An impeccable high note of the user experience is the remote control and volume control's chosen gear ratio. Each press of the up/down buttons elicits a confirmatory very sensible yellow light on the Jazz to let you know that the command was received and the wand's battery and your aim are up to snuff. Now the volume control moves by such a tiny amount that over/undershooting the desired level becomes essentially impossible. In short, the range of minuscule adjustments achievable from the seat is tremendously broad. That's thrice relevant because the Jazz remains brilliantly intelligible into levels barely above whisper to explore room for midnight sessions usually neglected. The wand's angle of infrared reception is fabulously endowed as well. Being 60° off-axis caused no misfires. As such interfacing with the Jazz from the listening seat was the stuff dreams are made of.



If you've never owned or handled a Nagra before, you'll be positively tickled by the response to the wand's on/off and source selection commands. Unlike nearly every other firm which employs invisible relays, Nagra turns their big block control *mechanically* and does so with a satisfyingly fat click. It's an obvious bit of exhibitionism for the company's well-documented acumen to execute mechanically trick devices with legendary Swiss precision.

Audible excellence. If I only had one word to condense my first impression, it'd be *space*. The Jazz excels at space in all directions. On layers it's like a hand-made Pâtisserie Boulangerie Blé Sucré croissant. That seems à propos given Nagra's location in Switzerland's French region. But it's not simply a function of overall expanse. It's accompanied by a specific quality. Exactly like a Rethm widebander whose Indian designer pursues what he dubs the 'spark of life' from unobstructed fully liberated overtone action, the Jazz aces billowy airiness and reflective venue cues. It's a big light-filled show buoyed by elasticity and subtle textures and seasoned with dimensional MSG for very tactile contextual contrast.



with Swiss soundkaos Wave 40 speakers, Zu Submission subwoofer and FirstWatt SIT-1 monos

If I only had two words to capture my second impression, it would have to be *noise floor*. Think a few subterranean levels below ground. This becomes most self evident with reduced volumes. The extent to which you can zoom out as though you were walking backward and away from the performers is stunning. Remaining *connected* has you zoom back in not physically but solely with your hearing attention. This ability to return purely with your mind's eye and still see it all at minimal loudness is directly proportionate to the machine's exceptional S/N ratio. Though Marguerite Kudelski is an equestrian, her Jazz isn't a horse but tube whisperer. This could fly in the face of expectations which associate Nagra's house sound as voiced for beauty over ultimate accuracy. Whilst the Jazz clearly lacks the dryness many relate to transistors, its ability to drill down on micro detail competes with powerfully microscopic semiconductor units.

In that respect the Jazz is far more modern than the previously reviewed PL-L. Make no mistake, beauty remains. The lens which captures it simply no longer applies deliberate leading-lady soft focus. Even so there *is* softness. But it's not from response deviations or obscured detail. It's textural. Rather than carve out transient emphasis which telegraphs as vigorous, choppy, spiky, needly or energetic, the Jazz is mellower and more decay-centric. It celebrates wafting undulating fluidity. Yet it's decidedly *not* thick. Again it's the Rethm aesthetic. It would collapse upon itself were tone density set too high to overshadow upper



harmonic finesse and inside-out illumination. The upshot is an attractive slightly beautifying treatment that's spatially cavernous in the very best sense, manages micro detail in a way which defies the analytical and remains lithe and supple throughout. It's a perfect distillation of what a modern valve preamp might be.



The earlier criticized umbilical orientation of the PSU - why not have it come out the back for a cleaner look?

ModWright LS100 | Nagra Jazz. Nagra's metal work is an obvious cut above the excellent LS100 by which ModWright at least to these eyes had established somewhat of a price reference already. But the rather costlier Jazz brought to the table more than just a pretty face and finer bone structure. In the most real-world of terms, its all-there ability at low levels was superior. Hearing literally *more with less* signaled

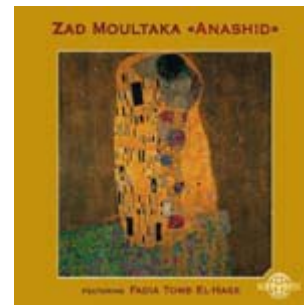
higher resolution. Men shopping for cars routinely engage in test-drive behavior that's alien to their usual driving style. They go faster, accelerate harder and—if testing a 4x4—hit off-road terrain they'd never dream of if the vehicle was their own. Likewise for hifi auditions. At unrealistic levels men hit taiko drum spectacles, cannon-shot overtures and other Rubicon Trail excesses which put a shop system under duress in ways which home living with others abutted by neighbors would never create.



The Jazz can do all that with ease. But compared to remaining fully present, palpable, intelligible and involving at the *subdued* and subtle end of the scale, loud and bombastic is very primitive beginner's stuff. As the ModWright demonstrated, going quiet equates to smaller, clumped together, clouded over and trading tonal and textural variety for progressively more and more homogenized sameness. That's a perfectly normal result of throttling back dynamic range. The very fine very quiet parts fall below the event horizon.

The Nagra obviously followed the same inescapable trend of turning down the volume. But not only did it delay its onset, it didn't suffer the same *extent* of shrinkage and obscurity. By starting out with a higher S/N ratio, the Jazz retained more of it when the loudest-to-quietest scope was strategically squeezed like tooth paste. The LS100 got flat and empty sooner. This greater magnification power and separation of the Jazz expressed itself also in the tone density domain. The LS100's slightly fuzzier and thicker meatier expression was less teased out and articulated. This reflected directly as a subjectively smaller sense of venue scale and dimmer stage lighting. With its fatter tone the LS100 gave up some definition and illumination. Simultaneously it played somewhat looser. The one area in which the ModWright undeniably exhibited 'more' was bass power or weight. Here it has routinely outdone previous challengers. This comparison was no different. I'd not call the Jazz under-endowed by any stretch. I'd call the LS100 hung a bit like a horse.

From this comparison my takeaway was, never mind vaunted Swiss manufacturing finesse and advanced finishing chops. Those arguably aren't primary sound contributors. They'll be of little importance to budget-conscious shoppers. Very compellingly Nagra's Jazz also demonstrated the same finessed sophistication sonically. Where I'd found the earlier PL-L somewhat of an older man's toy—think echoes of the aural pipe'n'slippers aesthetic—the Jazz felt decidedly younger and fresher. It was in fact more vigorous than the ModWright. Whilst making it look traditional as always, the designers of the Jazz really did overhaul and *modernize* the PL-L platform. As first evidence of the brand's renaissance presently underway, to me the new team at Romanel-sur-Lausanne surely seemed exactly on the right track!



TruLife Audio Athena | Nagra Jazz. After my review of the Grecian preamp I'd asked designer Velissarios whether he'd ever listened to it with a transistor amp. He hadn't. This didn't surprise me. Whether as suspected it was his choice of 6H30 or not, on transient focus, cutting power and textural dryness the Athena was decidedly more transistory than my solid-state Esoteric C-03. Though I could well envision truly copasetic synergy with a somewhat fatter less incisive bandwidth-restricted valve amp where the Athena would become welcome degreaser and accelerator, with superior transistor amps of FirstWatt SIT-1 caliber the same qualities became somewhat excessive. Within my resident stable of loudspeakers, Athena's sword did wonders however with Sven Boenicke's mostly omni B10. Their horizontally opposed sidefiring 10-inch woofers/midranges deliberately enhance a room's reverberant field. This makes for a naturally redolent dense farfield-mixed sound. For my long-wall upstairs system anchored by these compact speakers then the 6H30 linestage became my top choice mated to a SIT-2 stereo amp. Like with fine wines whose connoisseurs recommend specific foods to best complements them, proper matching of electronics and speakers is key for artful results.



Back downstairs against the Nagra and same SIT-1, Athena's encounter proved short-lived for the same reasons as before. Whilst the 12AX7 and 12AT7 which the Jazz champions aren't necessarily known for textures—here the 'big-tone' 6SN7 has the reputation—they trounced the 6H30s in the Grecian implementation. The latter were comparatively strident, glassy and *dry*. At least with transistor amps not deliberately voiced to emulate tubes like an ARS Emitter, Nagra's very fluid highly resolved Jazz was the far better match. Triangulating against the LS100, I could now clearly verbalize their positions relative to my bigger system. Where the TruLife Audio was overly transistory to push the presentation too deep into the cool and edgy, the ModWright very gently erred on the other side. The Jazz nailed the golden middle *and* added the most responsive remote volume control to also walk off the winner on the interface smarts. The latter would repeat itself for the next comparison.

Thrax Audio Dionysos | Nagra Jazz.

At €15.000, this single-stage 6N6P preamp with 6C4P-EV rectifier runs a transformer volume control with only 23 steps below unity gain. Add a high-output 4V balanced source and amps of 1V or higher input sensitivity and this gets too loud far too quickly. Thrax's own discrete R2R DAC thus outputs only 1Vrms and their amplifiers offer strategic 2/4V input sensitivity adjustments.





This obviously broadens their pre's useful range to be just right. Conventional high-gain systems simply are unceremoniously left out in the hot as it were. Given price I'd call that a serious flaw. Not only is Nagra's volume taper far more gradual, the 0dB gain option offers further 'grey-zone' expansion to increase the breadth of attainable intermediate values. In the real world that's not only practical whilst opening the doors to modern hi-gain sources and amplifiers plus high-efficiency speakers. It's a must! Not being able to reach the *exact* desired volume is like an automobile jumping from 0 to 10 to 20km/h. Good luck parking it. On other tech the Dionysos is fully transformer-coupled on all i/o ports which include two each XLR. Like the Jazz, its mixed outputs unfortunately cannot be run simultaneously.

Positioned within €2.800 when one fits the more affordable Jazz with its optional input transformers, Thrax and Nagra competed as sonic equals with one discernable core difference. The Thrax was the more lit up and piquant on transients. The catch-all term for this truly broadband behavior was *crystalline*. At least in popular perception it equated to a greater transistor flavor. Though applied subtly, Nagra's mild texturization expressed classic valve virtues. If textures are what has folks gravitate to a tube preamp in the first place—an entirely sensible rationale—the Dionysos strips them away. It quite literally acted like a superior impedance-compensated passive. Yet my autoformer volume passive Bent Audio Tap-X in its admittedly very drab enclosure beat the Thrax functionally with 61 discrete attenuation steps at one fifth the price*.

A smaller difference between Dionysos and Jazz was the latter's greater weight in the bass. If this were the Wild West, the Thrax might be called the quicker draw for its highly crystallized slightly stark behavior. That also made it leaner. Nagra's contours were drawn with a slightly softer-tipped pencil. This expressed itself as fluffier or gentler whilst the Thrax was hyper focused and sharp. On raw detail capture where audiophile perception would grant the costly Bulgarian volume control the theoretical advantage over Nagra's far simpler motorized resistive pot, I discerned no appreciable performance delta. On guitar tremolo close to the bridge, the Platinum content of the Thrax treble was higher to create the usual illusion of more detail but listening closely only saw a different handling of the transient edge.



In this comparison the prior spend-more-get-more ascent had hit a wall. Between €10.700 and €15.000 things no longer moved up. Now they went sideways into two equally valid flavor choices with very similar basic hardware functionality. Whilst I loved the split numerical display of the Dionysos, I much preferred how the Jazz actually *handled* its volume. In the final analysis the Nagra sonics also suited my transistor power amps better.

Octave HP300SE | Nagra Jazz. This €5.500 German line stage (add €850 for phono) with single 12AU7 driver and 6922 follower combines 50Ω output impedance with 10Hz-200kHz response at -1.5dB, gain of 12/19/25dB and a S/N ratio of -108dB in low-gain mode. The XLR inputs see a differential summing opamp whilst the XLR outputs are transformer-coupled like the Jazz. Closer inspection reveals Octave's brilliant specs to rely on a chip-based output buffer and 22-35dB of NFB depending on gain.



* For another experiment I connected my Metrum Hex converter via XLR and RCA to both preamps to learn how its offset in output voltage (XLR is twice as high) would shift/expand their volume control ranges. Imagine my surprise when switching inputs on the Jazz caused zero signal interruption. With a very small time delay the music simply got slightly louder (XLR) or quieter (RCA). I don't know who'd ever appreciate that in practice but I saw it as another example for how Nagra's engineers really do sweat even the smallest of details.



Valve purists might scoff at the hybrid transistor outputs and the liberal use of negative feedback. They should recall that Octave's amplifiers are specifically designed to deal with low-impedance reactive speakers to be exclusively push-pull pentode and thus feedback by design. Octave demonstrates with big Dynaudio, Triangle Magellan and other burly boxes beyond the reach of most valve amps and which would be a virtual death knell to nearly all zero-NFB SETs. That makes for an altogether different design ethic and— one shouldn't be surprised to learn—also a different type of sound.

But the core difference to the Nagra Jazz had less to do with audiophile sound items on the usual checklist and all with gestalt. Obviously speakers only deal in the acoustic transmission of electrical signals. They care nothing about abstract human concepts. Listener response is due to what's *in* that signal. It simply appears that some very important responses to hifi playback aren't confirmed yet by collaborative measurements. I'll thus talk of the audible effect, then briefly theorize what caused it. The Jazz was fluid, elastic, outgoing, effervescent and aerated. It had swing. Breath. It was generous and vibrant. Gushing. The HP300SE embodied a Victorian woman. In her fishbone corset she moves with very conscious poise whilst



taking very shallow breaths.. Musically things were rigid, stiff, drawn inward and dry. There was very clear and audible exertion of control. Its byproduct was simply a squelching of the Nagra's elasticity.

Yet nothing was wrong or objectionable about the sound per se! In fact listeners majoring on high-output wall-of-sound type power music would probably not at all relate to my description. But take for example Miguel Poveda's last track from *Coplas del Querer*. Here the singer is backed by massive string orchestra and solo violin. That oceanic soaring of expertly recorded strings had a very different singing quality which I imagine even lovers of amplified music would key into. And that bel canto gestalt was the vital differentiator.

What caused Nagra's buoyancy and freedom of expression? Valve outputs without a transistor buffer? Much lower feedback? Here designers who have strategically isolated effects of specific circuit choices must chime in. Asked what audible attributes created or contributed to the effect, I'd point at more elongated decays and their connective tissue and as such perhaps results of lesser *damping*. When I experimented with foam-filled acoustic corner traps and first-reflection sidewall absorbers, the effect was quite similar. Reduction of HF reflections killed off vital energies. Textures dried up. The sense of free breathing restricted. Once I removed these treatments, musical freedom returned and suffocation lifted. I understood that at least in my setup these treatments did something very different than damp unwanted bass energies. Hence my theorizing that this change of musical gestalt was directly related to an electronic facsimile of my long since abandoned acoustic damping attempts. The Nagra sounded like a reverberant room, the Octave like an overdamped one. Or think resonant tonewood soundkaos speaker versus an inert aluminum Magico. The latter's popularity reminds us. None of this is absolute. It merely reflects different design approaches and their associated sonic ideals.



with Aries Cerat Stentor speakers

To reconfirm that the Jazz bears little semblance to the firm's previous house sound, Frederic Beudot on staff wrote in after being emailed how the Jazz surprised me given expectations from its PL-L predecessor. "I agree. Their new stuff is head and shoulders better than the previous generation. Like you I found their gear too warm and plush except for the small solid-state phono preamp I reviewed a few years back. It had enough dynamics to be interesting whilst keeping a lot of Nagra's richness of tone. I heard the Jazz a few weeks ago. I *really* liked what I heard. It replaced an older Nagra at a friend's and lit up his whole system without losing the charm. I was impressed!" Back on usage items, Octave's feedback-generated gain changes took about 10 seconds of output muting to manifest. The Jazz could be switched from 0dB to 12dB and back on the fly. This was one more demonstrator of its featurization practicality.

Conclusion. *New wine in old skins.* That's what Nagra's Jazz is all about. It's the same long-loved looks with a new modernized sound. Of eight preamps on hand — ModWright, TruLife Audio, Thrax, Octave,



the next of the new crop - Nagra's solid-state Melody

Esoteric, Wyred4Sound, Bent Audio passive—the Jazz competed at the very top of the resolution game played on bandwidth, low noise and drive. It then added a finely measured dose of tube aroma which didn't infringe one iota on its resolution but added the type of nuanced texturization which our hifi vocabulary points to with words like suppleness, fluidity and succulence. Finished flawlessly, it is enhanced by an ultra-responsive remote that offers very fine volume gradations whilst adding balance and input switching. And the machine is fitted with just the right connectivity features. Audio Technology Switzerland's Nagra Jazz thus bodes exceptionally well for the company's restructured future under its new ownership.



By eye traditional, by ear pointing in a bold new direction, Nagra's Jazz is a bridge product. It should appeal to the established clientele and a new audience who perhaps never before considered the brand because like yours truly and Frederic Beudot, they assumed its sonics were too plush and tuned for comfort rather than thrills. I never expected it but with my SET-like transistor amps, the Nagra Jazz truly *thrilled* me. Hence consider this writer—and perhaps Nagra too?—an old dawg who just learned a terrific new trick. Live and learn? You bet. Let's never get too old for *that*...!

Quality of packing: Top shelf.

Reusability of packing: Many times.

Ease of unpacking/repacking: A cinch.

Condition of component received: Flawless.

Completeness of delivery: Perfect.

Human interactions: Good but slow as is typical for the Swiss.

Pricing: Costly as you'd expect from a luxury brand but highly competitive on sonics.

Website comments: Present state not commensurate with either product or brand.

Final comments & suggestions: If technically feasible—it's probably not or it would be there - I'd love to see both RCA *and* XLR outputs usable simultaneously to accommodate purely balanced amps like NCore monos with a subwoofer. I'd also like to see a center detent for the continuously variable balance control. Finally I'd like to have the power supply's umbilical to the Jazz exit on its rear next to the IEC power inlet so that the front merely shows the red LED; and add a power mains switch to the PSU so its power LED doesn't remain on indefinitely unless unplugged from the wall.



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AUDIO TECHNOLOGY SWITZERLAND

PAGRA JAZZ

A perfect modern tube preamplifier

2013

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