



A SYNDICATED
POLISH ARTICLE



NAGRA MSA

This review first appeared in the April 2010 issue of [hi-end hifi magazine High Fidelity](#) of Poland. You can also read this [review of the Nagra MSA](#) in its original Polish version. We publish its English translation in a mutual syndication arrangement with publisher Wojciech Pacuła. As is customary for our own reviews, the writer's signature at review's end shows an e-mail address should you have questions or wish to send feedback. All images contained in this review are the property of High Fidelity or Trafomatic Audio. - Ed.

Reviewer: Wojciech Pacuła

Review system: Go [here](#)

Review component retail: 34.200 zł + 5.300zł for VFS

The Nagra audio brand belongs to the [Nagra Kudelski Group](#). As you might realize, Kudelski is a Polish name. For many years, the company's founder and chief engineer was a Polish engineer. The story of his ancestors is quite interesting. As you can read [here](#), Tadeusz Kudelski, father of Nagra founder Stefan, was a son of Tomasz Kudelski, a Lvov Polytechnics graduate responsible for introducing to the architecture in Stanisławow a style of art nouveau. He started his job there by drafting a design for a Polish State Railways structure.



During that time, he fell in love with the city and settled down. His family ran an open house amongst whose frequent visitors were Stanisław Przybyszewski and Jan Kasprówicz, famous Polish poets but at the time teachers in one of the Stanisławow high schools. Tadeusz Kudelski followed in his father's footsteps and attended Lvov Polytechnics. In 1918 he took active part in the town's defense as one of the Lvov Eagles and an adjutant of his professor from Polytechnics, Kazimierz Bartel, a politician and three times prime minister of the Polish government. Tadeusz' carrier kicked off when Bartel talked the ambitious engineer into moving to Warsaw and once there helped him start over. Even though the Kudelski family had become Warsaw residents, they still came to visit Stanisławow quite often. It was there in the so-called *cooling room* which in fact was a basement that young Stefan began his first experiments and said to his friend that one day he would be a minister without a portfolio. Ambitious plans.



Nobody could have guessed that one of hi-end's and pro audio's legends was about to emerge. One key contributor was the passage of history. No matter what, Stefan Kudelski's background had him destined for great things but other factors too helped shape his company into what it would become. Incidentally, the name Nagra derives from the Polish word *nagrywać* (to record - music for example). After the lost September Campaign of the Nazi's 1939 attack on Poland, the Kudelski family fled with the Polish government first to Romania, then Hungary and finally France. There Stefan's father Tadeusz became a member of the resistance and sent his wife and son to Switzerland. Stefan graduated from a French high-school in Florimont and afterwards attended Lausanne Polytechnics.

He was quite disappointed by his education's poor quality and decided to quit during the fourth year. Afterwards he designed and built his first tape recorder in his small Prilly apartment. Years later he would receive an honoris causa degree from the same Polytechnics in recognition of his design work on the Nagra tape recorders. Tadeusz Olszański, author of an article about Stefan Kudelski and also his friend, wrote that Stefan sold his first tape recorder for CHF 1.000 which became an instant hit. According to the same report, the company was grown without bank loans. All earnings were simply reinvested. A few years later Stefan Kudelski received his first Academy Award Oscar for OST from *Orfeu Negro* (directed by Marcel Camus, 1959) which was recorded with one of his tape recorders. Later his machines became standard NASA issue. Stefan Kudelski also found himself inducted in the *Gent Swisses 1998* list of the 100 most ingenious Swiss. He surely is a legend and also part of our Polish history.

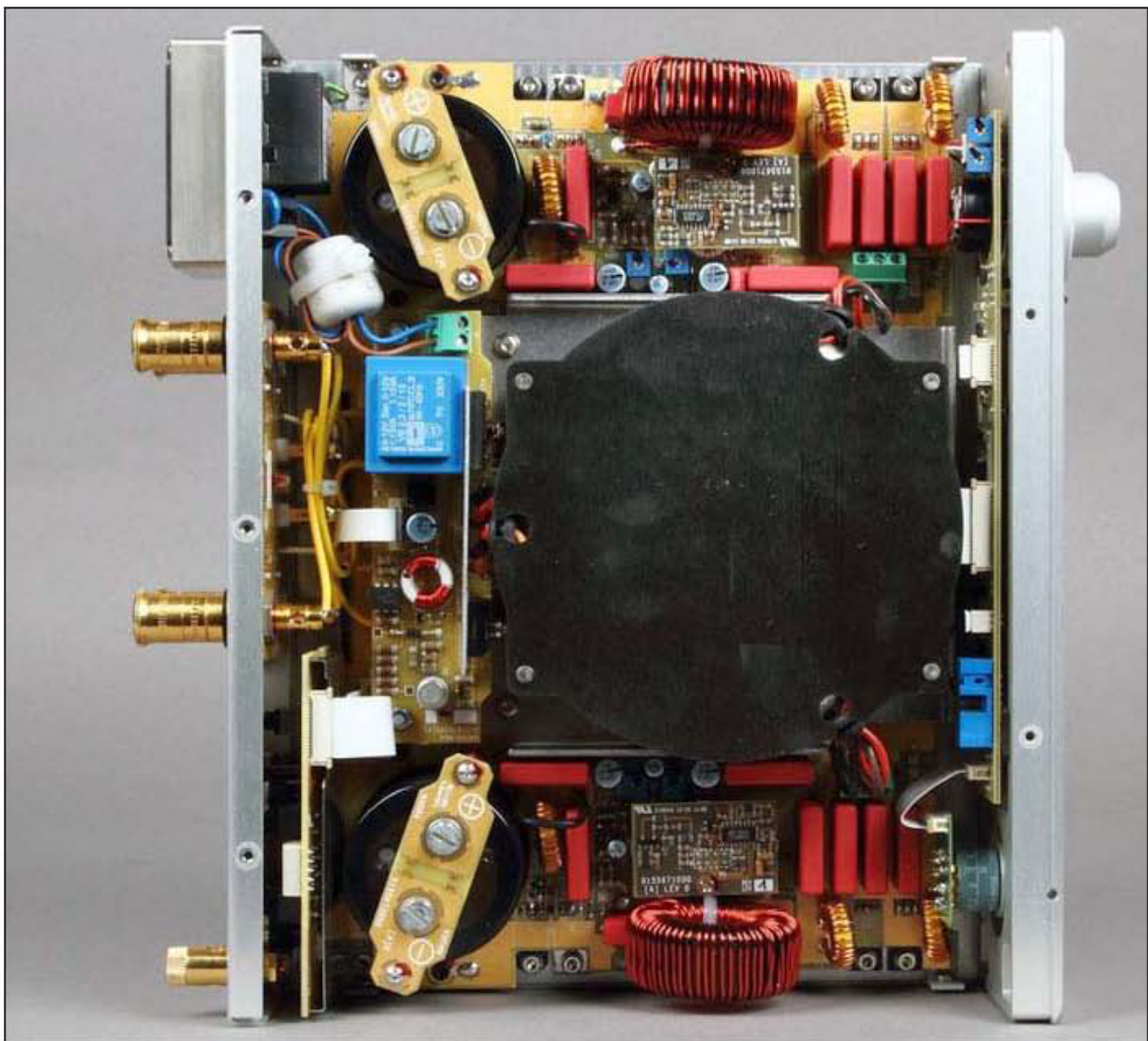
The Nagra Kudelski Group today is run by Stefan's son Andrzej and divided into two branches, Nagravision and Nagraaudio. The latter divides into professional and hi-end audio. The new MSA amplifier represents the hi-end. Its abbreviation stands for *Mosfet Stereo Amplifier*. Its immediate predecessor was the famous pyramidal PSA of which I reviewed both stereo and mono versions. These were very good sounding but I definitely didn't fancy their appearance. The casing was made of thin bent sheet metal to sidestep Nagra's legendary mechanical substance. I wrote about it then so there's no reason not to now. In my opinion the MSA corrects this previous 'mistake' while adding novel wrinkles. It's still a small casing shared with the CDC player, PL-P and PL-L preamplifiers and VPS phonostage. While compact, it immediately telegraphs being no toy – or if so, a toy only for grown-ups.



Front and back are classic aluminum, Nagra's trademark modulometer is on the front. The sides too are aluminum. The clever top is one seamless heat sink that's bigger than ever. The aluminum stock it's machined from—not extruded—starts life as a 10kg brick and finishes out at 3.5kg. The MSA in stereo mode outputs 60wpc into 8 Ω , hence the overbuilt heat sink doesn't get too warm. Each channel runs a single pair of Mosfets which, Nagra's leaflet states, avoids issues of more massive paralleling. Today's review is preceded by our earlier reviews on the PL-P preamplifier, phonostage and headphone amp [here](#) and [here](#); the CD player, CDC preamplifier and PSA amplifier [here](#); the D/A converter + MPA amplifier [here](#); and the D/A converter [here](#).

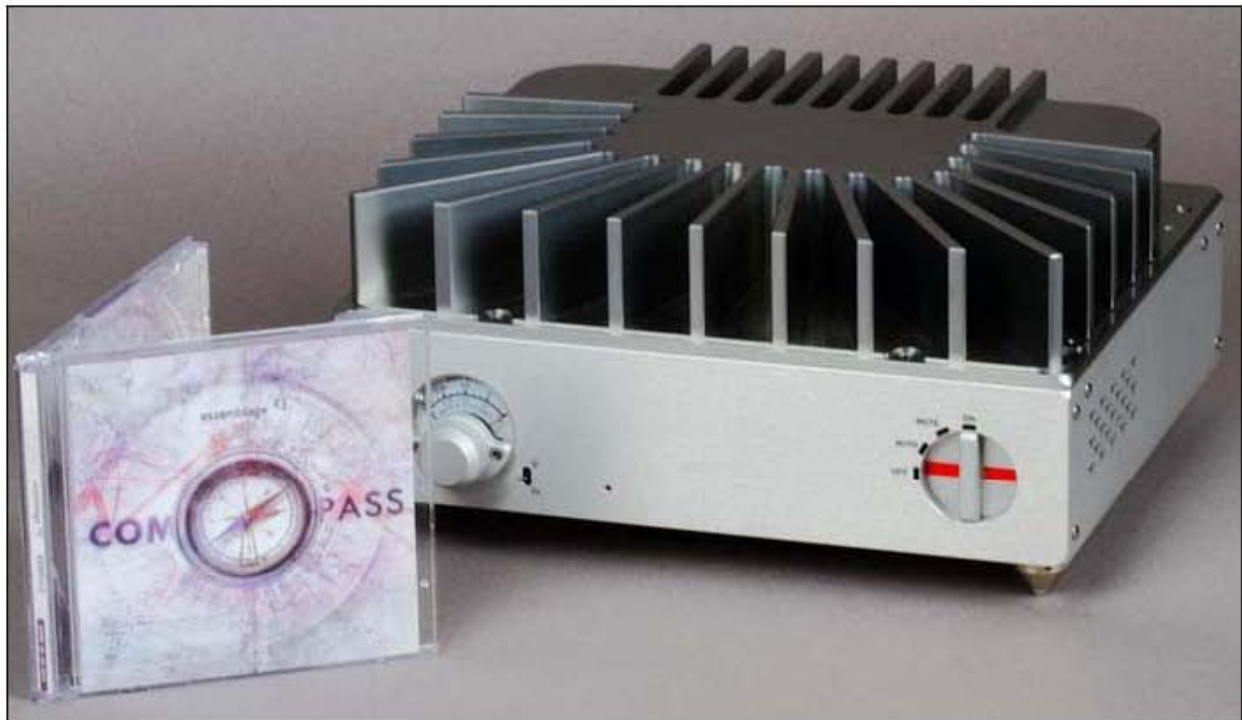


Music used for this review included: *For the Masses*, 1500 Records, 540 919-2, HQCD; Charlie Haden, *The Private Collection*, Naim, NAIMCD 108, 2 x CD; Chet Baker, *Chet Baker Sings and Plays*, Pacific Jazz/EMI Music Japan, TOCJ-90028, HQCD; Depeche Mode, *Abroken Frame*, Mute, DMCD2, Collectors Edition, SACD/CD+DVD; Diorama, *A Different Life*, Accesion Records, A 102, CD; Frank Sinatra, *Sinatra Sings Great Songs from Great Britain*, Universal Music/Sinatra Society of Japan, UICY-94421, SHM-CD; Garry Mulligan, *Night Lights*, Philips/Rainbow CD, PHCE-3064, CD; Joe Pass, *For Django*, Pacific Jazz/EMI Music Japan, TOCJ-90027, HQCD; Johann Sebastian Bach, *Goldberg Variations*, Matthews Halls, Linn Records, CKD 356, 2 x HDCD; Milt Jackson Quartet, *Milt Jackson Quartet*, Prestige/JVC, VICJ-41534, K2 CD; Voo Voo, *XX*, Sony & BMG, 520034 9, CD; Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Symphonies*, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Linn Records, CKD 350, 2 x SACD/HDCD.



When I first laid eyes on this little Nagra amplifier during unpacking and putting it on the vibration isolation support, I was so impressed that I almost fell off the chair. I *would* have fallen off had I not sat in my favorite couch instead. Even whilst putting the Nagra back into its box—so small as to fit a few beers at most—I was still full of admiration and jealousy. You see, the MSA together with the VFS support isn't just about sound. It's also about visual appeal. It's a terrific example for just how good an audio device might look while remaining terribly compact. This newest Nagra is petite, not much bigger than the power supply in my former Leben RS-28CX preamp in fact. And its finish... Swiss products are famous in that regard. While stereotypes are often false, if somebody wanted to prove the Swiss theory, the MSA would do. The anti vibration platform was originally designed for Nagra's tubed phonostage but we all know that solid-state devices require proper mechanical isolation too. I didn't test the support by itself but simply used it throughout the listening sessions. Testing it separately would have been quite involved because the setup in my SolidBase VI Custom rack is time-consuming. Nagra's scheme involves insertion of three spikes with Delrin tips that correspond to retainers in the platform. If you compare the MSA solo to how it looks on the VFS, you'll appreciate that the two should never be separated.

So - cosmetics, dimensions, proportions and finish are *shockingly* good. Of course aesthetics won't suit everyone's tastes as they do mine. Ditto the sound. Although here Nagra's amplifier is extremely competent, with all the details well purposed, it still bears some signature mark of its creator. I believe I managed to read that designer's intentions well. In my opinion then, his main goal was to have the MSA sound like a 300B amp as much as feasible. How would I think that? In my rack, the MSA directly replaced the 300B [Trafomatic Audio Experience Two](#). By now it's also known that Nagra is hard at work on a push-pull 300B amp in almost the same chassis as the MSA (minus the heat sink of course). But the most important clue was the tonal balance and certain other sonic characteristics that put the Nagra almost on the same footing as the Trafomatic and other 300B designs. That's no easy thing to pull off. It's very difficult in fact but obviously doable. It also introduces limitations. I will deal with those later as an evaluation in absolute terms is one thing and potential buyer preferences another.



This amp lives somewhat on the warm side. During the same period I also reviewed the ASR Emitter I and loved it though it was still warmer than the MSA. The latter 'sugars' the sound and focuses on the first plane more like the Experience Two than the Emitter I or II. This last one is so sweet as to almost cross the line into unacceptable and humid (though I didn't hold it against it since some people would fall in love with its sound but it does show the bigger context). Nagra offers a more distinct sound which doesn't pour liquid sugar on everything to thereby cover up the musical events with a varnish. Still, first impressions will always be of warmth, never cold. Why? It seemingly has to do with slightly softened transients. I heard the same thing with the stereo and mono pyramids. Even Nagra's biggest MPA did. It's plausible evidence for a particular Nagra house sound, i.e. a consistent sonic signature characteristic for all their products.



In short, this amplifier sounds *beautiful* yet not too pretty. It preserves most the original tone colors, perhaps not as ultra-precisely as the Trafomatic and different also from my Luxman M-800A. The Nagra isn't the grand master of space or ambient retrieval. It also won't differentiate as well as the above amps. But that's likely deliberate. How I hear it, Nagra wanted to present the most possible tone whilst maintaining proper focus. And that they have achieved 100%.

There are some elements which even the best 300B amps can't swing on conventional speakers. The first is bass. Here the Nagra offers an extended strong foundation with a bit of warmth. Although the *very* low end isn't as controlled as my Luxman, it is still objectively good. Higher up, the bass becomes very good. Thus the MSA was fabulous on both the potent bass from Voo Voo's *XX* as well as Joe Pass' guitar. In the upper part of the range where cymbals or vibraphone live—the latter for example on the *Milt Jackson Quartet*—things seemed slightly laid back and a bit darker.



Yet I'm not absolutely certain. On specific high-quality recordings like Haden's *The Private Collection*, especially the second disc with the Webster concert from the University in St. Louis, things didn't sound laid back at all. For confirmation, I paid special attention to tape hiss on a few more recordings. Naturally nobody in their right mind listens for background noise over music but for this purpose, judging master-tape induced noise is as handy a tool as white noise. The Nagra just limited this background noise a bit to indicate a minor modification in the upper band. This wasn't a selective notch or peak but rather, a gentle slope over a broader range. It becomes unnoticeable on high-quality recordings and avoids impressions of darkness or limitations because the vocal range on a whole is very open and strong.



It's worth focusing on this band as it does introduce some limitations. While the MSA offers 60 watts into 8 Ω , it doesn't possess the same drive as my 60wpc Luxman. This suggests that size does matter. At high levels, the Nagra compresses just a bit as on Wojtek Waglewski's voice on *XX*. This is a great recording for instruments but very poor on vocals likely due to some recorded compression. Warm amplifiers cover that up a little because they average out the sound on all recordings. Because the Nagra is no classic warm amp, it presents such mastering weaknesses precisely. If we turn up the volume, the Nagra will thus emphasize such flaws. Most likely it won't be a big issue because it didn't happen in my 30sqm room at standard volumes. If you have a larger room and difficult loads however, I suggest you consider two MSAs in mono mode.



MSA without preamp: The above comments included my Ayon Polaris II preamplifier with AC Regenerator power supply. Nagra offers their CDC player with integrated preamp so you can always experiment with a CD + amp combo to save money. By coincidence, my new Ancient Audio Lektor Air also sports a built-in (tube) linestage so going CD direct would become an obvious experiment. Surprisingly, withdrawing the amazing 50.000zl+ Ayon preamp changed little overall. While there were changes, they were so small as to render value comparisons irrelevant. By a tiny margin, the overall sonic scale shrunk. The first soundstage layer wasn't quite as palpable and the bass wasn't as energetic and less extended. But there also was an *improvement* in soundstage depth. Where it had been good before, now it was very good. Transparency and resolution were similar (bravo to Ayon). I was really impressed by so small a degree of change. A more distinctive sounding preamp—perhaps Nagra's own PL-P—should affect greater differences. Given my CD-direct results, I'm certain that a combination of MSA with a CD player with integral line stage like Nagra's or Ancient Audio's makes very good sense to perhaps postpone thinking about a preamp.



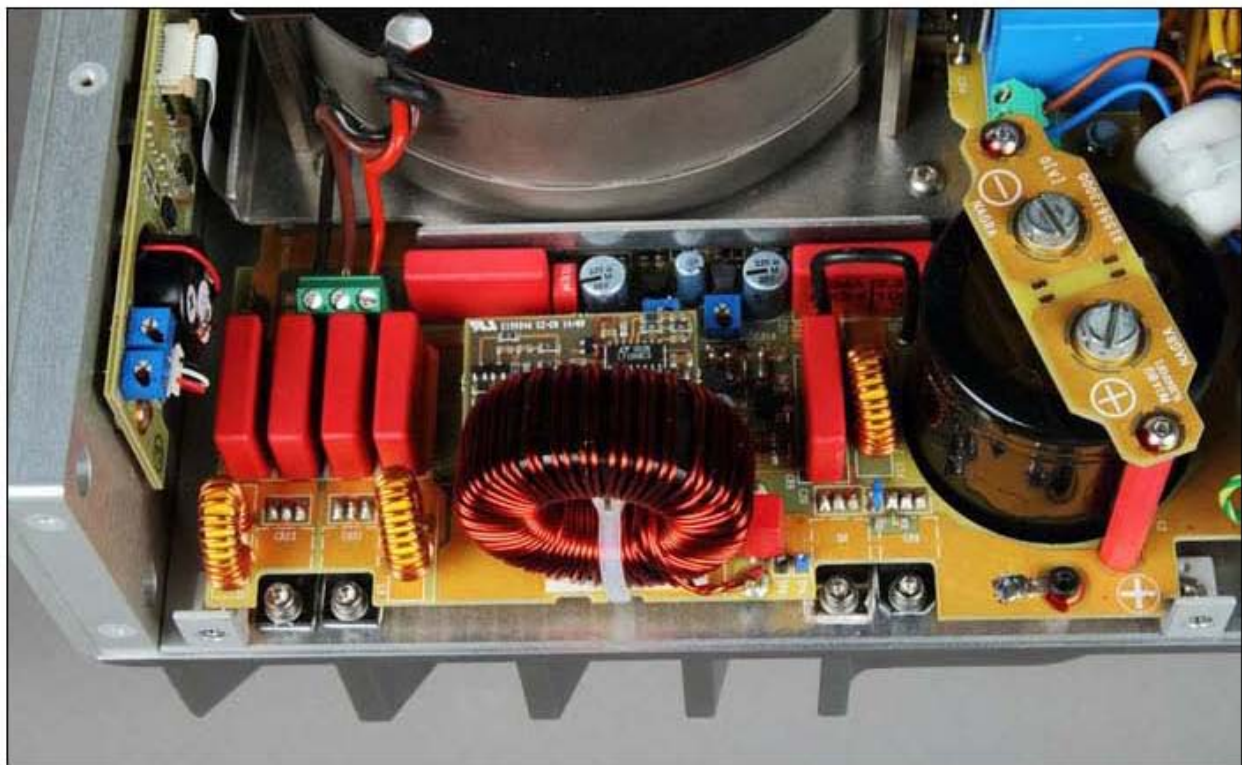
Summary: Nagra's MSA is a very interesting device. With controlled warmth, it makes big transistor sound with vacuum tube traits from a tiny package. It's important to state that this isn't a hybrid concept to mix certain qualities. One can tell that everything here has purpose and was intentioned by the designers. Every feature and aspect complements everything else. The MSA amplifier thus has a clear agenda and that's why listening to it becomes so pleasant. Unlike other warm amps, this one might not be the favorite of electronica fans. I believe that Nagra's overriding concern for each sound and its tone reduced some dynamics and shrill edge which are essential for music like Diorama's. Depeche Mode and older albums like *Abroken Frame* sounded better but their sonic tangibility could still be improved.

Jazz and classic music were remarkable however. If you have a chance, listen for example to the new Linn Records releases of Mozart *Symphonies* or the fantastic J.S. Bach *Goldberg Variations* with Matthews Halls on harpsichord. With its brilliant combination of craftsmanship, great looks, a famous brand name and remarkable sound particularly with smaller ensembles, you then might find it difficult to resist this petite Swiss beauty.

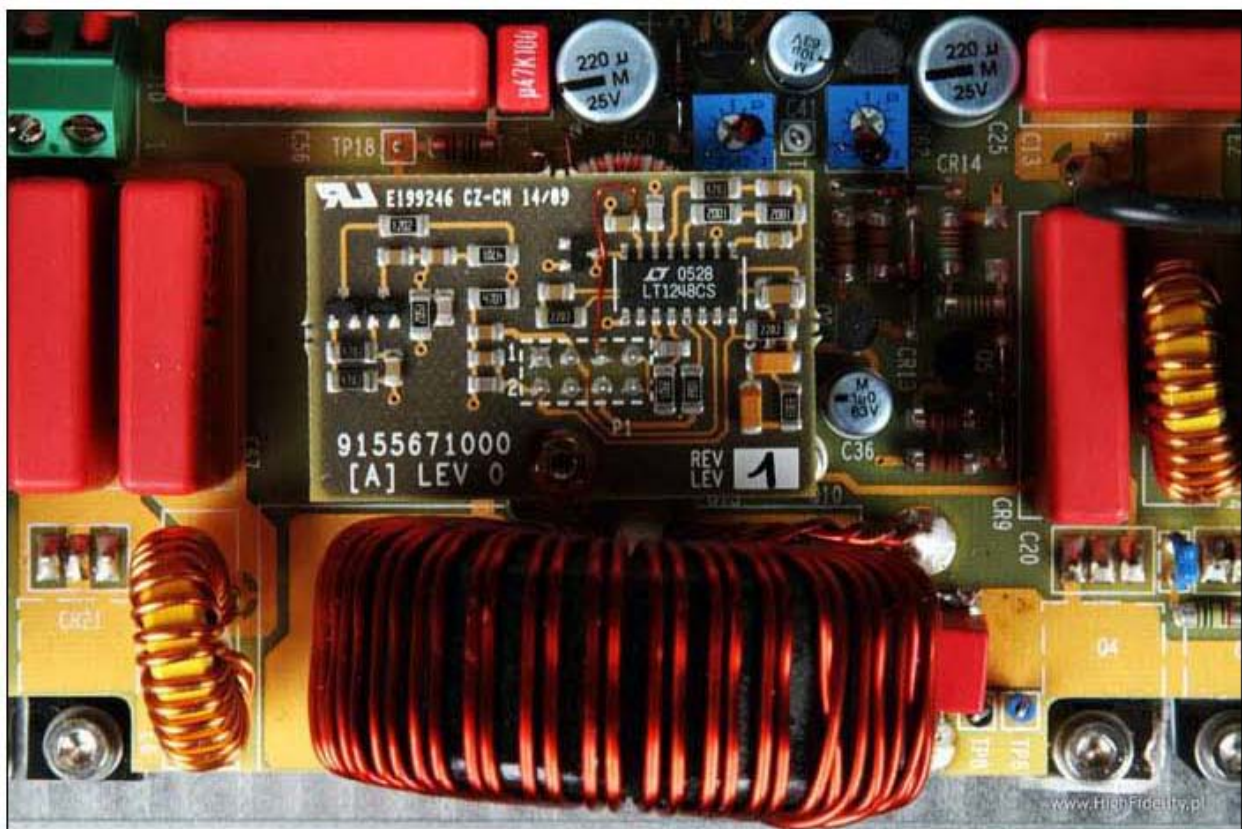
Description: Nagra's MSA is a stereo amplifier that can be switched to mono. It ingeniously marries Swiss precision with small dimensions. The aluminum case is crowned with a massive heat sink and the front is adorned with the famous Nagra modulometer and power-on selector. The latter switches from off to standby to auto (signal-sensing) to mute to on. The back panel sports two pairs of quality gold-plated WBT 0763 posts and a pair of XLR inputs. Yes, there's only a balanced input since the circuit is fully balanced. Fortunately you can use the included Neutrik RCA-XLR adapters.



A bridge selector switch on the rear allows parallel bridging to double output current as well as power. A small toggle switches between bridge, normal and bi-amp modes. There are also two small switches to change input sensitivity between 1 and 2V. Finally there's the IEC power inlet and a mechanical on/off switch.



The compact dimensions were enabled by an innovative power supply. Although the main element is a large shielded power toroidal transformer placed on a separate support, the controller chips (one per channel) are key too. There's a specialized Linear Technology LT1248 power factor controller chip in charge of the entire power supply. It is part of the PFC *power factor corrector* solution first championed in the year 2000 MPA. This circuit is placed between transformer and power supply to generate a correct power sine wave - a sort of on-board power conditioner. This means more surface-mount parts and only two mid-size filtering caps. Here you'll also find the inductive parts, cored coils and many large polypropylene Wima capacitors.



The MSA doesn't use conventional footers but four plastic discs. Nagra simply encourages users to experiment with different feet, spikes and so forth. That explains the presence of four pre-drilled holes which for example fit Finite Elemente's Ceraballs. In my opinion it is much more reasonable however to purchase Nagra's VFS *vibration free support* which, though first designed for their phonostage, also works very well with their PL-P preamplifier and now MSA amp. It is so universal because all these Nagra models share the same footprint. The VFS consists of two 7mm aluminum plates decoupled with alpha-GEL pellets. Colored differently, these pellets are weight-rated to eliminate specific vibrational energies in both the vertical and horizontal axes. The VFS ships with three spikes or feet to be screwed into the bottom of the Nagra unit you wish to support. Machined from ARCAp, a non-magnetic non-ferrous copper-nickel-zinc alloy with Delrin resin tips, these footers also really dress up this support system.



Technical data according to manufacturer:

Power: 2 x 60 W RMS/8 Ω (normal mode selected)
Input sensitivity: 1 or 2 V (selectable)
Bandwidth: (+0/-3 dB): 10 Hz-70 kHz
S/N: 104 dB
THD+N: < 0,09 %/100 W
Size: 280 x 230 x 118 mm
Weight: 9.6 kg



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