



# **THE NAGRA PL-L**

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## A Compact Powerhouse

By Jeff Dorgay

**N**agra has a legendary status among audiophiles, almost enigmatic.

The first thing I usually hear when I bring their name up is "I can't afford that stuff, it costs a fortune!" Let's separate myth from reality; though they are a bit penalized by the current US dollar situation (as is every other European manufacturer), Nagra gear is no more expensive than any other high end brand these days and it's less expensive than quite a few I can think of.

Four or five years ago, \$8495 would have been at the top of the preamplifier price scale. Today with quite a few preamplifiers in the five figure range, this is not an outrageous sum and considering the sound the PL-L offers, I think the asking price is quite reasonable. Our review sample had the optional transformer coupled balanced outputs that can offer a full floating balanced output. This is an additional \$500, bringing the price as tested to \$8995. It comes with a full-featured remote that will work with other Nagra components as well, so if you have their CD player, you can control everything with just one remote.

The PL-L is very compact, only about 12 x 10 x 3 inches and weighs seven pounds, without power supply. The box is machined from aluminum and is clear anodized. It has an external power supply similar to the Nagra CD player and phono stage, which has just arrived as we go to print with this review, so stay tuned for our take on that very soon!

Often we think of hi-fi gear as serving a utilitarian purpose, but Nagra has elevated their industrial designs to be works of art. This is evident as you look at all of the details on this preamplifier, from the sculpted shapes of the controls to the beveled edges and corners of the case and of course the modulometer. For those of you not familiar with Nagra, this meter is a very precise, multifunction meter that is identical to the ones on the legendary Nagra portable tape recorders. It can be used to keep tabs on channel balance, power output and monitoring the power supply voltage. I must say this is my favorite design element on Nagra gear!

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Removing the top panel of the PL-L reveals Swiss engineering at its finest. 24kt gold circuit traces, and top-quality parts throughout. There is heavy shielding where the power enters the circuit board and a layout that redefines efficiency. A complement of three tubes (2-12AX7's and one 12AT7) makes for a simple yet effective layout; just like peeking inside a fine Swiss watch!

The next thing you notice after the modulometer, is that the inputs and outputs are located on both sides of the PL-L, instead of on the rear panel.

While this is a bit different than what we audiophiles are used to, it harkens back to the portable Nagra tape recorders, which also had their jacks located on the sides. In a location recording environment, it made for a much shorter signal path between components. Once again that Swiss precision! Personally, I really enjoyed this feature as a reviewer, because it made it much easier to switch gear into and out of my system. Another very handy feature is the ability to switch between the two outputs from the front panel. *(continued)*

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### Surprise At First Listen

I'm not sure why, but because the PL-L is so compact, I wasn't prepared for the BIG sound this small preamplifier produced. When the PL-L arrived, my two reference preamplifiers (C-J Act 2 and the Aesthetix Callisto) were, well, so much bigger. Don't let the size fool you, the PL-L will go toe to toe with the world's best. I was instantly captivated by the sound of the PL-L, which was big, spacious and powerful.

Which led me to another pleasant surprise. My Nagra PSA power amplifier has a tonal character that I would characterize as "precise". It is very accurate and clean. It does not sound dry or forward, but it does not embellish the sound in any way at all. The PL-L is very neutral but it has just a drop of extra harmonic richness that lets you know you are listening to tubes instead of transistors, very much like my Conrad-Johnson Act 2. The PL-L provides that little bit of airiness that solid-state can have a hard time achieving.

Thanks to just three tubes under the hood, the PL-L is quick to warm up and get down to business; 15 minutes and you are enjoying the full measure of its sound, so you won't have to warm this one up for two hours before you can enjoy a listening session.

### Big On Personal Style Too

One of the things that shouldn't be overlooked these days when assembling a decent hifi system is aesthetic value. Granted, I would never forgo musical ability for good looks, if you can have both it will make putting said hardware in your living room a lot easier.

The Nagra gear succeeds brilliantly on both counts, with the sound to match its beauty and this is where the small size really comes in handy. A stack of Nagra gear with a PL-L, their CD player and even the new phono stage only requires a minimal footprint, so it will not intrude on your living space at all. *(continued)*

Eventually, the Nagra gear made it's way to my living room and a few of my good friends in the design world went absolutely bonkers when they saw it there.

### The Glorious Sound Rules The Day

As attractive as the PL-L is though, what kept me glued to the chair was the sound that it produced. I used the PL-L with quite a few different power amplifiers, both balanced and unbalanced. While the balanced outputs were very handy, I found the single ended outputs had just a touch more sonic purity. Imaging was a tiny bit more precise and I felt that there was some more air to the presentation, especially when listening to acoustic instruments. If you live on a steady diet of popular music, you might not even notice the difference.

I nominate the PL-L for membership in the hall of stratospheric preamplifier performance because of its superb performance in a few key areas. It has the weight that only the best preamplifiers possess along with a highly evolved ability to resolve dynamic contrasts. Not only can it give you the heave-ho of a big bass drum, but it has the control to make it sound convincing not bloated. Listen to the big kettle drums in your favorite Bax, Mahler or Shostakovich symphony. On a lesser preamplifier, those drums just plod along, but with the PL-L they set you back in your seat if you have a full range set of speakers.

This is where the speed and precision combined with the excellent tonality convinces you that you are listening to something quite special. For the Rock and Rollers in the crowd, drop the recent MoFi Megadeth CD *Countdown to Extinction* in the player and crank it up until that modulometer is showing some major velocity and you get that extra bite and width from Dave Mustane's Marshall stacks that puts a big smile on your face. Ok, female vocals sound pretty good too.

Of course the first track that I had heard on the Nagra gear was Tom Waits' "What's He Building in There?" and it was so haunting that it cleared the room at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. But this track is another favorite that can really show off soundstage size in all three dimensions and another test that the PL-L passed with ease.

### A Tough Act To Follow

In the last three years, this has been the first preamplifier that I haven't taken out of my reference system immediately after the review and gotten back to business with my Act 2. I would have to put the Nagra PL-L up on the list as one of my all time favorite preamplifiers. It certainly will give you a big percentage of what the cost no preamplifiers offer at a bit more reasonable price. Only three common tubes inside make it very easy to care for in the years to come, even if you want to stash a few sets of expensive NOS tubes away. When you factor in Nagra longevity, build quality and style this makes the PL-L a class leader. ●



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