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Nagra Classic HiFi System Review 2022.

By Steve Huff



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As I sit and write this review I am listening to music and watching for the snowstorm that is supposed to bring us a direct hit within the next few hours. *I am hearing "the biggest snowstorm in 100 years" though I have my doubts.* It's currently coming down as sleet.

I am not worried though. When I was a kid in Chicago I lived through the Blizzard of 79. It was awesome as a kid but I am sure it was not so much fun for my Dad who had to shovel the snow and dig his car out after it was buried.



I even had a T Shirt...

As I remember those days as a ten year old kid with friends, enjoying the time off of school and playing in the snow I am hearing songs emerge from my speakers that sound supremely sublime. *Clean, clear, sparkly, fresh and with a refinement and presentation that I have rarely heard in HiFi.*

The songs are being played courtesy of a set of electronics that is quite special indeed, for a multitude of reasons.



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The Nagra Classic Amp, Classic PreAmp and Classic DAC has found its way into my reference room. After my evaluation I have to say that I wish these pieces were more accessible to the masses in regards to cost. They have a Beauty about them in the flesh. They harken back to a bygone era in the way they used to make things. Dials, knobs, lights, metal and meters. Quality through and through. You may have heard the term "They don't make 'em like they used to". Well, at Nagra, they do.

Then we have the sound. The way Nagra reproduces music in my room is unlike any other electronics I have had in this room, *and it confuses me somewhat.*

Being a guy who feels blessed to be able to try and review so many pieces of HiFi from low cost to extreme, I have been trained to believe that the bigger and heavier a piece of gear is, the better it must be. Pass Labs for example makes some of my favorite amplification but they weigh a ton and are no fun to move around. The Denafrips Terminator II DAC is huge, heavy and borderline unruly in weight for a DAC.

My old Line Magnetic 219ia was over 100lbs, for an integrated amp.

The Kinki Studios EXM1 integrated I recently talked about is 61lbs.

Now all of these heavy pieces sound gorgeous. They are beautiful in design, build and sound is world class. Period.

Then I have the Nagra set that looks beautiful, precise and well, very small.

The \$15k DAC is under 10lbs. The \$18k AMP itself is under 40lbs. The \$18k preamp is 10lbs. The entire stack of separates has a retail cost of nearly \$55k and comes in at under 60lbs for the set. Almost the same weight as the \$4500 Denafrips Terminator II DAC on its own.

Yes, \$55k. It's hard for me to wrap my head around but I also know many people out there in the world have the cash to buy things such as this without blinking an eye. There are millions of millionaires in the world and I will review any gear whether the cost is \$1000 or \$100,000.



See the pre and amp in my space.

I know some get offended with reviews of crazy expensive gear but I do not. There is something for everyone in HiFi, and I mean everyone.

Looking at all levels of HiFi also gives me insight into why some brands charge a fortune for the gear they build. It can also show me what is worth it, and what is not. What is hype and what is designed for the rich, just because. Yes, some gear in HiFi is designed just for those with money *but some is born of a passion for being among the best there can be.*



Going back to Size and Weight

How could HiFi gear that is so small, so light and so expensive sound as good as the big heavy muscle that some brands build? I started to think...is Nagra for real? Is it just targeted to the rich who want the name and style over sound? Are some other brands pieces made to be heavy to impress us with build and mass?

If indeed Nagra is able to deliver sound above the others (*as they should for the cost*) with the small size and weight how come others need big heavy enclosures? Hmmm. I wanted to find out if

Switzerland summit-fi brand Nagra was worth the cost for those Audiophiles who can afford it. I also wanted to see just how much better or different Nagra could be vs brands that cost much less.

As I sat down to listen to the Nagra trio, powering my Fleetwood Deville speakers with a full loom albeit without the \$7500 vibration platforms and \$18k power supply.

Going from a \$2500 Kinki EM1 or \$20k Pass Labs setup to the \$60k Nagra set should have the skies open up with a golden light beaming down to the room. Yes, a beam of white light should travel down from above the clouds to allow me to have eargasm after eargasm at this level.

I need to be impressed as I have a hard time figuring out why these pieces cost so much. Sure, hand made in Switzerland where wages are high and quality is top of the heap. I get it. Unique style and design, yep it's here. But what about the sound?

Before I get into that let's talk a little more about the build of these pieces. BTW, I do not get technical, I just talk about the vibe, the feel, the sound, the experience.



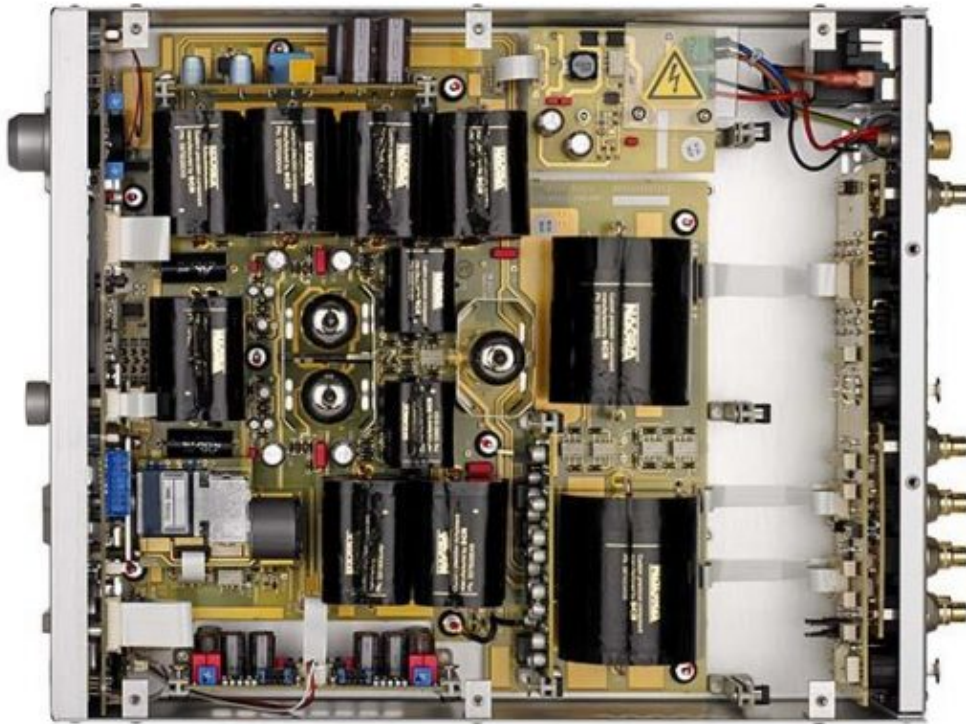
The Classic Pre-Amp is a Jewel Indeed.

The Nagra Classic Pre-Amp is a tubed pre-amp. **It has three tubes inside**, Two 12AX7 and one 12AT7. Nagra hand picks these tubes sourced from Electro Harmonix and reject as much as 50% of the tubes that they test. They are gold pin, and are hand picked, tested and listened to inside of each and every pre-amp before it leaves the factory.

Yes, each piece Nagra makes is listened to by a person before it ships out. That's some pretty impressive quality control. They highly recommend that when the tubes start to die out (sometime between 5000-10000 hours) that you only replace them with an official Nagra Tube Replacement set.

The Nagra replacement tube set comes with a box, gloves and tools for a cool \$450, for about \$60 worth of tubes. Hmmm. I did order some higher cost Gold Lion Gold Pin's to try out at around \$120. **I ended up going back with the stock tubes. They sounded better indeed.** I guess at this price point

\$450 is not an issue when it comes time to replace the tubes. They will last 5000-10,000 hours and you will rest easy knowing you have perfect tubes for your expensive pre-amp.



These highly regarded pieces are indeed hand made in Switzerland using only the highest quality of parts inside. This is the Classic pre-amps claim to fame. It sits as a small box that measures around 15X10X3 and comes in at under 10lbs. The DAC is the same physical size and the amp is as well. It is just taller but has the same length and width dimensions.



The pre is gorgeous. Solid. The sound is stunning and while it doesn't sound like golden age tube

electronics, the tubes do allow for some slight warmth and body to be injected into the sound. The result is gorgeous and the pre is a perfect mate to the Classic Amp which is also a very special piece.

Beauty. Precision. Style.

There is a beauty to the design, style, looks and parts used in all of Nagra HiFi Products. It looks like a precision instrument to some, and medical equipment to others. Nagra is designed with extreme attention to detail and I have never found someone who has had their Nagra Audio product fail on them. Not to say it doesn't happen but I have searched for issues and have found none. It is said that Nagra audio pieces last 15 years or more before even needing a check up.



In fact the target audience of those who own Nagra are men aged between 50-60 who have tried it all before. Nagra says those who finally try Nagra almost always stay with the brand for life. They have a solid reputation for quality, beauty and of course impressive sound quality.

The build of each piece is fantastic and I found zero faults. **The 100 WPC amp has two sets of speaker binding posts.** One for spade connectors and one for banana. You can set the amps input sensitivity to 1mv or 2mv and the pre-amp can go from 0db of gain to 12db of gain with a flick of a switch. This comes in handy for speakers that need more oomph to get up and go. I feel all preamps and amps should have this feature.

I can say the amp is amazing and delivers amazing performance in the bass, mids and highs. Many say this amp is special, and I agree. Just like the Classic Pre, the Classic AMP is a star. It has detail and imaging performance up there with the best, but at the same time it delivers a touch of warmth and nice body. It sounds more like a 200WPC amp to these ears. The way this amp does dynamics and attacks are jaw dropping yet it remains composed, refined, and smooth no matter how loud you listen. Compared to the Pass XA60.8 the Pass amps are juicier, warmer and a more relaxing listen. The Nagra more refreshing, exciting and wide open. More 3D.

The DAC is unique as well (though it was just discontinued recently) and while it comes in at a whopping \$15,000 retail, I also have a Chord DAVE here that comes in at \$12,500 retail. *I have*

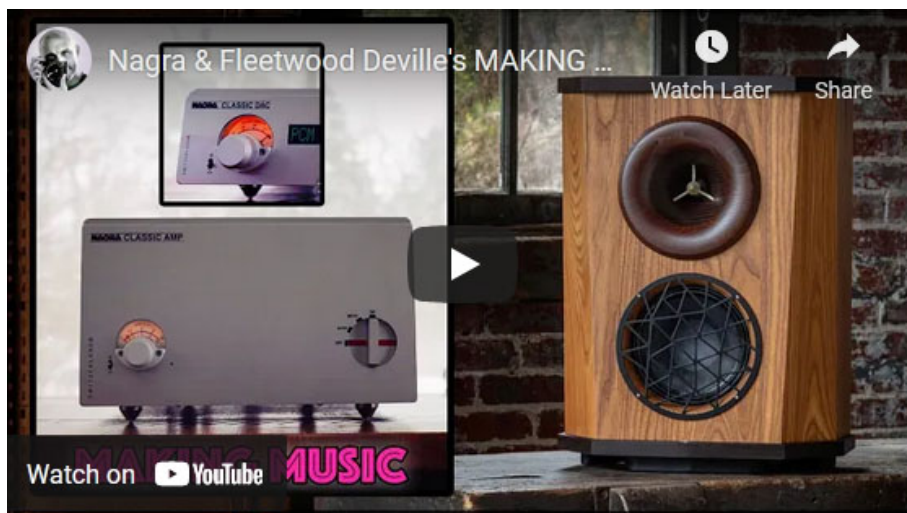
found that a top tier world class DAC can transform a system more so than an amp or preamp and yes, big time DAC's do make a very nice difference in most systems.



Behind the Classic Pre and Classic Amp.

As long as the system is set up right, in a good room and with quality gear in place, a world class DAC can truly elevate it.

I was super curious about this Classic DAC as the new Tube DAC offering from Nagra starts at \$27,000 and can go up to almost \$50k depending on options such as power supply, vibration base, etc. It makes the cost of the classic seem, well, affordable.



From Nagra on their Classic DAC:

“The circuits of the Nagra CLASSIC DAC use the DSD 2x version of the format, operating at a level 128 times superior to that of traditional CD and twice that of SACD”

Nagra current Tube DAC is considered one of the best in the world. The Classic is considered a lower cost alternative (that is now discontinued as the Tube DAC is said to outperform it easily) and am sad to see it not being offered any longer as it was the most affordable option for classic lineup.

I like the term “Classic” as I am in my 50’s, so I am a classic as well. The Classic DAC is almost on the other side of the spectrum when compared to the Chord DAVE. It’s just as big, almost as dynamic but offers up a little bit more euphoria in the sound. Where the DAVE is a detail hound, the Classic is a music hound. Yes, it’s as musical as I have heard a DAC



Bottom Line on build is that it’s some of the best I have seen and they somehow kept it all light in weight and small in size.

Starting the first Listening Session

I let the classic trio warm up for an hour before sitting down to listen. These pieces here are all used, 5 years old for the pre and amp and 6 years old for the DAC, so they have burned in long ago.

With 290 hours on a new set of tubes in the preamp, I was ready to roll.

I have been used to the sound of the Pass Labs gear in my system as the XA60.8 amps and XP-10 and 12 preamp have been with me for the last 8 months or so for long term review. I have fallen for them completely.

The Pass preamp and amps come in with a warm, almost relaxing type of sound. Detailed, holographic and sweet yet never offensive in the highs, at all. If anything the highs are a touch rounded off with the Pass Class A Amps. Big juicy bass and humanity come from Pass but its strength does not lie in the dynamic areas of music with their XA60.8 amps in place.



Think of Pass Labs Class A as a juicy, organic, detailed and transparent yet with a warm (though not dark) and ore relaxed juicy kind of sound.

I have also listened to the Nagra Classic pre and amp with my Chord Dave DAC, which is the most impressive and “wow” DAC I have experienced to date, in my audio lifetime of 35 years.



With the DAVE the Nagra set was alive, electric and highly detailed yet remaining smooth at all times. The way details emerged was breathtaking with the Dave. Dynamic yet refined. When listening though, I felt there could be more body to the music as the Nagra gear seemed to lean more to the clean, clear, detailed side of spectrum with a nice tall and deep 3D soundstage.

The Dave leans a little..well..lean in this matching. Dave matches best with warmer speakers or amplification. The two together, Nagra and Chord, may have been too much of a good thing. As amazing as it sounded there were moments I wished for more body to the music when the Dave was paired with Nagra.

With the Nagra Classic DAC installed, and a perfect mate with the preamp and amp, I heard a completely different presentation.

With the full Nagra set in place the sound transformed into a warmer, fuller, bigger, taller and deeper type of sound. The 3D was there, the details were also there. They were just more subdued and no longer shot out from the speakers direct to my head. Rather they stayed within the mix (which is more accurate to the recording but less exciting to the ears) gently and more naturally presented.

While the classic DAC was not as holographic as the DAVE, it provided more musicality, was more ethereal and euphoric but never stepped into the muddy waters of being dull or dark. It’s quite nice and I have never heard this kind of refinement in a DAC before.

I can only imagine what the TUBE DAC sounds like. Wowzers.

Honestly, the first few hours of listening I was missing the DAVE.

By the next days and week though, I was in love with the Classic DAC as it was presenting the music more as a whole, rather than in pieces. It pumped in more body to the sound and there was a touch more passion and emotion coming out of the speakers. The sound was a bit more rounded and it also blossomed with a touch of humanity. It was breathtaking and beautiful at the same time. It was airy, yet fluid and sweet.

While the DAVE could be eery real with some vocals and instruments, the Classic DAC was bringing in more soul and a larger sound. I could tell it was a perfect match to the preamp and amp, and as time went on I felt it was a much better match vs the DAVE within this all Nagra setup.

The music was effortless and smooth with the all Nagra setup and the kicker is I was using around 1 watt, or less to fill my listening space. With 100 of these watts on hand in the Classic Amp, it does deliver the first 10 watts in pure Class A, and I was using only 1 of these watts to power my Fleetwood Deville Speakers. The pretty yellow meters tell us the watts we are using in real time. Pretty cool.



My Lifetime Speakers...The Fleetwood Deville.

There was no sign of digital harshness, sibilance or stridency with the all Nagra setup in place and with the ever so slightly warm leaning Deville's, it was a match made in Heaven.

Music. *That's what I said to myself. THIS IS MUSIC.* It's not trying to wow me with special effects or details that startle me, Rather it was impressing me with the way it just reproduced any music I played with a sweetness, scale and clarity. Nagra was proving itself to be an amazing Synergistic match to the Fleetwood Deville speakers and even my Klipsch Heritage Heresy IV's.

In other words, it was bringing the best from all speakers I hooked up. Dynaudio? Check. Klipsch? Check. Fleetwood? Check.

When I wrote down in my notes "This is how music is supposed to sound", it hit me.

The way Nagra was delivering the music felt right. It was not overly warm or dark, it wasn't bright nor did it have sizzle or sibilance. It was smooth but never crossed into that dull territory. It was alive, very much so. It offered quite a bit of refinement over the much lower cost Kinki EXM1 that has a similar "Swiss" sound signature.

What it was specializing in was being semi neutral but also delivering a smooth soundstage *that was just as tall as wide.* Vocals came out into the room with body and that holographic imaging that makes some music so involving. It was as musical and enjoyable as I have heard. I could not fault any of it in regards to performance. It's nice hearing a soundstage that is wide. It's magical hearing

one that is wide, tall and deep. The Nagra was doing this effortlessly, like it was built for this purpose.

After a while with Nagra I took it all out (which was easy and problem free due to the small size and weight) and I placed in the Pass Labs XP-12 and XA60.8 set. I kept the Classic DAC in place. The sound changed for sure. It was softer, more subdued, not as dynamic or impactful.

On the other hand, the Pass Labs set was a shade darker yet sounded very sweet, open and intimate. Those Class A 60 Watt amps are really fantastic. I love the Pass Sound and when listening to small scale Jazz I just melt in my seat. It's so welcoming.

When I placed the DAVE DAC back in with Pass, the details were back, the dynamics were better and the DAVE brought forth some exiting sounds. The Dave was a brilliant match to the Pass Labs gear, moreso than the Nagra classic DAC. No question here. The pairing of DAVE and Pass Labs was brilliant.

These are just two different sounds between Pass and Nagra. Both do well with any music but I do have to say the Nagra setup of DAC, AMP and PRE impressed me more. Remember the Nagra set is more than double the cost of Pass Labs and both of these brands are super high end audio, make no mistake.



Nagra's first dedicated pre-amp, the PL-P from 1997.

There is something special about the Nagra set and it's not just in the sound. Even so, I expect if one spent the same amount on Pass Labs the sound would be just as magical for sure. You would just have to deal with the size and weight. I'd expect a Pass Labs XP-32 and X250.8 would be up there with the Nagra in sound. This would set one back around \$30k, or \$8k less than the Nagra Pre and Amp. This set would also weigh in at over 150lbs vs 50lbs for the Nagra.

The special thing about Nagra is the size, design, low weight, parts quality, reputation of the brand, longevity and the way you just know when listening that you have reached the top of the mountain. As I sat and listened I wrote down "It doesn't get better than this" and I mean that. "No one else

will give you all of this, even if you pay more". "All of This" means beauty, design, sound, parts quality, simplicity and sound quality.

Most HiFi in this price range is huge, heavy, and will bring only a small difference in the *flavor* of sound.

I have never seen small, lighter weight HiFi that actually performed like this. Nagra is much like the Leica Camera of HiFi. Expensive but beautiful and with a heritage. Nagra's main claim to fame was with their old reel to reel recorders and they date back to the 1950's. They are known for quality, reliability and design.

Leica is known for their small size, design, and simplicity. Leica also is up there in the higher priced category for cameras and one can expect to pay well over \$20k for a Leica M11 and a couple of Leica M lenses.

Leica = Small, Light, Beautiful in looks and performance. Nagra = Small, Light, Beautiful in looks and performance.



The Nagra Classic INTEGRATED. One Box, no tubes, \$20k

When evaluating the Nagra Classic set I said to myself "If I owned this set it would be buried with me". There is nowhere else I would want to go, and that is saying a lot. With so many amazing HiFi brands out there I have found some I adore. Pass Labs is one of the brands I consider lifetime brands. Nagra is yet another.

Fleetwood Sound is doing some fantastic things with speakers and even furniture for our audio gear (I hear they will be doing electronics soon). All very special in regards to build, pride of ownership, quality and sound. Then we have Luxman who is another favorite brand for the way their gear looks and sounds.

It has only taken me 35 years in HiFi to discover these things ;)



Going up the Nagra Ladder. Be prepared to pay. I actually prefer the design of the Classic line to their much more costly HD line.

I understand I am writing about crazy gear here that is not accessible to everyone. One thing I will say to all of us who can not bring themselves to spend this kind of cash on audio? **You do not have to.** I would say that if you want a solid system that sounds gorgeous and offers up a huge heaping serving of true high end sound you can do that for much much less.

Even so, there are some of you out there who want to keep climbing the mountain of performance within your audio systems. If you are one of these passionate music lovers and you have not heard Nagra, I highly recommend you give them a listen.

If you are in Phoenix AZ, AZ HiFi carries Nagra and has them on demo in their reference system. You can even hear the Fleetwood Deville's there ;) If you stop in, say Hey to Glen and Bill for me!

Is Nagra Worth The Cost?

So did I discover if Nagra is worth it? Well, the answer to that is not cut and dry. It all depends on your love of audio, your passion for it, your bank account or credit line and your desires when it comes to sound.

If you value the name in a brand, Nagra is up there near the top of the audio heap.

If you value build quality and precision design, Nagra is up there at the top.

If you value simplicity, longevity and rock solid dependability, Nagra is up there with the best.

If you have the funds to be able to get into Nagra, they are a must audition.

If you want to end your audio search once and for all, Nagra can help you do this.

If you want sound that matches the price, look, and build...well, Nagra delivers that as well.

I would venture to guess I have lost more money over the last 35 years in HiFi audio than what these three Nagra pieces would cost me on the USED market today.



Conclusion

The three pieces I have here were not sent to me by Nagra to review. Rather, I bought them all **used** to evaluate from TMRAUDIO.COM, the best place on earth to buy high quality used HiFi. Seriously. These Nagra pieces were about half the cost of new from TMR and they even inspect, photograph and test all the gear they take in to sell. They also have a return period and warranty as well.

I had 15 days to check them out and if they did not deliver I could return them for a full refund.

At half price, these pieces are 100% worth it if you are a passionate audiophile with the funds and nerve to jump. New is worth it if you can truly afford it and want a full factory warranty and the satisfaction of owning “new” but at the new price there are many other options out there to explore.

These music makers are indeed special in many ways. They are unique and they are extremely rare on the used market. They retain value very well if you buy used. My pieces are all 9/10 condition, and perform and look as new. I now feel like I got a deal but when I purchased I was sweating. I wanted to be able to compare these pieces to Pass Labs, Kinki, Naim and a few others to see if they are the real deal or just made for the rich.



I have heard great things about the Classic INT. The Integrated from Nagra. Small, sweet, easy.

Over the last year I have kept my eye out for used Nagra, to fulfill that curiosity I have had forever about the brand. These classic line pieces almost never popped up. Those who buy Nagra usually keep them for long term and upgrade when Nagra releases new models. **That right there tells you an awful lot.**

The sound signature is clean, clear but with warmth as well. It's airy, intimate and real. It's very big and 3D. The sound delivers everything one could want in a high end system but be aware the sound is very clean, very clear, very noise free and may be different from what you are used to. An audition or trial is always 100% recommended.

Make no mistake, you are also paying for the gear to be made in Switzerland, the name, the heritage, the design, the parts quality. Much like a Leica Camera that most photographers feel is overpriced. Even so, you do get something from a Leica that you can not get from a Sony, Canon or Nikon. I should know as I have been testing cameras from all brands for 15 years.

Pride of ownership simplicity, style and small size.

As for audio gear, yes you can get gear that sounds as sweet (but different) for less, I am sure. But you will not get the looks, size, weight, style **AND** the sound from others.

With Nagra the music has just the right amount of body and mid bass presence though some may feel it is a tad shy in this area, especially if you are used to big fake booming bass. The treble is silky yet extended. With the classic DAC the sound is smooth and hash free with a warmth and fullness that is pleasing to the ear.

The soundstage impresses with width, depth and height and imaging is world class, if not gentler over some other super detailed offerings (such as the DAVE).

It's as close to that perfect musical presentation that I have heard, no matter the cost. Nagra is end game for 95% of those who will take the leap and now I understand why.

Expensive but beautiful. Timeless. Classic.

One more thing. Anytime I listen to the Nagra it takes about 45 minutes for the sound to get to it's best. I think it's a class A thing as the Pass Labs gear is the same. The first 45 the sound may be a touch thin and slightly grey. After 45 minutes it opens up into a massive stage, gets warmer and much bigger. You can hear this improvement in real time and it's pretty cool.

I like to turn on the system on Friday night and leave it on through the weekend when I listen A LOT. I do turn the preamp off though, as it has tubes.

If you want some beautiful gear for less, made in the USA..see THIS SETUP. Though in sound, build, parts, and design it does not and will not match the Nagra. Even so, fantastic quality proper HiFi gear for the money.

You can see more of the Nagra offerings along with more details about the classic line at Nagra.com.

LISTENING NOTES...



Listening to Gabor Szabo's "Somewhere I Belong" on his 1969 album showed me the delicacy and musicality of the Nagra gear. It's a lovely track with a guitar instrumental, drums, and it also has a nice warm and welcoming sound with the Nagra at work. It's a full sound with details and a special

treble performance that elevates the sound from the warmth.

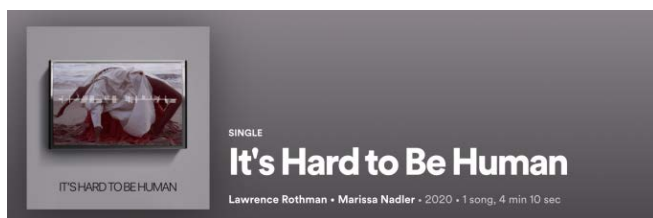
There is 3 dimensions here as well, with gentle yet natural imaging performance. The sound is gorgeous, lovely and inviting. Nagra manages to do the details without sounding overly detailed. There are reverb decays and just a beautiful sound to this entire album recorded in 1969. It's about as perfect for these ears as it gets for a recording such as this.



Sharon Van Etten singing Femme Fatale is a haunting listen on the Pass Labs gear. She is in my room with the Kinki Studios EXM1. With the Nagra it's a mix of both. It's haunting, beautiful and composed. This song has layers of sounds, music and voice.

The Nagra setup provides a rich, almost lush presentation of this song. It highlights the subtleties and the shadings of every single sound and unwraps the digital bits via the Classic DAC in a supremely musical and warmer leaning way.

When I swap in the Chord DAVE DAC I get more energy and separation of all of these layers. It's not as musical but has more wow factor indeed. The thing is, the more musical pieces always wins in the long run for me. The Classic is beautiful.



It's hard to be human from Lawrence Rothman and Marissa Nadler offers up a dreamy and ethereal presentation. It's sound can vary from system to system but when everything is dialed in right it should sound clean yet full with vocals that sound sweet and huge.

With the Nagra set the imaging is so natural and real it is beautiful. Mid song the soundstage expands even more and we are treated to a wonderful wall of music and instruments that we can hear clearly. Haunting vocals hang in the back and then come forward. With the Chord DAVE in the system this song elevates with more separation of details.

It also loses some of the body and warmth that the classic DAC brings to the table. I love both presentations but can see the longevity in the Classic DAC as it just sounds so natural, real and musical.