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# Nagra Compact Phono

Compact in stature only, Nagra's svelte MC-focused phono preamp is offered with the optional Compact PSU and a vibration-damping base. Should you budget for them all?

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**Y**ou gotta love a product that lives up to its name. With a footprint of only 185x166mm and a height of 41mm, the Nagra Compact Phono is just that: compact. It's also about as far removed as possible from the all-singing, all-dancing, all-valve two-chassis £68,500 HD Phono [HFN Jun '25]. The Compact Phono costs £4500, is solid-state, MC-only and as minimalist as a phono amp can be.

A note about Nagra's decision to create a downsized line. The Compact Phono and units such as the cigarette carton-shaped Grimm PW1 phono amp [HFN Oct '25], Chord's tabletop models, Rotel's DX-5 amplifier [HFN Dec '25], and the return of the Musical Fidelity X-Series cylinders, exemplify the trend toward smaller components. At present, the only other item so far in the Compact range is the Compact Server, but if Nagra was to add a preamp, power amp and DAC, I've no doubt they'd sell like ice cream in July.

## ONE BECOMES FOUR

Purchasing the Nagra Compact Phono is determined entirely by the customer's budget because it offers a systematic upgrade programme which will have you reaching for that credit card a second time. Should you begin with the least costly set-up, your £4500 gets you the unit, a 100ohm mini-XLR loading plug and a small 12V DC 'on the wall' (aka wall wart) power supply – the latter being adequate, but only just [see PM's boxout, p81].

Here's where visions of a sub-£5000 acquisition need to be dismissed. The optional Compact PSU adds £3500, while the £1350 Compact Vibration Free Support (VFS) platform also proved its worth. This comprises two machined aluminium slabs separated by a compliant polymer layer, and is supplied with replacement feet that, once screwed into the Phono or PSU's

**RIGHT:** Hand-wound input transformers [right] offer +10dB of step-up with a further +36dB within the active RIAA network [centre] and either +16dB or +1.5dB on the output [near left]. Note PSU regulation and filtering [top]

base, locate into recesses on the VFS's top surface. You'll want two of these isolation platforms if you add the Compact PSU. And trust me, you will want the PSU.

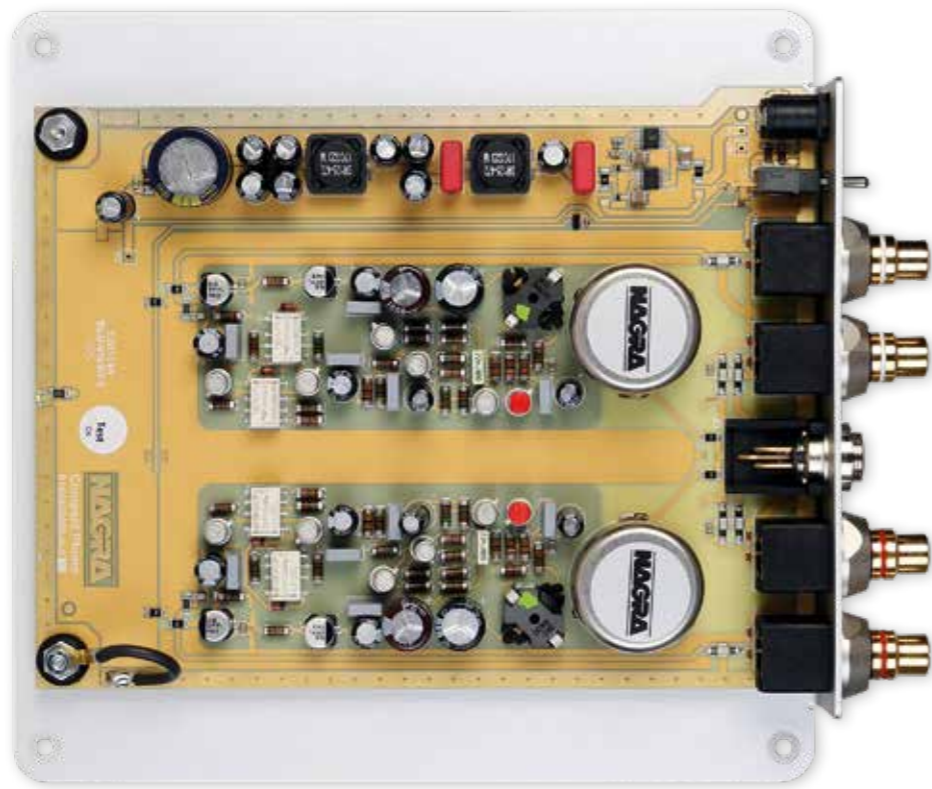
Should your preferred MC cartridge require other than the default 100ohm loading plug, there is a set of five values (39, 180, 270, 470ohm and 1kohm) available for £420 – absolutely recommended if you run multiple cartridges. The socket for the 100ohm plug and the optional values is on the back, between the RCA phono sockets for tonearm-in and signal-out [see p83].

## KNOW YOUR LIMITS

As for the remaining elements on the back, they include a toggle switch to select high (62dB) or low (47.5dB) gain, an earthing post, and a socket for the power supply, whether the wall wart or the optional Compact PSU. The latter's rear contains only an on/off rocker switch, the socket for

the lead to connect to the Compact Phono, and another earthing post. Both front panels are empty save for an engraved Nagra legend and a yellow power LED.

The limited nature of the Compact Phono is clear – eschewing moving-magnet means it's not a 'universal' phono stage and matching it with suitable cartridges from the outset will save you much rending of garments. PM spared me a lot of trial-and-error by defining a 'best fit' MC for the 100ohm base unit. His advice was 'pick MCs rated below 0.6mV-0.7mV (1kHz/5cm/sec) and look for an internal impedance below 10ohm. The Compact Phono's 100ohm loading can be changed on request, of course, but that's it as far as flexibility goes'. He added that it would have a 'definite sweet spot for MCs with high enough output to yield a useful S/N, but not so high that the phono stage will be clipped by big grooves'. And I did feed it 'big grooves' from the outset. ↪



'The Compact Phono is solid-state, MC-only and as minimalist as a phono amp can be'



**LEFT:** The 'milled from alloy billet' Compact Phono is seen here with spiked feet attached, located into Nagra's optional VFS (Vibration Free Control) base. Gain and loading are selected on the rear [see p83]

Lest you think these criteria are too restrictive, with or without the extra impedance plugs, it turns out that a 100ohm default and the output values delineated by PM cover a wide swathe of moving-coil cartridges. My reference TechDAS TDC01 Ti [*HFN* Sep '14], which was measured by PM at 440µV, and a half-dozen others in my arsenal fit the bill, and not one fell outside save for a couple of high-output types. Most of the classic MCs work perfectly with the Compact Phono, and the loading kit expands the roster of possible candidates.

### POWER UP

I'll be frank – as costly an extra as it is, the Compact PSU must be considered as essential. For anyone who has ever doubted the claims made for optional, upgraded power supplies when available,

“Compact” refers to its case size, not bottom octaves’

eg, the aforementioned Musical Fidelity X-Series' X-PSU, I have never heard it demonstrated so vividly as with the Compact Phono plus PSU.

As good as Nagra's Compact Phono certainly sounds straight out of the box with the power supplied by its wall wart, every single parameter seemed to improve with the substitution of the Compact PSU. This included dynamic swing, bottom-end control, slam, speed, transient attack, quietness and transparency. The transformation was not subtle.

Impressed if not baffled, and eager to test the experience, I dug out my old X-Series X-DAC and ran it with and without the X-PSU. While not quite a shot of steroids to match the gains of the Compact Phono-plus-Compact PSU, it did provide context and repeatability. Power

supply fetishists have a point. Suffice it to say, the remarks which follow apply to the Compact Phono with the Compact PSU.

### WHOLE LOTTA BASS

Having switched on the unit and left the room for a couple of hours, as is my habit with new components, I can't tell you how long the warm-up is from ice-cold, but I can assure you that the sound remained consistent from that point onward. I dug out a guaranteed juggernaut of an LP, *Led Zeppelin II* [Atlantic R1-535224], and was immediately made cognisant of two qualities the Compact Phono possesses in spades, and regardless of ancillaries.

Both are mandatory sonic elements for Led Zeppelin playback, and this phono preamp delivered them with such aplomb that I felt like I had been cheating Wilson's *The WATT/Puppys* [*HFN* Sep '24] of music worthy of their capabilities. The first was the sense of mass, obvious from the opening notes of 'Whole Lotta Love'. Whether serving the frenetic bass of John Paul Jones or the powerhouse percussion of John Bonham, the delivery had the visceral force I would normally attribute to the presence of a bigger amplifier. 'Compact' in this instance refers only to the unit's case size, not its bottom octaves. ☞

### POWER PLAY

This latest 'entry-level' phono preamp from the Swiss brand is a simpler design than either the preceding VPS [*HFN* May '13] or Classic Phono [*HFN* Aug '22], those employing 12AX7EH/12AT7EH and ECC83/ECC81 triode tube-based RIAA networks, respectively. Arguably, the Compact Phono has more in common with the earlier BPS model [*HFN* Aug '10], both being solid-state throughout, even though the Compact's +10dB input step-up transformer bears close resemblance to that employed in the VPS (the Classic used a +16.5dB step-up). While the BPS ran off a 9V battery, and suffered from very restrictive input overload margins, the Compact Phono has a 12V DC supply and an internal gain structure offering a better balance between sensitivity, noise and headroom [see Lab Report, p83].

But what about that 12V PSU? The supplied 'wall-wart' is not entirely without compromise and is responsible for a series of correlated spikes radiating out at multiples of 257Hz at or below -105dBV across the Compact Phono's noise floor. This low-level interference completely disappears with the superior Compact PSU [pictured, right] in tow. The difference in A-wtd S/N is 2dB in favour of the latter (77.9dB vs. 75.9dB), but this simple number does not fully reflect the subjective advantage it delivers. PM



## NAGRA COMPACT PHONO



**ABOVE:** Single sets of unbalanced (RCA) inputs and outputs are joined by a chassis ground post, Low/High gain toggle, three-pin socket for the loading plug (default is 100ohm) and a DC input for the supplied wall-wart or optional Compact PSU

So taken aback was I by these new-found depths that I inserted the Compact Phono into a second system feeding BBC LS3/5As. Even with the limitations inherent in that small monitor, it was clear the lower registers via the Compact Phono enjoyed a level of freedom which changed the impact of the song. That small woofer could not disguise nor hinder the way Nagra's Compact Phono preamp establishes the foundation of the sound.

### LEAP OF FAITH

As for the second revelation, it was a matter of another sort of quantity. This phono amp creates a soundstage which can only be described as 'gargantuan'. In the recent documentary *Becoming Led Zeppelin*, Jimmy Page describes how during the recording he spread Bonham's drums across the listening space to a point that's arguably wider than reality. Relocated to a domestic living room, it comes across convincingly as a life-sized drum kit. Not only did the Compact Phono create stage width beyond the speakers' edges, it also provided uncanny height and seemingly limitless front-to-back depth. I realise the Swiss suffer a questionable sense of humour, but this unit's name was starting to become ironic.

Needing a bit of subtlety, I turned to the more delicate moments of Blind Faith's eponymous LP [ATCO SD33-304B]. The loping sound of 'Well All Right' played into the hands of those who think an electronic component can affect the rhythm of a recording. I remain sceptical, but the ebb and flow of the piece spoke of a fluidity I associate more with valve gear than with solid-state. The Compact Phono was starting to sound like a sharper if cooler younger brother to the HD Phono.

The vocals of Steve Winwood, with his characteristic nasality, came through with a naturalness allied to a lack of sibilance, in a precise location with correct scale. Moreover, echoing what I heard on the Led Zeppelin album, Ginger Baker's solo begged the question as to who was the better drummer – something I'm not prepared to answer. But what this Nagra phono stage did allow me to hear and compare not just Baker and Bonham's speed or complexity but their sonic characteristics, one fatter sounding, the other tighter – but both astonishingly powerful.

### COMPACT KING

As vocals remain my preferred measure of a system, I turned to a singer who delivered perfection every time she opened her mouth. The clarity of Linda Ronstadt's vocals will test the mettle of any system's midrange and her delivery of 'Love Is A Rose' on *Prisoner In Disguise* [Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-608] showed the Compact Phono's midband and treble to be the perfect companions to that peerless bottom end. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

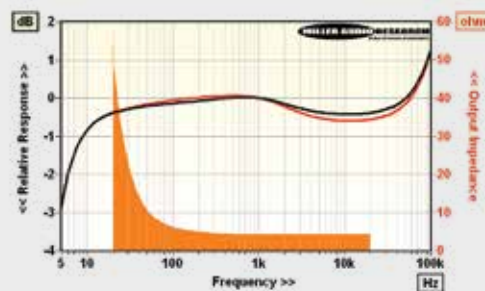
In a hi-fi universe awash with amazing phono stages, I can easily name a dozen I'd be happy to own. Adding the Nagra Compact Phono to the list is a no-brainer, even with caveats about it being MC-only and calling for matching skills bordering on OCD. If there's a downside beyond those practical limitations, I can cite only the need to add the Compact PSU. In other words, if you're an MC-only user, it's a taste of heaven.

Sound Quality: 88%

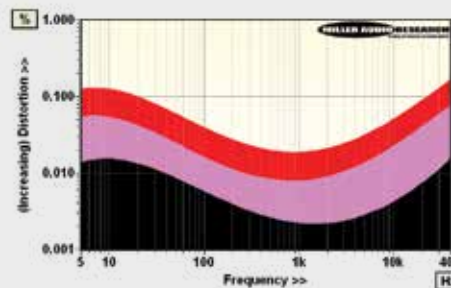


Tested here with the optional Compact PSU [see boxout, p81], the Compact Phono's two gain settings are accurately specified by Nagra at +47.35dB (Low) and +62.0dB (High), implying sensitivities of 4.29mV and 794µV, respectively, for a 1V (0dBV) output. In practice, the Compact Phono's maximum output level is 1.63V and the maximum input is just 7.15mV (Low) and 1.28mV (High) before clipping – so this little unit is not as accommodating of all MCs as the Classic Phono [HFN Aug '22] with its 18mV input threshold. It is, however, more realistically engineered than the old BPS model [HFN Aug '10] with its meagre 0.93mV input overload limit.

In practice this means MCs rated above 150-200µV (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec) should be used in the 'Low' gain mode to ensure an adequate ~18dB headroom for the boldest groove excursions. Only super-low output MCs should be used in 'High' gain mode, although both settings enjoy a very 'useable' 78dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 500µV in/0dBV out). MCs with rated outputs above ~1.2mV are not especially compatible with the Compact Phono. As input headroom is pushed this is reflected in distortion on the output, the Compact Phono dipping to 0.002-0.012% at 100mV output before rising to 0.0078-0.04% at 500mV and 0.019-0.1% at 1V output [all re. 20Hz-20kHz, see Graph 2]. Even the latter is still lower than the THD encountered with moving-coil carts [see p60]. The equalised response [Graph 1] shows a subtle -3dB/5Hz infra-bass roll-off that's also reflected in an increase in output impedance from 4.5ohm to 50ohm/20Hz [orange trace]. There's a broad -0.45dB dip through the presence and very high treble, but the response is flat to within ±1dB from 8Hz-90kHz. PM



**ABOVE:** RIAA-corrected frequency response (black, left; red; right) and output impedance (orange)



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus extended frequency (5Hz-40kHz, low gain; 100mV output, black; 500mV output, pink; 1000mV output, red)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                   |                                  |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Input loading                     | 100ohm (custom values available) |
| Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)      | 4.29mV / 794µV                   |
| Input overload (re. 1% THD)       | 7.15mV / 1.28mV                  |
| Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Imp.   | 1630mV / 4.3-55ohm               |
| A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)        | 77.5dB / 77.9dB                  |
| Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)   | -0.4dB to -0.39dB / +1.12dB      |
| Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. -6dBV) | 0.008-0.04%                      |
| Power consumption                 | 4W                               |
| Dimensions (WHD) / Weight         | 185x41x166mm / 1.9kg (each unit) |