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Made by: Audio Technology Switzerland S.A., Lausanne, Switzerland
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd, London
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Web: www.nagraaudio.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £21,998 with Compact PSU (VFS bases, £2298 & £1350)

AUDIO
FILE

PREAMPLIFIER

Nagra PREAMP II-S

Vanguard product in Nagra's new Series II – positioned between the established HD and Compact ranges – is a triode tube preamplifier complete with an iconic Modulometer
Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

So prolific is Nagra of late that the catalogue now has five families. I realise that sounds like I've just described the New York mafia. They consist of Compact, Classic, HD and Reference in ascending order of price, with the brand-new PREAMP II-S reviewed here introducing the new Series II. At present this is positioned between Classic and HD, but further housekeeping is pending [see PM's interview sidebar, p45].

Smack in the middle, then, is the line-level, all-tube PREAMP II-S reviewed here, which comes with Nagra's external Compact PSU for a total of £21,998. But the options list reads like the window sticker on a 1968 Cadillac... For openers, there's a decent saving if you already own the £15,798 Nagra Classic PSU, which is able to feed up to three products. The PREAMP II-S on its own is priced £18,348, meaning the Compact PSU accounts for £3650 of the package here.

FINISHING TOUCHES

With that out of the way, you have to deal with the remaining options. For example, the PREAMP II-S's XLR sockets are eligible for transformer-coupled options called 'Symmetrical Transformers Kits', at £3150 for the output and £3998 for the input. Then there are Nagra's VFS bases – highly recommended for added isolation and not just for the looks – at £1350 for the Compact PSU and £2298 for the larger footprint PREAMP II-S. While that might seem a lot for slabs of custom-cushioned aluminium, they do add the final touch, and at this price level, who's counting?

Owners of the Classic Preamp will be instantly familiar with the PREAMP II-S, which is almost identical in both size and layout. It requires only 280x76x380mm (whd) shelf-space while the Compact PSU

needs but 191x61x160mm (whd). Indeed, the *raison d'être* of this Series II, like the Compact line, is to maintain dimensions which better suit modern dwellings, especially space-poor urban settings.

I did a double take when I looked at the front panel, so recognisable is the Nagra style after 28 years [see boxout, p46]. To the left is a tiny toggle which selects five levels of illumination for the signature Modulometer to its right, an item without which a Nagra preamp would seem naked. Next comes an OLED display which shows the chosen input, mute mode and balance settings, followed by a rotary for selecting the inputs if you're not using the remote.

TAKING CONTROL

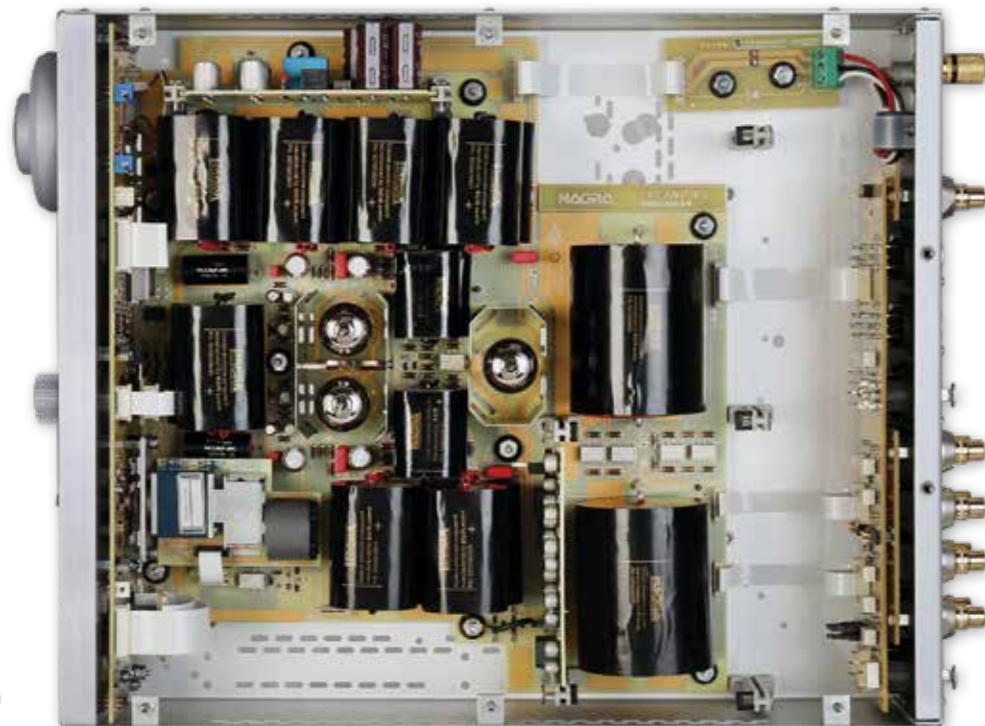
You gotta love the machined knob for the traditional Nagra volume control, which is

a way of reminding you that the chassis is machined from solid aluminium, damped with phenolic sheets. It is a joy to operate, but the PREAMP II-S's cute little remote control [see p47], which has a flat bottom so it can stand upright, is too much of a pleasure not to use. I suspect few owners

will access the controls on the preamp itself when the remote is so tactile and form-friendly, similar to a computer mouse or joystick.

Left of and below the volume control is another toggle switch that selects the unit gain of 0dB or +6dB. Another switch to the right chooses the PREAMP II-S's XLR or RCA output. A final control is the large four-position rotary selector for power on/off from standby (the main on/off switch is located on the back of the Compact PSU). The 'R' setting is selected to enable the remote control

'The options list reads like the window sticker on a '68 Cadillac'



RIGHT: Additional PSU filtering [top left] provides supplies for the pair of ECC83 tubes [input and gain, centre left] and the dual-channel ECC81 output triode [centre]. Transistors are used as current sources (biasing) only. Note motorised ALPS volume control [left]



'I did a double take when I looked at the front panel, so recognisable is the Nagra style after 28 years'

PREAMPLIFIER

RIGHT: The 'milled from alloy billet' Compact PSU is seen here with spiked feet attached, located into Nagra's optional VFS (Vibration-Free Support) base

to choose on/off. Next is mute mode, and then the 'On' position for playback. In the upper righthand corner are the IR receptor window and the remote control's LED, which flickers to show signal received.

SNUG 'N' STYLISH

At the back – and with nary a millimetre of real estate wasted – the PREAMP II-S provides (from left-to-right as viewed from behind, p47) one XLR input, four RCA single-ended inputs, a second XLR for bypass mode as required in multiroom or AV set-ups, and both RCA and balanced (x2) XLR outputs. Rounding out the connections is a LEMO socket to take the feed from the chosen Nagra power supply, and an earthing tag should you add an external phono stage which might need it. As much as the front of this new Series II model oozes Nagra's high-end hi-fi style, the back is redolent of its legendary IV-S tape recorder and professional products, so Nagra-lovers will sigh with nostalgia.

Although most seasoned audiophiles will find the PREAMP II-S pretty much self-explanatory, there are little quirks which



would suggest that you sit down with the owner's manual. For example, source selection from the front-panel rotary requires scrolling through the various inputs, whereas the buttons on the remote allow you to jump to the input of your choice. As these are labelled A through

'Stability comes from the solid-state biasing of Nagra's tubes'

E, you will have to learn what they control. Hint: A is the balanced XLR input.

Five buttons in the circular segment of Nagra's remote govern volume up-and-down, left-right balance and mute. The unmarked

button on the remote is for power on/off should the PREAMP II-S be placed in the aforementioned R position, while the F key is not assigned for this unit. A red LED blinks on the remote when a key is pressed.

SWISS TIMING

From ice-cold – and I do mean February frigid – the PREAMP II-S took exactly 60 seconds, as timed appropriately by a Swiss chronograph, to enter 'operate mode'. I wondered if Nagra consulted one of its

horological neighbours when it timed the warm-up period.

When switched on, the OLED display reads 'Heating...' with the ellipsis moving to show that something's happening. ↻

LEFT: Rear of the Compact PSU with IEC AC inlet, 12V DC output and gold-plated earth post



MATTHIEU LATOUR

While Ken was auditioning the PREAMP II-S, I reached out to Nagra's Audio Division Director, Matthieu Latour, and project manager, Léonard Bacinello. 'The PREAMP II-S is a pure tube amp – we use transistors only as active current sources for biasing the tubes', says Léonard. The ECC83s, one per side, are used for the input and central stages, the latter setting the overall gain and driving the ECC81. That double triode has the option of +6dB gain – through feedback – and forms the PREAMP II-S's final output stage.

Matthieu steps in and sets the scene for this launch. 'Series II pays tribute to our heritage by the use of Roman numerals', he reveals. 'It's a designation historically reserved for our most important recorders [the Nagra I was its first portable hi-fi recorder]. Over the past 75 years, only seven machines have carried this prestigious naming convention.'

So why not begin with a Series I? 'We have a Series I but it is planned as a higher-tier range, positioned between Series II and the HD line. Once fully developed, Series II will replace the Classic Line, representing the next evolution of Nagra's core design philosophy and aesthetic.'

Whatever the changes, the iconic Nagra Modulometer, identical to that used in the Reference and HD lines and echoing the meters found in the legendary Nagra IV-S and Nagra PL-P [boxout, p46], will be retained. 'The Series II is conceived as a growing family', confirms Matthieu, 'and we are currently developing a matching power amplifier, the AMP II-S, slated for release in Q3 2026'. PM



PREAMPLIFIER



Over this minute the two 12AX7/ECC83 and single 12AT7/ECC81 (output) tubes undergo the gentle pre-heating sequence which probably contributes to the claimed valve life of 5000-10,000 hours.

As age brings patience, I didn't enter serious listening mode until nearly an hour had passed, leaving the room after a quick burst just to see if the PREAMP II-S benefits from more than the one-minute warm-up. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that you don't have to leave this thing cooking before you hear all that it can deliver. I would assume that stability comes from the solid-state biasing of the tubes.

Being on a heavy metal jag for some unknown reason, mid-way through my listening I found myself spinning up the eponymous *New York Dolls* [Mercury SRM1675] and *The Stooges* [Mobile

Fidelity MFSL 2-605] albums, followed by a respite in the form of Nicolette Larson's *Look In My Direction* [Second Disc QCDLEM4BX263] and Julie London's *Julie Is Her Name Vol II* [Analogue Productions CAPP7100SA]. The latter SACD was chosen because I had just been immersed in recordings from 1956 for our upcoming anniversary issue [HFN Jun '26].

FAMILY TRAITS

If ever a product dismissed the hoary notion that hi-fi components are or should be genre-biased, it's this beauty. The very

first word that came into my mind was 'neutrality', and the second was 'quietness'. I was reminded of the sonic resemblance to the HD Preamp [HFN Nov '18] and thus had to marvel at how close the PREAMP II-S is to its dearer siblings. While it's true that you get more sophisticated circuitry and possibly other features by moving up a level, the main sonic benefits I

could recall were slightly more slam down below, perhaps thanks to the HD's and Reference's massive power supplies, and a whiff of grandeur. Otherwise, this is clearly related to its hugely expensive stablemates.

That, of course, mattered most when listening to the loud and angry punk of *The Stooges*, or the glam punk of the *New York Dolls*, but for both the most telling element

was how Nagra's PREAMP II-S dealt with Iggy Pop and David Johansen's snarls. Their textures and tics came through with such detail and clarity that I'm obliged to add a third word to this Swiss brand's lexicon: 'transparency'. This tube preamp is so open sounding – again, it's that quietness and the huge dynamic swings which both contribute – that I could swear I was hearing a deeper soundstage as well. This even carried over to the lean Julie London recordings, where space mattered more.

both and leaves the worst of both. Whoever voiced the PREAMP II-S managed to extract enough valve warmth to ensure its humanising of the vocals, alongside sufficient forensic ability to make sure every minute detail comes through.

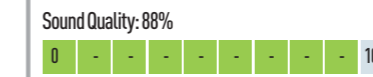
The PREAMP II-S may be the baby sister of HD and Reference, but it certainly knows how to punch above its weight. Which begs a reality check: I do not want, for a moment, to portray the Nagra PREAMP II-S as somehow an 'economy' purchase, even though its mission is to enable music lovers to acquire a Nagra preamp at a lower price (and at a smaller size). This is still 'high-end' in the pecuniary sense, but it will prove a standout model in its price category of £15,000-£25,000. The fun is in comparing the PREAMP II-S to tube and transistor rivals.

Larson's voice was crystal clear in a country-and-western way (though she sang more West Coast rock than pure C&W) while London was known for a bit of huskiness, both vocals in direct contrast to the rasps of the punks. The preamp presented these with such character, clarity and emotion that I had to dig out a pair of LS3/5As – the voice champs – to check I wasn't imagining it.

As often happens, one instrument or one set of licks provided that frisson of reality in which the listener is fooled into thinking that the performer is right in the room. It was the slithery guitar on London's 'Blue Moon' which had such vivacity that I did a double take, one of those moments where you forget you're listening to a sound system and think that you're at the actual event. And that's beyond a price tag. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Even for an audio veteran of 50-odd years' standing, surprises still occur. The PREAMP II-S emerges as one of the most ideally balanced exemplars of transistor-biased tube technology that I can recall, certainly at its price. Were I well-heeled and in need of a control unit, unwilling to forsake my full-on valve leanings, this would force a rethink. It's warm, open and as silent as needs be. It just may be Nagra's new 'sweet spot'.



'Her voice was crystal clear, in a country-and-western way'

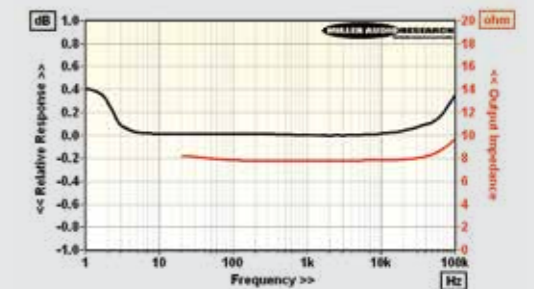


LEFT: Nagra's dinky little RCU-III handset covers volume, mute, balance, input selection and on/off (when preamp mode is set to 'R')

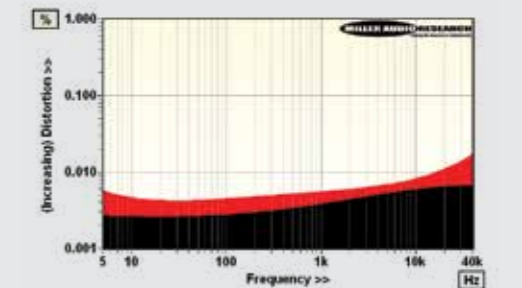
NAGRA PREAMP II-S

Tested without its optional input/output transformers, the PREAMP II-S still bears comparison with the far costlier HD Preamp [HFN Nov '18]. Nagra does not specify the absolute gain of either model, though both are effectively buffered unity-gain amplifiers when used in their fully balanced, XLR in/out modes – the HD Preamp offers –0.3dB, the PREAMP II-S offers +0.4dB (in '+6dB' gain mode). The Modulometer is accurately calibrated in this +6dB setting, the lower scale indicating 1V and the upper scale 0dB when the preamp has 1V/0dBV on its balanced XLR output. The scale shows a maximum 3V – depicted 'in the red' from 1V – although the true maximum balanced output is significantly higher at 10.5V from a usefully low/cable agnostic 80hm source impedance, the latter result courtesy of that ECC81 plus feedback. The A-wtd S/N ratio is generous at 96.7dB (re. 0dBV), a figure very close to the 98dB achieved by the HD Preamp – both results are very good for tube line stages.

The PREAMP II-S's frequency response does not show the volume dependence we saw with the HD Preamp's transformer-coupled output, but the general trend showing a gentle lift to +0.35dB at an ultrasonic 100kHz is the same. The subsonic response is also extreme, extending down to +0.4dB/1Hz [see Graph 1 below]. Distortion is determined more by the input than output level, as we saw in the HD Preamp. In this case the lowest 0.0018%/1kHz is achieved at full volume with 800mV in and 840mV out, the distortion increasing steeply to 0.25% with 2V in and ~2.1V out. Versus frequency, distortion is low at low bass frequencies – again, the PREAMP II-S lacks the HD Preamp's transformer-coupled output – but otherwise shows the same gentle increase to 0.01%/20kHz (re. 0dBV) [see Graph 2]. PM



ABOVE: Balanced line freq. resp. at 0dBV (black, 1Hz-100kHz) vs. output impedance (red, 20kHz-100kHz)



ABOVE: Output distortion versus extended 5Hz-40kHz frequency (black, -6dBV; red, 0dBV)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (<1% THD, 47kohm)	10.5Vrms (Balanced)
Maximum input level (<1% THD)	>14Vrms (Balanced)
Output impedance (20Hz-100kHz)	7.9-8.2ohm (Balanced)
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.01dB to +0.05dB/+0.35dB
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	950mV (Balanced, +6dB gain)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	96.7dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 0dBV)	0.0055-0.011%
Power consumption	24W (3W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	280x76x380mm / 4.8kg

NAGRA PL-P

Nagra's first line/phono preamplifier was the battery-powered PL-P [HFN Apr '98], tested exclusively by your favourite

hi-fi magazine nearly 30 years ago. Leveraging the build quality and styling of the manufacturer's iconic IV-S tape recorder, the PL-P sold for £7450 at launch, and combined tube-based phono and line stages with a separate headphone amplifier serviced by a front-panel 6.35mm socket. Other connections were side-facing – 3x line-level and 1x phono input on the left; 2x line-out, tape loop and a LEMO connection for an external battery charging unit on the right. Adjacent to the preamplifier's Modulometer display were separate left/right input level rotaries, allowing for fine-tuning of balance, but MC loading and MM capacitance (plus pre/post-1978 RIAA EQ) were set with the use of jumpers and internal pins. Inside the PL-P were also timers to monitor usage of its five ECC81 and three ECC83 valves, with replacement suggested after 5000 hours.

