

# Nagra Compact Player network streamer

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**T**he Nagra Compact Player raises a difficult question in audio: why do we buy an audio product? There's a myth – albeit one with a kernel of truth – that audiophiles buy their equipment because it's big, heavy and shiny. The Nagra Compact Player is none of those things. It doesn't even have the wonderful switchgear and the classic Modulometer that help make Swiss audio expert Nagra the style icon it is today, and yet... you are still engaging with a legacy that dates back to Stefan Kudelski's first portable recorders in 1951.

The Nagra Compact Player has none of these things because it needs none of them. It's purely a network streamer. It can be upgraded with a beefier power supply than the 12V plug-top unit supplied with the streamer. It can also get a handy leg-up with a made-for-Compact version of Nagra's Vibration Free Support system. But that's it. Aside from an earthing tag (useful not only for eliminating hum loops but also for bringing additional grounding firepower to the system), all you have is an Ethernet and a USB connection on the digital side, and a pair of phono sockets on the analogue side. And that USB connection is strictly for memory sticks or hard drives. That's a very tightly specified device. But do we really need 'more'?

## Three little boxes

Let's back-track a little and look at the new Compact line from Nagra. There are just three little boxes, all identical from the front, all upgradable with the Compact Power Supply (one Compact Power Supply for each Compact box, please), and all upgradable with the Compact VFS. You can boost the performance a metric smidgeon further by adding a second Compact VFS under the Power Supply.

The three boxes are the Nagra Streamer, the Compact Phono, and the Compact Player tested here. The Streamer and Compact Player have a lot in common, but where the Compact Player has a DAC and a pair of RCA outputs, the Streamer has an N-Link connector specifically for a Nagra DAC and a S/PDIF output for the rest of the digital universe.

The Compact Phono, meanwhile, is an MC-only phono stage that has much in common with the phono section of the classic Nagra PL-P preamplifier. It's fundamentally the same circuit as found in the Classic PHONO and HD PHONO, although those are significantly beefed up with a plethora of new technologies and components. All of these phono stages share the same Nagra-made step-up transformers.

Back to the Compact Player. As mentioned earlier, it's essentially the Streamer in the same box, but with the digital output replaced by a DAC and RCA outputs, and a dual-mono analogue output stage behind those plugs. It doesn't have the Nagra Digital Audio Module (NDAM) used in the Classic DAC II and Reference DAC for one good reason. It wouldn't fit! Instead, the company has chosen an unnamed DAC, but it does sport Nagra's own clock implementation and power regulation. It supports PCM files up to 384kHz at 32-bit resolution and DSD 256 files (although that's not made clear in any of Nagra's supplied information).

## Plays nicely

Perhaps the reason for not highlighting its file support capabilities is down to the effortless way it speaks to the outside world. It's Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect, and Qobuz Connect enabled, and it plays nicely with AirPlay 2 and vTuner. It also works with JPLAY, Plāys with Audirvāna, and is all kinds of Roon-chummy. For most UPnP/DNLA settings, when you are streaming local files from a USB drive or maybe a Network Attached Storage box (remember those?), you can (and should) use the MConnect app. This app also guides you through any periodic software updates issued by Nagra, should the need occur.

The Compact Player is designed to be as flexible as possible, as it can be used with an integrated amplifier or line preamplifier, or with its app-driven volume control to drive power amplifiers or active loudspeakers directly. In all honesty, I'm a little hesitant about this last audio pathway; without a front-panel indication of volume level, there is a risk that someone will 'dime' the volume and play tracks at full volume; even if only for a few seconds, this probably isn't a great idea.



It's about as large as those oversized paperback books that are – for some unaccountable reason – only available in airport departure lounge bookshops.



### Small but immensely strong

The Nagra Compact Player lives up to its name. It's about as large as those oversized paperback books that are – for some unaccountable reason – only available in airport departure lounge bookshops... despite 'small' being a desirable quality in a book you plan to travel with. But it's not in any way 'compact' in feel; made from an aluminium billet clamshell case, the diminutive Compact Player tips the scales at 1.9kg. That might not sound like much by the standards of high-end audio devices that are as heavy as one of Saturn's larger moons. But once you take the size into account, it's structurally dense.

The logo etched into the front panel sits above the single LED. That, plus the chamfered edges and its general purposeful demeanour, gives the Nagra Compact Player an expensive minimalist look and feel. It might lack that 'bling' factor, but it looks solid, especially when sitting on its four chromed feet and the Compact VFS plate.

It's odd, but – logo aside – nothing about the Compact Player shouts 'Nagra', yet you know it's a Nagra product all the same. Even if you covered up that big etched clue on the front panel, the case's solidity and the absence of sharp edges all point to something well-made, Swiss, and with a pro background. This harks back to that original question – do we buy it because it has the features, the build, or because it does what it's supposed to – deliver the sonic goods?

I received the Nagra Compact Player, complete with the standard power supply and its enbeefenated Power Supply box. A VFS made specifically for Compact boxes was provided for the Player, but not for the power supply. It had already 'done the rounds' among dealers and at the Audio Show Deluxe, so I cannot say whether it benefits from a lengthy run-in. However, with MConnect and the usual brace of Connects in tow, it took to my Ethernet at the first caress of an RJ45 plug.



EQUIPMENT REVIEW  
Nagra Compact Player



It's the refined man-about-town, listening to some cool jazz on a summer's evening kind of player.

» I mentioned earlier that Nagra didn't specify the resolution of the Compact Player. They didn't need to, because it's not that kind of streamer and isn't intended for that kind of listener. This is for the 'one and done' listener, one who enjoys music for its own sake and isn't obsessed with file types. They aren't going to be worried about the lack of upgrade options beyond the platforms and the power supplies; they aren't the upgrading type. It's all about the music, and it's in the music that the Nagra Compact Player really shines.

There's something relaxingly live about this player's sound. It's the refined man-about-town, listening to cool jazz on a summer's evening kind of player. It manages to combine clarity with a liquidity and a sense of musical flow that draws you ever deeper into the music.

Hyper-analytical it's not; you aren't listening to music to break it down into its component parts; the Nagra Compact Player is all about the cohesiveness. Music hangs together here, as if the band did a few more takes or some more rehearsals before they went live. I couldn't help but play some John Coltrane through this almost as soon as I fired it up; 'The Promise' from *Live at Birdland* [Verve]. This not only sounded right, it felt right.

How right? I haven't smoked in years, but my inner beatnik immediately wanted to reach for a Gauloises and tell everyone how "I love this dirty city." The Nagra Compact Player is the kind of component that's about the emotions, not the language.

### Breathless

After a while, cascading through my own Jean-Luc Godard movie, I began to reacquire more useful descriptive powers. But that distraction in the music is at the core of what the Nagra Compact Player does so well; it puts you in the music. That's heady stuff... leaving you, er, *Breathless*.

I'm trying to pin down precisely what places you in the music. It might have something to do with the imagery and the Compact Player's sense of space and openness. The staging is excellent; in particular, the Nagra Compact Player has excellent image layering. The sound is wide of the loudspeakers, but more importantly, it sweeps back into the room. 'Sweet Jane' [the Cowboy Junkies version on *The Trinity Session*, RCA], which leads to 'Pale Blue Eyes' from the eponymous third album by the Velvet Underground [MGM], seems to punch through the back wall of the room; the image is so deep. »





It's sophisticated and enticing sounding and has a sense of space that so few network-side audio players ever achieve.

» Beyond the image depth, the Nagra Compact Player's overarching sonic characteristics are defined by a sense of ease and a complete lack of electronic artifice. However, don't mistake 'ease' for a laid-back sound. The Compact Player can 'wig out' when it's called for. I'd argue that its sublime harmonic structure will make you want to 'wig out' to Rammstein or ZZ Top rather than The Prodigy, but that's more because something with a bit of full richness sounds so great.

Whether it is navigating the delicate nuances of a Mozart string quartet or the sprawling neo-prog rock of Steven Wilson, the Compact Player remains entirely unflappable. It brings a level of structural integrity and tonal richness to digital playback that approaches the passion normally heard in vinyl playback.

### Dynamic shading

The Nagra Compact Player's dynamic capabilities are excellent, but not in the *Sturm und Drang* sense. This isn't about thunderous bass lines or ear-splitting rim shots (although it is more than capable of portraying both). This is more about the nuances. It's a refined and elegant player, not a brute. That comes across best in the subtle textures of live music; the Nagra is excellent at delivering those subtle cues that separate live from recorded.

A sound this unforced and effortless might seem like a poor fit for fast-paced electronica, but you'd be at best only half right. Sure, that refinement, space and all that subtle sonic texture aren't the sort of things you might associate with Squarepusher's 'Terminal Slam' [*Be Up A Hello*, Warp], but the Nagra keeps surprisingly good pace.

When there's nothing but a hyper-accelerated, glitchy beat, there isn't much call for refinement, but the more you listen, the more the Nagra makes that frenetic sound more approachable.

The more time I spent just playing music through the Nagra Compact Player, the more I played Kosmische Musik or 'Krautrock'. *Zuckerzeit* by Cluster [Brain] made so much more sense than usual; the hypnotic Motorik rhythms of 'Heißer Lippen', the almost New Wave muted beat of 'Caramel', and the poppy nonsense of 'Rote Riki' almost stopped feeling like weird 1970s *Mittleuropa* noodling, and the 'underrated space rock' epithet took on more significance. Yes, we're moving away from describing how the Nagra Compact Player sounds and towards the music you play through it, but that's a common thread, because it doesn't make you think like an audiophile.

### Back to the beginning

Let's return one last time to that original question: why do we buy an audio product? In the Nagra Compact Player, the answer is simple and how it always should be... because it sounds damn good. Even stripped of all the switchgear and displays, free of the Digital Arms Race requirements for the latest DAC processing and the highest resolution, and devoid of all the audiophile tick boxes (apart from a name carved into the front panel), the Nagra Compact Player still sounds good. It's sophisticated and enticing, with a sense of space that so few network-side audio players ever achieve. For that alone, it deserves high praise. Yes, the absence of digital outputs or its inability to process MQA, ultra-high-resolution DSD or PCM files is a mark against the Compact Player, but most Nagra owners will be too busy playing music to care.

The Nagra Compact Player succeeds because it recognises that the ultimate goal of high-end audio is not to draw attention to the equipment but to disappear entirely, leaving only the music behind. It is a refined, elegant bridge to the heart of the performance, and in today's crowded digital market, that makes it a rare and precious instrument indeed. +

### Technical specifications

**Type:** Network Streamer and DAC

**Supports:** Qobuz Connect, Tidal Connect, Spotify Connect, Airplay 2, Roon Ready, Roon Tested, Plāys with Audirvāna, JPLAY certified, vTuner

**Controller:** mConnect app (iOS/Android)

**Connections:** Network Ethernet RJ45, USB (hard drive or memory stick)

**Outputs:** RCA connectors

**THD+N:** 0.04% @ 1kHz, -3dBFS

**Noise:** -140dB

**Dimensions (LxWxH, main unit only):** 18.5x16.6x4.1cm

**Weight (main unit only):** 1.9kg

**Price:** from £5,998

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**Manufacturer** Nagra Audio

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