Nagaoka MP-200 review

What Hi-Fi? Awards 2024 winner. Nagaoka's well-proven design produces a class-leading performance *Tested at £449 / $449 / AU$649*

What Hi-Fi? Verdict

The Nagaoka MP-200 is a terrific all-rounder and is easily one of the best performers in its class

Pros

- +

Balanced, detailed and precise sound

- +

Strong dynamics and pleasing punch

- +

Blocky shape makes it easy to set up

Cons

- -

The lack of captive nuts on the cartridge body makes it a little fiddly to fit

Why you can trust What Hi-Fi? Our expert team reviews products in dedicated test rooms, to help you make the best choice for your budget. Find out more about how we test.

Nagaoka may not be a familiar name to many readers, but this Japanese brand has an impressive and unusual heritage. It was formed in 1940 to make precision parts for clocks and watches, subsequently going on to specialise in machining fine jewels. Over time, this led to an expertise in making diamond stylus tips and ultimately, complete cartridges. Look at the company's website and you will find it now has fingers in all sorts of pies including headphones, microphones and digital cameras, alongside manufacturing moving magnet cartridges and various hi-fi accessories.

The MP-200 moving magnet cartridge is the step-up model in the company's long-running MP range. Unpacking this cartridge sends a wave of nostalgia over us, as distinctive colour aside, it looks just like the highly-rated MP-11 we craved in the early '80s. But, appearance aside, this is a significantly more capable cartridge than that much-loved budget favourite.

Design

The technical highlights here are the use of a low-mass boron cantilever combined with a superfine polished elliptical diamond stylus tip. The cartridge's internal generator is based around a powerful samarium-cobalt magnet and delivers a

decent output of 4mV (1kHz, 5cm/s). There is nothing unusual in terms of loading required from the phono stage, which follows the moving magnet norm of 47kOhms or cartridge weight (6.5g).

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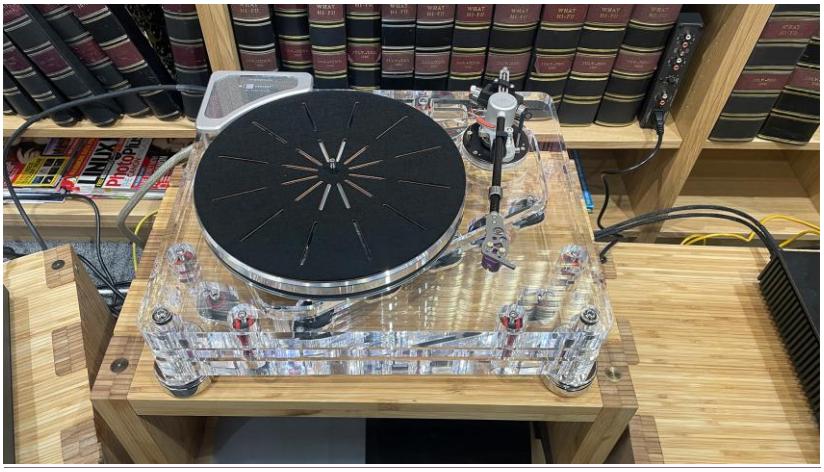
- 
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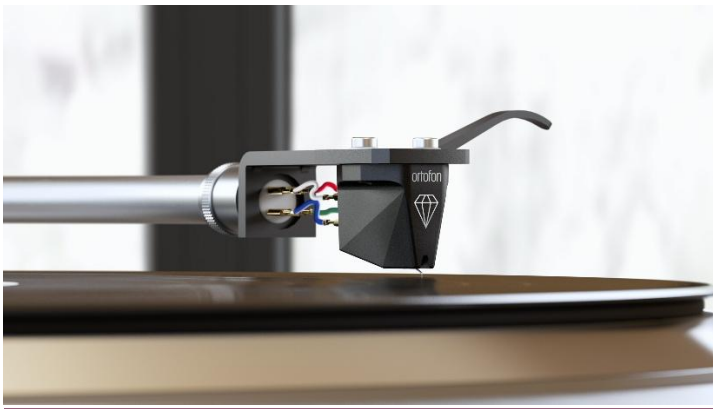
- 
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The MP-200's body is quite chunky but is unlikely to cause any issues unless the partnering tonearm headshell is on the unusually small side. We certainly didn't have any issues fitting the cartridge to our test turntable. It would be nice if the MP-200's body had captive nuts to make things a little less fiddly to fit, but apart from that its square front makes alignment a breeze. Nagaoka recommends a tracking force of between 1.5g - 2.0g, and we settled on 1.75g as the best compromise between agility, solidity and tracking security.

Nagaoka MP-200 tech specs

Type Moving magnet

Tracking weight 1.5g - 2.0g

Output 4mV (1kHz/5cm/sec)

Cartridge weight 6.5g

Our testing is done with the Nagaoka MP-200 mounted to our reference Technics SL-1000R record player and feeding a Cyrus Phono Signature/PSX-R2 phono stage. We also have the similarly-priced Ortofon Quintet Blue moving coil and a now sadly discontinued Goldring 2500 MM for comparison, alongside a pricier reference in the form of Vertere's hugely capable Sabre MM.

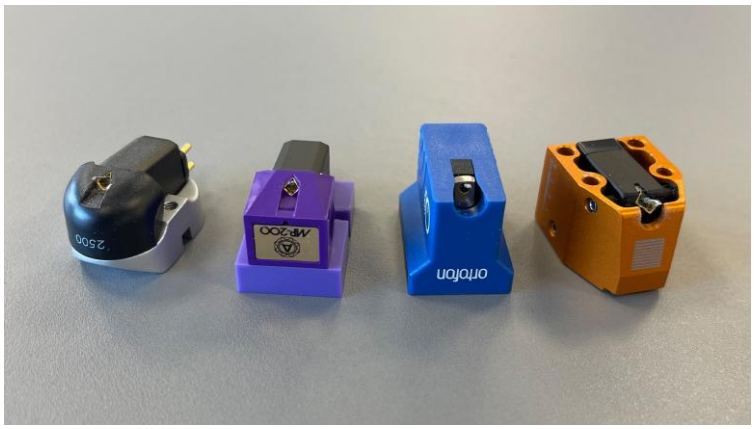
The rest of our reference system is Burmester's 088/911MkIII amplifier and ATC's SCM50 speakers. We also swap in Naim's Nait XS 3 integrated amplifier (using its standard MM phono stage) and the Epos ES-7N speakers to see how the Nagaoka performs in a more price-compatible system. In either use case, the results are excellent.

Sound

The MP-200 is a clear, controlled and entertaining performer. Its talents start with balanced tonality and continue with expressive dynamics and plenty of punch. As we work our way through our record collection it is hard not to be impressed by its composure when playing difficult and dense recordings like Orff's *Carmina Burana* and its ability to resolve large amounts of information. This Nagaoka tracks low-level instrumental strands with ease while still managing to make sense of the whole.

Stereo imaging is crisply focused and nicely layered with the massed choir and instrumentation positioned with conviction and stability. This piece is one of the most demanding we know with its savage dynamics and at times almost frenzied orchestration, yet the Nagaoka remains unfazed, producing a clearer and more precise window into the recording than any price rival we've heard. The midrange performance is terrific, with voices coming through in a convincingly natural way, packed with texture and full-bodied.

The MP-200 can be a fun listen too, as we find out during Four Tet's *There is Love In You* set. This rich tapestry of electronica shows off the cartridge's firm grasp of rhythmic drive and its ability to deliver bass with agility, articulation and power. The Nagaoka's presentation is forthright and direct, which suits music like this well: this moving magnet isn't a showy performer and doesn't embellish the sound to make it more exciting. The MP-200 is all about recovering the sound from the record groove without losing the music's energy and with a minimum of embellishment. It does this superbly.



L to R: Goldring 2500, Nagaoka MP-200, Ortofon Quintet Blue, Vertere Sabre MM cartridges compared. (Image credit: What Hi-Fi?)

Verdict

The Nagaoka MP-200 is a great all-rounder. It is well made and easy to fit (lack of captive nuts aside). There is nothing electrically that puts a hurdle in the way of compatibility, and the overall sound is as complete as we have heard at this level. We have no choice but to recommend this cartridge highly.

First reviewed: October 2024. Review updated: November 2024.

SCORES

- **Sound** 5
- **Build** 4
- **Compatibility** 5