

Aesthetix Calypso Linestage Preamplifier and Rhea Phono Preamplifier

Robert Harley



Aesthetix may seem like a new name on the high-end scene, but the company has actually been in business for ten years. For nearly all of those years, Aesthetix built just two products, the \$11,000 Callisto linestage and matching \$9000 Io phono stage. Those products have a singular mission: deliver the best performance available without regard to cost, appearance, or ease of use. The Callisto and Io are ultra-tweaky, ultra-expensive, ultra-inconvenient (the pair consisted of six large chassis with the optional outboard power supplies), and their cosmetics weren't conducive to front-and-center position in your equipment rack. (See JV's review of the Callisto and Io in Issue 143 and HP's review of the Callisto in Issue 137.)

I always viewed Aesthetix as a creative outlet for founder Jim White, who kept his day job at Theta Digital until three years ago. Jim made a large contribution to Theta's Casablanca, one of the best sounding and most sophisticated multichannel controllers extant, along with a slew of other superb Theta prod-

ucts. The Callisto and Io were a labor of love, and Jim's exploration of what was possible in circuit design.

Aesthetix is a very different company now. Not only is Aesthetix a full-time venture, but the decidedly niche-market Callisto and Io have been augmented by three very mainstream products: the \$4500 Calypso linestage, \$4000 Rhea phono stage, and the \$6500 Janus, a full-function preamp. (The Janus combines a full-fledged Calypso with a less elaborate implementation of the Rhea's phono circuitry in a single chassis.) White has taken the innovative circuit concepts developed for the no-holds-barred Callisto and Io, packaged them in one of the best-looking and most functional chassis in the high-end, and brought the price down from the stratosphere.

As I already pointed out in our Product of the Year Awards in Issue 146, these products redefine, in my experience, the price-to-performance equation in their respective product categories.

The Calypso linestage and Rhea phono stage look and function not like

second-generation products scaled down from loftier heights, but rather as fully matured and realized products in their own right. In fact, these two units, which share the same chassis, user interface, and remote control, are among the best-thought-out, best built, and most feature-laden products in their categories. Looking inside the chassis, I got the impression of a Swiss watch. The layout, parts quality, and overall execution are what you'd find in products costing more than twice the price.

The Calypso offers five line inputs on both balanced and unbalanced jacks, a tape loop, polarity inversion, a balance control, muting, numerical display of volume and balance, and the ability to turn off the display. In a neat trick, the display window also functions as a volume control; just press on the left or right side to lower or raise the volume. A "bypass" button puts the unit into unity gain, an extremely useful feature when the Calypso is used in conjunction with a home-theater controller.

The Rhea must be the most feature-laden phono preamp ever made. In addi-

tion to having three inputs (which lets you use multiple 'tables or multiple arms on the same 'table), the Rhea offers variable gain and loading, with independent settings for each input. A built-in cartridge demagnetizer sends a pulse through the cartridge to remove residual magnetism. A front-panel display indicates gain and loading. All features are available from the remote control. This means you can sit in the listening chair and adjust phono loading and gain or multiple cartridges. These features are an analog-lover's dream come true.

Many of these advanced features are made possible by the combination of microprocessor control and a stepped-resistor network for the volume adjustment, phono gain, and phono loading (see technical sidebar). Note that all digital-control electronics are turned off

Technical Description

The Calypso's circuit is pure tube, employing a single Sovtek 12AX7WB in the gain stage, operated differentially. This drives a Sovtek 6DJ8 (6922) functioning as a differential-output buffer. The volume control is a network of discrete resistors selected by FET switches.

This simple signal path is fed by an elaborate power supply featuring dual transformers, each with multiple secondary windings. Notably, all the power-supply regulation is discrete; there are no IC regulators feeding the audio circuits (the single IC regulator powers the front-panel display and control circuitry). Nichicon audio-grade electrolytic capacitors provide the generous filtering, and power-supply bypass caps are Wima.

The chassis, made from 3/8" grained and anodized aluminum, is strengthened by a stainless-steel tunnel that runs down the center and shields the audio circuitry from AC.

The Rhea's circuit is nearly identical to that in the \$9000 Io, but with small changes to reduce the tube count. The all-tube circuit employs five tubes per channel and yields ample gain (a whopping 75dB at maximum setting). The gain block uses two Sovtek 12AX7LP tubes operated in single-ended mode, followed by a single Sovtek 12AX7WG that provides gain and functions as a phase splitter to create a balanced signal. The output is filtered by a passive RIAA network, then amplified again by another 12AX7WB. The output buffer is a 6DJ8 (6922). Variable loading is provided by a switched-resistor network that offers nine settings; the eight gain settings are also selected via a switched-resistor network.

As with the Calypso, the Rhea's power supply consumes much of the chassis' real estate. All regulation stages are discrete, except the one that powers the control and display circuits. The power transformers are mounted on an isolation substrate and shielded.

It is difficult to overstate the build-quality of these two units, which is world class by any standard, and surprising at their price levels.

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when not in use so that digital noise isn't radiated into the analog electronics. One shortcoming, at least in the review sample I had, was that the volume control was far too insensitive at the low end of the volume range, particularly with highish-level sources. The lowest volume setting was too loud for quiet listening, and the volume steps were too coarse at the low end of its volume range. Aesthetix has since redesigned the volume control, fixing this problem.

The Calypso and Rhea do not sound like tubed electronics. I heard no trace of the classic tube sound—billowy soundstage, soft treble, full and ill-defined bass, or “musicality” at the expense of resolution. Instead, the three words that best describe this duo—and both components share the same qualities—are “open,” “transparent,” and “uncolored.”

In fact, these electronics impose the least coloration on the music of any I've auditioned. They impart a sense of palpability and immediacy that recalls the magic of live music.

I was bowled over by the Aesthetix' stunningly wide dynamics and effortless presentation of musical climaxes. High-level transients, such as snare drum, fairly jumped out of the music with a suddenness and impact that one hears from the real thing. It was as though a ceiling on the dynamic range had been lifted, opening up the dynamic palette on which the music was expressed. Listen to Roy Haynes' closing rimshot on the track “Elucidation” from a terrific new 180-gram pressing of *Like Minds* (Gary Burton, Chick Corea, Pat Metheny, Roy Haynes, and Dave Holland) from Pure Audiophile. It

serves as a musical punctuation, and through the Rhea and Calypso it had a startling realism. Say what you will about the music on Sheffield Lab's direct-to-disc LP of *James Newton Howard and Friends*, but the drum sound on this record is without peer. The Aesthetix pair seemed to turn this recording loose, revealing for the first time the full measure of its dynamics.

This quality alone gave the music such life and exuberance it seemed released from some sort of confines. It wasn't just transient slam that benefited from the Calypso's wide dynamics; the unit didn't congeal the soundstage or harden timbres during loud and dense orchestral passages. Even very highly regarded linestages to which I compared the Calypso sounded a bit compressed dynamically, and lacked the Calypso's

EQUIPMENT REPORT

seemingly unlimited headroom and complete composure no matter how complex the signal.

In addition to the impression of a ceiling being lifted from the upper-end of the dynamic spectrum, I had a similar feeling about the Calypso-and-Rhea combo's top-octave reproduction. There was a sense of air riding on top of the highest frequencies that opened up the presentation and fostered a feeling of listening to an ultra-wideband source. It's that same impression I get from microphone feeds and analog master tape. On microphone feeds and, to lesser extent, analog master tape, you can hear the room in which the recording was made—the air sounds “charged” with life. The Calypso and Rhea had an uncanny ability to convey this previously obscured aspect of familiar recordings. I didn't enjoy this

aspect of these electronics' performance for its own sake, but rather for the increased sense of realism and music-making it fostered. I heard a greater impression of musicians in a room playing together.

The pair's soundstage met all the audiophile criteria of width, depth, and layers of space between instruments, but I found myself ignoring these qualities and instead reveling in the performers' musical expression. One aspect of the Rhea, and to a slightly lesser extent, the Calypso, was the impression that soloists were “spotlighted.” That is, the soloing instrument seemed to move more forward in the soundstage and my attention was more riveted on that instrument, much the way I hear live music.

The Rhea and Calypso had deep extension and a center-of-the-earth solidity in the bottom octave. The mid-


bass leaned toward the warm and full side rather than in the quick-and-lean direction. This gave a natural, “round” character to acoustic bass that conveyed a feeling of air resonating in a large wooden body.

Finally, the Rhea was fairly quiet for a tubed phonostage that has a huge amount of gain, but lacked the jet-black background of, for example, John Curl's famous (and short-lived) Vendetta Research phonostage (which I lived with for five years). I could hear a bit of tube rush at times, although it wasn't distracting. The noise level was dependent on the tubes installed; I went through several tube changes.

Although far from the most expensive linestage I've had in my system, I must rank the Calypso as the best sounding overall. That's quite a statement—and a remarkable achievement

for a \$4500 product. Frankly, had the Calypso cost \$10k, I still would have recommended it. Moreover, the unit's build-quality and feature set would have justified a much higher price. The Calypso is not only a world-class performer, but a stone-cold bargain.

I have a similarly high impression of the Rhea. It shared the same fundamental musicality and rightness as the Calypso, and would be at home with even the most sophisticated analog playback systems. What's more, no other phonostage I'm aware of has the Rhea's useful features. If you're a vinyl lover, the Rhea would likely be the last phonostage you'll ever buy.

In an era in which many lesser-quality components cost considerably more money, the Calypso and Rhea establish new value benchmarks in their product categories. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Calypso linestage

Tube complement: One 12AX7WB, one 6DJ8 (per channel)

Inputs: Five single-ended (RCA jacks), five balanced (XLR jacks), one tape (RCA)

Outputs: Main out on balanced and unbalanced jacks, unbalanced tape out (unbuffered)

Features: Remote control with polarity inversion, front-panel volume and balance display, theater pass-through mode

Dimensions: 18" x 4 3/8" x 17 5/8"

Weight: 39 lbs. (shipping)

Rhea phonostage

Tube complement: Two 12AX7LP, two 12AX7WB, one 6DJ8 (per channel)

Inputs: Three single-ended (RCA jacks), three balanced (XLR jacks)

Features: Front-panel-variable gain and loading, independent for each input, remote control cartridge gain, loading, and cartridge demagnetizer

Dimensions: 18" x 4 3/8" x 17 5/8"

Weight: 39 lbs. (shipping)

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Clearaudio Maximum Solution Turntable; Graham 2.2 and Clearaudio TQ-1 tonearms; Benz Ruby and Clearaudio cartridges; Mark Levinson No.31.5 transport; Theta Generation VIII DAC; Sony SCD-9000ES multichannel SACD player; Plinius Odeon, Anthem Statement P5, and Balanced Audio Technologies VK-600SE amplifiers; Wilson WATT/Puppy 7 and Avalon Eidolon Diamond loudspeakers; Nordost Valhalla and MIT Oracle cables; Acoustic Room Systems and AV Room Service treatment; Three ASC 16" Full-Round Tube Traps; MIT Z-System power conditioning; Clearaudio Matrix record cleaner; Billy Bags equipment racks

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS

2625 Alcatraz Ave., Suite 501

Berkeley, California 94705

(510) 420-0379

Prices: Calypso: \$4500; Rhea: \$4000