

Stereophile

Aesthetix Saturn Calypso line preamplifier

Michael Fremer, July, 2005

A straight wire with gain? That's what a line stage is supposed to provide, but few in my experience actually accomplish it, and I'm not sure that most audiophiles would really want it that way. Some want a bit of tightening and brightening, while some prefer a bit of added warmth and richness. But whatever the preference, none of us wants *too much* of a good thing—the tighter, brighter line stages better not sound etchy and hard, and the warmer, richer ones better not sound thick and plodding.



Over the past few years I've heard some great-sounding and versatile line stages, including VTL's fabulous TL-7.5, Audio Research's Reference, Ayre's K-5x, Musical Fidelity's mammoth kWP (my reference), and Hovland's HP-100, to name but a few. Some, like the VTL, offer convenience and setup options that would make a Japanese-sourced home-theater receiver blush.

Aesthetix's Saturn Calypso (\$4500) was inspired by the company's more expensive Jupiter Callisto line stage, a two-box design crammed with enough tubes to warm a small apartment. In designing the Calypso, Jim White's challenge was to pack as much of the Callisto's performance into a single chassis as he could while using far fewer tubes, these driven by a solid-state power supply.

I liked the Calypso right out of the box—it looks as if you get something substantial for your \$4500. The nicely finished faceplate of brushed, anodized aluminum has five triangular input pushbuttons and associated blue LEDs,

plus additional buttons for Mute, Tape, Bypass, Phase, Display, and Standby. The volume control is built into the large, rectangular, transparent display. Press the left side to lower the volume, the right side to raise it. Very neat. The balance can be adjusted only via the full-function remote control.

On the rear panel are five sets of RCA and balanced XLR inputs, a set of RCA tape output jacks, two sets each of RCA and balanced XLR main outputs, and a set of dummy holes, labeled Phono, for the Saturn Janus preamp, which includes a phono board.

Inside is a symmetrical dual-mono design, the main circuit boards (also derived from the Jupiter series) packed with components from RelCap, Roederstein, and other suppliers of premium capacitors, resistors, and transformers. Right behind the faceplate, and the cause of the unit's oddly front-heavy balance, is a shielded, stainless-steel enclosure containing the transformers—one for the high-current/low-voltage tube-heater circuit, the other for the low-current/high-voltage solid-state and control circuitry—and a noise-reducing high-voltage circuit choke.

But what I noticed immediately upon removing the top cover to install the four tubes (a 12AX7WB and a 6922 in each channel) was how little actual wiring the Calypso has. The layout is ultratidy, and signal-path lengths kept to a minimum. The most prominent piece of cabling is one that takes the AC from the rear-mounted IEC jack to the front-mounted transformer. To minimize potential noise, the cable is routed through a channel that runs down the center of the chassis.

When you've hooked up the Calypso to your system (you can mix and match single-ended and balanced components) and the AC, the line stage goes into Standby mode: tubes powered off, solid-state circuits on, with sufficient voltage applied to form the coupling capacitors. Powering up the Calypso activates a circuit that wakes the tubes up gradually, ensuring their long life.

The Calypso's microprocessor-controlled operation is said to be accomplished without compromising the sound. When not called on to perform, the microprocessor circuit is disabled. It's active only when issued a command.

The Calypso's dual-differential, zero-global-feedback circuit automatically converts single-ended inputs to fully balanced. Volume control is accomplished via discrete resistors in 88 steps of 1dB each. A bypass mode for home theater use allows one or more inputs to be set for unity gain, so that an outboard processor can handle control functions. Finally, the display brightness can be programmed, or set to automatically adjust to the ambient room lighting. You can also shut it off via a button on the front panel.

In short, the Saturn Calypso offers an attractive combination of couch-potato convenience without compromising its tweaky audiophilic performance

potential. While the plastic remote isn't luxurious or even particularly ergonomic, it gets the job done. If you need to, you can teach any learning remote to control the Calypso.

Can the Calypso cha-cha-cha? The Calypso performed flawlessly during the two months it directed my system. It awoke from Standby in short order without having to rub the sonic sleep from its eyes before delivering its full musical bounty. It routed sources silently and responded to commands instantaneously. As a piece of audio hardware, you can't ask for more for \$4500—or for twice that, for that matter.

It took just a few hours of concentrated listening for me to understand why so many readers have asked me to review Aesthetix's Saturn series. Not since the VTL TL-7.5 was in my system have I experienced such mesmerizing midband richness unmarred by thickness and congestion. Equally impressive was the Calypso's quietness. Tube rush? Never heard any. And while I almost pulled the trigger on buying the hypnotic-sounding VTL '7.5, in the end I hesitated because its bottom-end extension and control, while appropriately nuanced and well-textured for acoustic bass, were not sufficiently taut and punchy to serve all of my musical needs.

Musical Fidelity's kWP couldn't match the VTL's luscious yet transparent, silky-smooth mids—few preamps I've heard can—but it was sufficiently juicy to float delicate if somewhat more recessed images, and its bottom-end extension and rhythmic drive delivered rock and pop's musical goods unhindered.

With Wilson Audio Specialties' MAXX2 loudspeakers—capable of low-end performance down to 20Hz, review forthcoming in the August issue—there would have been no hiding any bass inadequacies the Saturn Calypso might have had. But the Calypso's bottom-end performance never left me wanting more extension, more control, or more definition—all of which came as a big, pleasant surprise when I substituted it for the kWP (though the MF was still somewhat more "punchy").

When asked to deliver the lowest, stomach-rattling organ notes or massive reggae bass attacks, the Calypso responded with sufficient extension, control, followthrough, and well-sculpted low-end definition to be completely credible at all times. It served up electric and acoustic bass, kick drums, and timpani with satisfying textural and tonal authority, maintaining control whether the musical gestures were small or massive. When I cranked up the volume the Calypso delivered, never compressing, bottoming out, or smearing the bass.

The Aesthetix's midband presentation was everything I expect from an all-tube circuit: rich, colorful, harmonically involving, fully fleshed out—all without sounding waterlogged, sluggish, or overly "golden" or romanticized. The midrange picture served all musical genres equally well—a difficult balancing act.

Overall, the Calypso's midrange performance bettered that of my reference KWP, which sounded somewhat polite and recessed by comparison, with a tendency toward "oily," insufficient definition of high-frequency transients. The KWP seemed to lead with the transient attack, the harmonics following in tow. The Calypso produced that breath of musical life in which everything hits simultaneously.

The top octaves were extended, airy, and natural sounding, cymbals ringing sweetly but decisively, with just the right balance of shimmer and crackle. Hard-edged electric guitar lines had satisfyingly ear-searing bite, never sounding softened or rounded off. The louder I turned up the volume, the *better* it sounded on top, yet the Calypso delivered the goods at the lowest levels too.

That's how live music sounds. Get close to the stage and cymbals continue to ring sweetly, but more intensely. Even when you get so close your ears begin to throb and ring sympathetically, it's because of the SPLs, not because of harshness. The Calypso's tonal and transient presentation was like that. It never sounded hard or harsh, but neither did it sound soft or muffled or overly round. It was a truly amazing balancing act that had me cranking up the volume and sticking my smiling face right into it, night after night, and never wishing for more or less of anything.

The Calypso's spatial presentation was equally impressive, placing well-focused, delicately rendered images in a vast three-dimensional space without etch or blur. This level of performance elicited well-deserved "Wows" from friends listening to familiar recordings (hearing them through the MAXX2s didn't hurt, I promise). The sonic picture never "stuck" to the speaker baffles—what we heard were three-dimensional, fleshed-out images that floated and "popped" convincingly.

Dynamics at both ends of the scale were equally well served by the Calypso, delivered with a natural musical flow that was not hyped. Perhaps some of the LPs and CDs I played during the weeks I auditioned the Calypso had greater macrodynamic potential, but the preamp's "slam" factor was never in doubt, and if the tube-driven circuit had a higher noise floor than a solid-state design would have had, the noise was neither audible, nor did it interfere with low-level dynamic scaling or the resolution of inner detail.

If the Calypso lacked in any department, it would be that it might have missed the last bit of expansive air and resolution you can find in some preamps costing far more—but not in all of them. On the other hand, the Calypso *never* sounded bright, hard, or artificial unless the recording *told* it to sound that way.

Cooking Audio is like cooking: the combination of ingredients is as important as the quality of each. Recently, an executive from a major record label visited my listening room. He wanted to listen to the Wilson MAXX2s, and through them the only format he takes seriously: vinyl. When he arrived, in the middle of

this review, I had the Aesthetix Saturn Rhea phono preamp and Saturn Calypso in the system, driving the Musical Fidelity kW power amps and the MAXX2s. I'd just taken MF's kW phono preamp out and replaced it with the Rhea. That earlier combo had kept me up until 3am nightly, me telling myself that this was, by a wide margin, the best stereo system I'd ever heard in my home, and perhaps (I'm embarrassed to write) the best I'd heard anywhere—something I had never before told myself.

But on this night, with this VIP sitting in my listening chair, it just wasn't happening. He knew it and I knew it, though I said nothing. "Let me switch something around," I said, and substituted the kW phono for the Rhea. With that, the system sprang to life; we spent the next few hours wowing through some choice tunes.

Just before finishing this review, I returned the kW preamp to the system, still using the kW phono preamp. Ugh. *That* combo wasn't happening either. Even after a 48-hour warmup, everything sounded gray and lifeless. Bass was rubbery, transients slick and silvery. The harmonic, textural, and tonal colors had been drained from the music. These \$44,900/pair speakers had wowed me for weeks. Now they bored me. I inserted the Manley Steelhead phono preamp. All better. Life restored.

The Aesthetix Rhea phono preamp is an excellent component—as are the Musical Fidelity kW preamp and kW phono preamp—but in my system for those days, the combinations of the two MF pieces or the two Aesthetix pieces didn't do justice to the music or to the system or to the individual components. When you're cooking up a stereo system, it's not enough to use the finest ingredients. You have to make sure the recipe works.

Conclusion Was I impressed by Jim White's Aesthetix Saturn Calypso? Damn straight I was. Used with far more expensive gear, it held its own and then some, and had one of the best-balanced sounds of any audio component I've come across at any price. At \$4500 it's no budget product, but it's a high-performance component in every sense of the term, and something you can stick in the face of any cynic who thinks high-end audio has become a ripoff. Whatever the Calypso's sonic shortcomings might be, they're so well hidden that you'll discover them only by changing out the Calypso for whatever might prove to be better. My biggest complaint was the manual's virtually blank specifications page. The purchaser of a high-performance audio product deserves better documentation.

The Aesthetix Saturn Calypso was one of the most enjoyable, musically satisfying preamplifiers I have had the pleasure of reviewing. Your \$4500 buys you a beautifully built, smartly designed, crisply functioning, versatile, and, most important, sonically brilliant preamplifier. I could live with it happily ever after. You could spend a great deal more and get more for your money, but you're just as likely to get less—that's how good the Saturn Calypso is.

