

REPRINT



CALYPSO Line Stage & RHEA Phono Stage

by Shane Buettner

Aesthetix was started nearly 10 years ago by president and designer Jim White, an experienced industry veteran. Notable among Jim's achievements is that he worked with Theta Digital for many years on design teams that developed their landmark Casablanca digital controllers up through the current Xtreme DAC version (Dude!) of the Casablanca II. Jim also worked on the design of Theta's Dreadnaught power amplifiers, which Richard Hardesty and I both purchased and still use as our reference power amplifiers. How's that for a resume?

Aesthetix hit the ground running with the ambitious Jupiter series preamps—the Callisto line stage and Io phono stage. These highly regarded products are two-box designs, with each component having its own separate power supply and massive numbers of tubes in each chassis and they sell for \$6,500-\$14,000, depending on unit and options. By virtually all accounts the Jupiter series lives up to its celestial name and indeed challenges the state of the art in preamp design and performance.

The challenge Jim White undertook with the Saturn series components we're looking at here was to approach the lofty performance benchmarks established by the Jupiter series for a fraction of the price in a pair of single-chassis designs. The results are the Calypso line stage and Rhea phono stage, which sell for \$4,500 and \$4,000, respectively. (The series also includes the Janus, which is a line stage with integral phono for \$6500.) As you'll find out these products pack an amazing amount of build quality, features and performance into two gorgeous boxes that indeed give the higher priced products a run for your money.

Calypso Line Stage

Just to make sure you're tuned in, remember as I list Calypso's attributes that this is a

\$4,000 line stage!



Calypso is a single-box tube line

stage with a fully differential circuit topology—single-ended signals are converted to balanced in the gain stage and remain balanced through the output. An additional conversion takes place when the single-ended outputs are used. Balanced input signals stay balanced from input to output. No global feedback is employed.

There are five inputs plus a tape monitor loop and two sets of single-ended and balanced outputs per channel. Calypso uses a solid-state power supply built with E&I core transformers rather than toroids. There's an inductor choke on the high voltage power supply to quench noise.

The input switching is solid-state with FETs while four tubes are used in the gain and output amplification stages (Sovtek 12AX7s for gain and 6922s in the output/buffer stage). The volume control uses FET switches that switch discrete resistors with 66 steps of 1dB. A bypass mode can be engaged easily (two pushes of the bypass button within 5 seconds) on any input to establish unity gain for surround processor pass through. The remote is fully featured—in addition to engaging the bypass mode you can invert phase, shut off the front panel display and make input selection, mute the signal, and control the volume

and balance (balance is available only on the remote).

On the tactile front, Calypso is heavy in the way that makes you feel like you've really bought something substantial. It's pretty in a tough way with a brushed anodized aluminum chassis, which is non-ferrous and resists magnetic artifacts. But Calypso is more than weighty. Every aspect of it that you'll touch has a rugged, substantial feel to it from the input connectors to the front panel buttons and the embossed A (for Aesthetix) logo. The "A" logo and the front panel are cut separately with a laser, and then the two pieces are pressed together. Pretty cool.

The front and back panels and bottom chassis are silver while the top cover and side panels are black. Volume can be adjusted on the front panel by pressing either side of the blue LED display, which I hadn't seen before. The tubes require installation and, quite surprisingly, the top cover lifts off with a good tug to separate the patches of what look like Velcro™ that hold it to the chassis. I say the material *looks* like Velcro™ because Aesthetix has informed me that it's actually an "advanced polymer interlocking material." Geez, even the stuff that looks like Velcro™ is actually some high-grade "unobtanium" on these things! Whatever it is, it works just like Velcro and so long as it makes for a good and ridgid coupling (and Calypso's performance suggests it does), I'm all for avoiding 30 access screws to pop the cover.

As impressive as Calypso is outside, unlike most of today's supermodels it's got inner beauty to match. (That's actually speculation on my part—I haven't dated a supermodel in a long time.)

According to Aesthetix, Calypso and Rhea both use power supply and dual-mono audio circuit designs derived from the Jupiter series products. Opening the top cover you'll see the transformers are up at the front of the chassis in a stainless steel can, and set behind them on either side are mirrored, physically isolated circuit boards for the left and right channels. High quality parts are contained throughout such as Neutrik XLR connectors, Roederstein resistors, and WIMA capacitors (the lit doesn't brag about it but there are some Relcaps in there too).

The board layout is clean and uncluttered in appearance, and true to Aesthetix's literature you don't see much wire. The wire

that runs from the AC receptacle on the back panel to the can with the transformers passes through a shielded conduit.

Overall, Calypso appears to offer a staggering amount of build and parts quality for the money.

Now, there are two more features that set apart Calypso from the other preamps we've reviewed here. Many preamps with remote control, especially one as fully functioned as Calypso's, utilize a microprocessor to execute remote commands. As with Ayre's K-5x, Calypso's microprocessor is narcoleptic—it stays in "sleep" mode, waking only to execute a command before nodding off again so that it's not constantly generating noise. For additional noise reduction, the display can be shut down via the front panel or remote.

More impressive is Calypso's standby mode, which keeps all of the solid-state circuits heated up and the capacitors charged with higher voltage than is used in normal operation—apparently everything but the tube heaters and front panel display stays up. This should dramatically reduce the time it takes for your system to get up to speed when you turn it on and maximize the tubes' life span. That's hot, and it's something I'd sure like to see in the products that cost 2 to 3 times Calypso's price!

Last, but certainly not least, I should go into a little more detail on the remote that ships with Calypso and Rhea. If you bought both you'd have two remotes, but you only need one. The diminutive remote is plastic—the build quality is incorporated elsewhere, which is fine by me.

Three little buttons at the bottom switch its operation mode from Calypso to Rhea, or even to Janus if that's the way you've gone. I found operating Calypso and Rhea with this single remote a real snap, if not an outright treat. It even has direct access to the input sources. If you've been even halfway around the hi-fi block you know that high-end performance and good ergonomics seldom meet. The Saturn series Aesthetix gear is a refreshing step in another direction, and I've never used anything that's as complex in function yet simple to use.

Rhea Phono Stage

Rhea appears to be a phono twin of Calypso in most ways. From the outside looking in, only a slightly different set of front panel buttons and rear panel connections differentiate them. Rhea's made from the same chassis material, and finished in



exactly the same strikingly attractive and heavy-duty fashion (including the space-age polymer that looks and behaves like Velcro™).

Although all three of Rhea's inputs are single-ended, signals are balanced in the gain stage and the audio circuitry from that point on is differential (balanced) through the output so long as one of the two balanced outputs is put to use. So, even with single-ended inputs many of the advantages of a balanced circuit topology are still realized.

As with Calypso, Rhea uses zero global feedback. There are two single-ended and two balanced outputs. Each input will "remember" discrete gain and cartridge loading settings so you can accommodate separate table/arm setups. Speaking of which, there are seven gain settings for moving coil cartridges in (mostly) 6dB increments from 38dB-75dB (off is the 8th option). Nine cartridge loading settings are available: 75, 125, 250, and 500 ohms, as well as 1k, 2.5k, 5k, 10k, and 47k.

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Rhea's solid state power supply and dual-mono audio circuit boards are also derived from the Jupiter series products, and, although the power supply is solid-state, all gain and amplification is performed by tubes. Rhea uses more than twice as many tubes as Calypso with a total of ten tubes for its three amplification stages and output buffer stage (12AX7s for gain and 6922s in the buffer stage). Rhea's RIAA network is passive with polypropylene caps and Roederstein resistors.

In general, with Rhea you see the same board layout and high quality parts you see in Calypso—only here, there're more of them. Rhea also includes the same nifty standby mode as Calypso.

As mentioned above, the remote control and user interface are outstanding. When Rhea's remote mode is operational you can switch inputs, mute the signal or switch load and gain settings

from the remote. This is just killer for dialing in the right cartridge loading value on the fly with familiar material. In addition to all this, you can run Aesthetix's renowned cartridge demagnetizer from the remote or front panel.

I have to say I was looking forward to taking Rhea for a spin (literally!) after using a Linn Linto for over two years. The Linto is a terrific phono stage that I've heard dump other phono stages that cost multiples of its price. But it is rather rigid in gain and loading configurations, which Rhea certainly isn't.

Performance

Let me just say it: the Aesthetix gear is the stuff that throws off the curve for everyone else. Calypso provides the kind of performance that you just won't hear with anything else anywhere near its price point, and it's better than many things that cost twice as much. In fact, it's my opinion that of the preamps reviewed in these pages only the VTL 7.5 eclipses the Calypso's overall performance.

Calypso doesn't have quite the same level of see-through transparency and layered dimensionality that the VTL 7.5 has, nor does it have quite the jump factor or vividness in the midrange that the ARC Ref 2 has. But Calypso comes shockingly close in overall performance to what's accomplished by its much pricier competitors.

Calypso has clarity and depth with focused, coherent images layered from front to back with musicians occupying distinct planes. Dynamics didn't jump from the speakers so much as they just flowed, rising and falling, waxing and waning in a startlingly natural fashion.

As with its more expensive brethren, Calypso could be turned up louder, and will rock harder, without strain or congestion. This preamp sounds closer to the neutrality of the VTL 7.5 than any of the others auditioned, and has much of the harmonically rich tube sound that's undeniably right for me.

The big VTL is the only preamp in this survey that exceeded Calypso's inner detail and resolution of fine musical texture. The Aesthetix isn't quite as open and extended on top as the big VTL or ARC preamps, but it extends very deep on the bottom with authority and no bloat whatsoever—just taut, articulate, detailed bass.

While Calypso doesn't quite match the mid-bass speed of the ARC, neither does it have that preamp's slight leaness in that area. I think you're getting my drift by now. The \$4,500 Aesthetix is not quite everything that the VTL 7.5 and ARC Ref 2MKII are, but it's damned close for much less than half the price. I believe that's the definition of a benchmark and notice that there's a new sheriff in town.

Rhea has many of the same sonic characteristics as Calypso, which is to say it too is fabulous. Although you'll hear a fair amount of tube rush before the music starts, once you drop the needle you hear detailed, dimensional sound with a black, quiet background.

Rhea's ability to layer and separate images on the stage is extraordinary. An excellent example is found on the Classic LP *Come Away with Me* by Norah Jones.

The last track on the record is *The Nearness of You* with Norah singing at the piano. The piano is clearly out in front, with the vocal layered in space behind it—just like it would be if she were sitting behind the piano and singing to you in your room. Excellent sense of depth, space and focus along with outstanding texture and shading with the vocal.

Tonally, while Rhea captures all instruments with veracity, I was particularly struck with its rendition of piano. It showed just the right amount of foundation and weight with light, airy and natural decay. Extension at the low end is authoritative and powerful, but also detailed and quick. Rhea seems just as neutral and high in resolution as Calypso, and also has enough tube life in it to let you connect to it. I love this phono stage.

Comparing Rhea with the Linn Linto is an interesting exercise. The Linto is in some ways more spectacular as a result of lightness in the bass that emphasizes its rhythmic speed and midrange clarity—and also makes the Linto seem like it's got a little more jump at times.

I'm convinced that's a bit of coloration, but it's seductive to be sure. Rhea sounds fuller and warmer, but not out of proportion—it just has a low end foundation and depth that the Linto doesn't. Rhea strikes me as more tonally balanced.

The Linto seems livelier on top, but also emphasizes surface noise to a higher degree. On super quiet vinyl Linto's quick and

punchy sound can be very appealing. On less pristine vinyl, Rhea lets you get more of the music and fewer playback artifacts. The fact remains that these two phono stages are close in overall quality on my Linn LP12 rig, in spite of a nearly 3:1 price difference.

Rhea is more expensive, and it does sound better to my ears, always pulling me into its deeper and more dimensional musical landscape. And Rhea is far more flexible in terms of inputs and outputs, as well as loading and gain settings.

The Linto, good as it is, has fixed gain and loading, which may be an issue depending on your current turntable setup, not to mention potentially limiting some move you might want to make with your LP playback in the future. Rhea can pretty much accommodate any about-face you might make at any time and, hey, for \$4,500, it should!

Conclusion

The Aesthetix tandem is a lot more than a pair of "budget" products. Calypso, in particular, sets a standard. I would rank this preamp's performance in this survey where I did regardless of its price. That it costs only \$4,500 is cause for celebration among audiophiles. It's not really a budget product at that price by any stretch, but it simply performs far beyond the level you'd expect in every way, including its ease of use and scope of features. Nothing I've seen is as ergonomically sound as the Aesthetix gear.

Rhea's in the same performance league, although it is expensive for a phono stage. But it has unsurpassed flexibility and blends seamlessly with Calypso in your system, both components effortlessly controlled by a single remote. And it too is simply beyond reproach in terms of pure performance. Jim White may have done his job too well. Even his more expensive gear is looking like a hard sell in comparison to Calypso and Rhea! [APJ](#)

Richard Hardesty comments on...

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AESTHETIX PREAMPLIFIERS

and aesthetically pleasing products in this group. The Calypso not only looks beautiful, it is easy and convenient to use. It pro-

vides audio performance that rivals the most expensive components yet it costs comparatively little.

It's difficult to criticize a product this good, but if pressed I'd say that the Calypso may offer slightly less resolution of subtle details than the more costly offerings in this group and it leans ever-so-slightly towards the richer, darker (one could say more musical) side of neutrality.

The price of the Aesthetix Calypso line stage preamplifier will undoubtedly rise above its current bargain basement cost of just \$4,500. At the current price this is a value leader but I would still consider it to be a top performer at twice the cost.

*The Rhea offers lifelike vinyl reproduction with very little tube noise. The musical presentation and three-dimensional imaging set it apart from the solid-state competition. The Rhea leans slightly towards darkness and sounds rich and warm. It mates well with a variety of line stages. We have reviewed only a few phono stages but this is the best one auditioned so far. It's not cheap at \$4,000 yet it provides accurate performance rivaling prestige components that cost far more. **APJ***

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