

Aesthetix Callisto Signature Linestage and Io Signature Phonostage Preamps

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Designer Jim White's Aesthetix Callisto and Io Signature preamps make every LP I've listened to sound more beautiful, more present, more like the real thing. Some folks might call components that make *everything* sound gorgeous "euphonic." Me, I'd call the Aesthetix Callisto and Io Signatures the best preamps I've yet heard.

What sets this duo apart from even the finest competition isn't difficult to describe: more air, more bloom, more harmonic richness, more dynamic life. And the Aesthetix add more of these things without adding much color of their own. Though no tube preamp is absolutely colorless, the Callisto and Io have less of a predominant tint, be it the golden brown of Conrad-Johnson, the grey of Audio Research, or the dark velvet of Lamm or BAT, than any others I've heard, and where they do deviate from dead-center-neutral is, in my opinion, the right place to deviate—the upper midrange and treble.

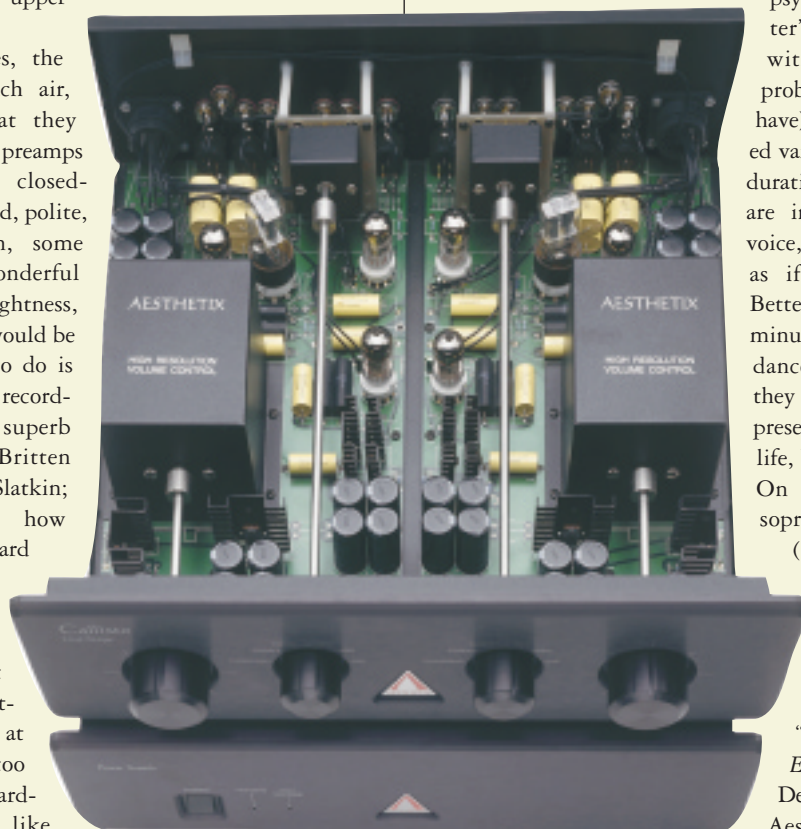
In the top octaves, the Aesthetix add so much air, light, and bloom that they make these other great preamps sound closed-in and closed-down—overly controlled, polite, hi-fi-ish. Once again, some might hear this wonderful influx of energy as brightness, but, once again, some would be wrong. All you have to do is listen to a first-rate recording—like Cisco's superb remastering of the Britten *Young Person's Guide* [Slatkin; Capitol]—to know how wrong. I've seldom heard winds—instruments that are among the hardest for any system to reproduce without unnatural flatness, tightness, and airlessness or, at the other extreme, too much brightness and hardness—sound more like

themselves, more like big columns of air that float above the orchestra and bloom with just the right color and breathiness.

And that is only the start, for the Aesthetix carry this same air, light, bloom, and color down through the midrange and deep into the midbass. French horns, trumpets, trombones, and tubas—listen to this same Cisco disc—are each reproduced with the same sensational rightness as the winds. Violins, solo and ensemble, when they are well-recorded (try Milstein's *Strad* on the Glazunov Concerto [Cisco (again)]), sound airy and rosy without sounding insubstantial—a near-perfect blend of string, bow, and body—and shed harmonics the way a soft feathered spot sheds light. Ditto for violas and cellos, which, when doubled by the basses, have that forest *and the trees* sound of old Magneplanars (and the real thing).

Voices are simply marvelous. If you think you've heard fine detail before, think again. The Aesthetix pair reproduces what

psychoacousticians call "jitter" (not to be confused with the timing-related problems that CD players have), the little breath-related variations in pitch, timbre, duration, and dynamics that are inherent in any human voice, or acoustic instrument, as if they were melismas. Better still, they invest these minute dynamic changes with dance-like energy, so that they flutter and fluctuate in presence the way they do in life, breath by human breath. On difficult-to-reproduce sopranos, like Joan Baez's (try "Wild Mountain Thyme" from *Farewell, Angelina* [Cisco (encore)]) or Birgit Nilsson's (the electrifying "Agamemnon" aria from *Electra* [Solti, Decca/London]), the Aesthetix don't eliminate



the sibilance and nasality of the former or tame the steeliness of the latter so much as *humanize* both, by adding this layer of breathy detail (and, yes, a hint of brightness and light) that makes each artist sound less like a recording and more like the real deal.

And the way the Aesthetix reproduce the power with which each singer sings, the size and dynamic range of their sopranos, is unparalleled in my experience of preamps. Here are voices that get loud and soft the way flowers blossom and fold. Rather than the herky-jerky, ratcheted dynamics that all of us are so used to on record and particularly on CD and other digital media—the jolting starts and sudden stops of instruments that seem to go from piercing to near silent in a split-second, with nothing between—here is the very essence of bloom.

And that brings me to the Aesthetix's foremost virtue. It is customary, as I'm doing here, to break a component's performance down into discrete categories—timbres, dynamics, imaging, etc. Such categorization is a convenience for readers and writers alike, but it is also misleading because, as any experienced concertgoer can tell you, in life all of these "discrete" categories are inextricably interrelated. That is why I came up with the idea of "action"—to try to suggest that it isn't dynamics or timbres or imaging alone that make for a more lifelike sound but the way these three constantly interact with each other to change our perception of the musical contributions of a given instrument and instrumentalist. What makes the Aesthetix Callisto and Io so superior is the lifelike way all their many superlative qualities combine to do this very thing, so that, for instance, the breathy details that I spoke about on voices (and every other instrument), don't stand out *as details* but as natural attributes of a realistic presentation. As a result, we get the eerie impression that we are listening not just to individual sounds, or to aspects of sounds, but to a concerted activity, to men and women *making music*.

Both of the Aesthetix are very big sounding preamps, rather like greatly improved versions of the ARC preamps of yore (e.g., the SP10 MkII). As I said when I reviewed the ARC Ref 2MkII, this bigness (and bloominess) is, to my ear, more realistic rather than less, though some audiophiles seem to prefer more tightly focused imaging. It goes almost without saying that the Callisto and Io's soundstaging is vast—at least as good as the best I've heard, and the best I've heard (the ARC and Lamm combos) are no slouches. For reasons that may have as much to do with the cable, interconnect, and amplifiers that I currently use, the Aesthetix also seem to make the nearly invisible Kharma Ceramique Reference Monitor 3.2s even less visible as sound sources, since it is harder to hear an image that is substantially bigger than the driver/enclosure that generates it as coming from that driver or enclosure, particularly when it is being back-projected, as those of the Callisto and Io are, with tremendous depth and width of field and, just as important, tremendous height and transparency.

Now before you guys run out and buy a Callisto and Io, let me list some caveats.

First, the Callisto and Io are all-tube units, each with its own separate, massive, outboard, all-tube power supply (connected to each dual-mono main chassis via two umbilical cords). Indeed, in the "Signature" versions of the Aesthetix, both the linestage and the phonostage can be had with *two* separate tubed power supplies—a dedicated supply for each *half* of each dual-mono preamp—making for a six-box preamplifier! In short, you're looking at a lot of tubes, a lot of heavy boxes, a lot of heat, and a lot of money (\$20,000 for the Callisto and Io with a single power supply each; \$24,500 for both with dual power supplies). Moreover, and unlike the ARC and C-J units, there is nothing automated about any of these boxes—no remote control. Though one of the many technical glories of the Aesthetix Callisto is its superb 46-step volume control, you will have to get up off your fat ass and walk over to the preamp to adjust levels, switch inputs, and tailor balance.

Second, though both the Callisto and Io are fully balanced preamplifiers, I cannot recommend either unit as highly as I am now recommending it if you do go with a fully balanced setup. You will get the sound I've described above when the two preamps and your amps are hooked together via Valhalla *single-ended* interconnects with a single length of Silent Source interconnect between turntable and phonostage. Switching to balanced Valhalla (or Purist or Transparent or anything else) makes the Callisto and Io substantially quieter, increases output, improves detail, lowers grain and brightness, enhances bass definition and extension, but so darkens the overall sound and constricts bloom that I would no longer recommend either unit ahead of its competition (though together the Aesthetix pair would be on a par with it).

Third, the Io phonostage is highly susceptible to hum and RF. Unlike the uncannily quiet Lamm LP2 Signature phonostage (review forthcoming)—the only tube phonostage without a transformer I've ever heard that has next to no noise or RF—the Io will buzz, purr, grouse, and faintly tune in radio stations if you (or it) are located in an RF-rich environment, as I (and it) am. Though this noise can be reduced by using well-shielded interconnects and carefully dressing them vis-à-vis power supplies and power cords, I never get a dead quiet background, as I do with the Lamm or the ARC when it is used via its (not-so-hot) step-up transformer. For some, this alone will be a disqualifying factor.

Fourth, the Io is a 12AX7-based phono preamplifier, which in part accounts for its bigness and bloominess (and its light, airy, beautiful treble). It also accounts for some of its susceptibility to hum and for a (typical-for-12AX7) slight, fine, gritty grain and a bit of upper midrange brightness. Though not inordinate (and virtually eliminated if the unit is run balanced), there is this small bit of signature tube-noise in the Io, over and above the RF noise, which does somewhat reduce transparency compared to select solid-state units and to the dead-quiet, ultra-transparent Lamm LP2 Signature.

Fifth, you may have noticed that I haven't talked about the Aesthetix's low bass. That is for three reasons. First, my refer-

