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What Hi Fi Sound and Vision 03 APR 2007

Aesthetix Calypso



£ 3200 5

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Arguably the most natural-sounding preamp for this money

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- **For**

Natural transparent presentation; expressive dynamics; crisp timing; fine build

- **Against**

It's big

It might seem odd to describe a £3200 stereo preamp as something of a bargain, but that's exactly what this Aesthetix Calypso preamp is when used with its matching [Atlas power amp](#) (£5950).

It's not luxurious build or finish that marks it out; you'll have to look to the engineering for clues to this duo's greatness. Take a look inside these units and you'll find neat, carefully laid-out circuit boards with a great deal of attention paid to power supplies and magnetic shielding.

It's in the listening where these amps shine, though. When it comes to transparency and insight, this Aesthetix pairing has more in common with the likes of Audio Research's Reference 3 and Ref 210 pre/power combination than it does with the vast majority of 10-grand rivals.

Remember that the mighty and mightily impressive Audio Research pairing comes in at almost three times the Aesthetix's money, and you realise just how good a sound we're talking about.

Delivers a full dose of passion

As you'd expect, all the basics are spot-on. Tonally, the Calypso/Atlas combo is essentially neutral, with no undue emphasis on any specific part of the frequency range.

More importantly, this amplifier is cohesive, with the bass, midrange and treble dovetailing brilliantly to make a seamless whole.

This pairing is one of the most natural-sounding amplifiers money can buy. It delivers Jill Scott's vocals with a full dose of passion and soul intact: there's agility, an astonishing amount of detail and just the right amount of solidity.

When it comes to rendering voices or acoustic instruments, this two-boxer even makes our reference Bryston pairing sound mechanical.

Surefooted timing and strong dynamics

You can add surefooted timing and strong dynamics to the list of plus points, too. This pre/power is great at conveying the ebb and flow of a large-scale symphony such as Mahler's *10th*, and is similarly skilled at delivering Van Morrison's *Moondance* with all the jauntiness it deserves.

Sonic perfection? Well, the Aesthetix is closer than most, but still open to criticism in some areas. For all its clarity and faithfulness, the duo doesn't quite deliver the full amount of punch in the midrange and treble.

It needs just a little more bite at those frequencies to convey the full amount of aggression that the likes of Eminem or even Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* deserves.

Even taking these shortcomings into account, this Aesthetix pairing is an astonishingly capable piece of hi-fi. In overall terms, it remains the best we've heard at this price level or anywhere near it.

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