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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Aesthetix Rhea Signature phono stage, Calypso Signature line-stage preamp and Atlas Signature hybrid monoblocks

by Roy Gregory

Lest there be any confusion, this review definitely covers the whole enchilada – phono, line and mono amps – but despite that fact it seems to fall naturally into two halves, partly for historical reasons and partly on grounds of value; but I'll get to those later. Way back in Issue 46, I got to review the original (non-Signature) versions of the Aesthetix Rhea phono-stage and Calypso line-stage, descendants of the massive (and massively expensive) Io and Callisto, six large boxes of all-tube extravaganza. I won't wade through the same history all over again, save to point out that Aesthetix main-man Jim White was once a mover and shaker at Theta digital, before his passion for things analogue (and the sheer excellence of its expression) saved his soul from the dark side. The products in front of me here can reasonably be described as third generation and boast quite a bloodline, apparent in their refined lines and equally refined performance.

Again, to précis that original review, the Calypso was cool, controlled but dynamic, where the Rhea positively buzzed with energy and musical enthusiasm. Both were exquisitely constructed with subtle yet distinctive styling and a range of operational versatility and niceties that left most other high-end units looking ill-considered and threadbare.

Their musical and sonic characteristics dovetailed perfectly, delivering a performance that stood comparison with some of the best about, despite their (relatively) modest price and carefully tailored weaknesses. At just under £7,000 the pair at that time, they represented an absolute bargain, one that carefully matched to a suitable system (a caveat that applies equally to the competition) were capable of delivering really impressive musical performance.

Now we have the Signature versions, outwardly identical and boasting upgraded internal components, the burning question as in every such case, is whether the additional performance is worth the extra cost. Nowadays, the standard Rhea and Calypso have crept up in price to £4,100 and £4,600 respectively, while the Signature versions run out at £6,500 a piece. That's a substantial hike in price, for which you get upgrades to critical inter-stage and output coupling capacitors (18 in the Rhea, 12 in

the Calypso) along with adjustable, air-core caps elsewhere in the circuits that allow their performance to be precisely trimmed. The standard rubber feet are also replaced by a set of the excellent (and expensive) HRS Nimbus couplers. Hold the parts in your hand and they might not seem like much, but custom Teflon caps don't come cheap and nor do other, audiophile varieties. Most of that cost can be seen in the parts count – although that doesn't necessarily make it good sonic value.

Fortunately, in this instance – and even given the gulf of elapsed time – there's no mistaking the fact that the Signature models have gone from very good to great. In quantitative terms that's not necessarily a long step, but in qualitative terms it's all too often an insurmountable gulf. What's even more important is that where the standard versions have distinct characters that definitely dovetail, making the whole greater than the sum of the parts and possibly placing limits on their application in isolation, the Signatures are far closer in character and better balanced overall.

Let's start with the line-stage. The standard version always had a potent bass performance, but was leaner and more restrained further up the range, whilst its transparency and lack of false emphasis did nothing to spare the blushes of source components or material. In contrast, the Signature version is a much more balanced performer. Listening to the Gunther Wand Beethoven 7th Symphony (from the superb Esoteric SACD set) the expected, explosive bass dynamics are all present and correct, but now there's more detail, more shape, texture and air around the notes, making the orchestral foundation far more convincing and purposeful. But now those qualities extend across the rest of the range, with a welcome colour and substance to the mids in particular, that makes instruments more immediately identifiable and natural, their contribution more effective. So the gentle, almost lilting combinations of wind and upper strings that characterize the first movement have a restrained poise and tension as they are first introduced, a natural swing and energy once the catchy melodies are established. It's a progression that leads you naturally through the work, reflective both of the consummate composition and performance. It's built on the ability to track the flow and density of the music right across the range and it is key to an involving and convincing performance. Add to that the fact that these improvements in resolution, noise floor and as a result micro dynamic and harmonic resolution, have been achieved without over-egging the spatial presentation and the Calypso Signature delivers a musical performance that is both convincing and compelling.

I recently reviewed the Pure Sound L300 line-stage, rejoicing that at last

I could add a new contender to my list of great line-stages – seemingly the hardest of all audio needs to fulfil. Well, line-stages must be like buses, because the Calypso Signature makes that rarefied list too – and in some style. The standard version is very good; the Signature is in a different league, its lack of musical constriction, character or emphasis allowing it to perform just as a great line-stage should – almost invisibly. Despite the relative brevity of its tenure it has already settled right into my system, trusted and relied upon in a completely unquestioning way. I love the way it just gets on with the job: no fuss, no drama and no drawing attention to itself.

I could almost use the same sonic description to sum up the Rhea Signature; interesting in that in this instance the musical journey has been in the opposite direction. The Signature sounds more detailed and refined than the standard version, but more importantly it also sounds calmer and more in control of the sheer musical energy it injects into proceedings with such apparent ease. Back to the 7th and in this instance the Speakers Corner pressing of the 1962 Karajan/BPO set on DGG (no EQ issues here as the 180g discs are RIAA): With multiple 'tables and cartridges currently in-house and under review, the Beethoven presented the opportunity to compare the Rhea's transparency to both the source and the performance. With Lyra Dorian cartridges mounted in both the VPI Classic and the ClearAudio Innovation, the Rhea clearly demonstrated its strengths. Not only was I able to connect both 'tables simultaneously and flick between them at the touch of a ▶



COUNTING THOSE FEATURES THAT COUNT...

I've already suggested that these Aesthetix units are unusually versatile, but that versatility goes way beyond simple convenience. Each of the products under test incorporates an array of features that contribute directly to its sonic performance and, just as importantly, your chances of actually realizing that performance in your own system.

Let's start at the front with the Rhea. This gives you three, independently configurable MC inputs, with front panel and remote control of not just nine different loads but also eight different gain settings, the latter being an often-overlooked aspect of record replay. Despite being an all-tube circuit, the Rhea can deliver up to 75dB of gain, theoretically allowing it to accept even very low output cartridges. In practice, noise levels at the highest gain settings are intrusive, but having that adjustability allows you to balance the system gain (and as a result, musical dynamics) against noise, critical in a fully optimised record replay set-up. And note the term "system gain"; given the huge differences that exist in line-stage gain characteristics, this adjustability also allows you to trim record replay levels to match those of CD. That means that real record collectors (and who else will fork out for a Rhea?) will be able to run anything up to three different tonearm/cartridge combinations, each optimised and gain matched to the system. Talking of forgotten or overlooked aspects of phono reproduction, Aesthetix also include a cartridge demagnetizing circuit to eliminate the build up of residual fields within the generator assemblies. Nice.

As well as the three sets of single-ended inputs, the Rhea offers two pairs of single-ended and two pairs of balanced outputs – which I have to say seems a little excessive. And if I wanted to get really snippy then I'd ask for either more loading steps below 500 Ohms (you get 250, 125 and 75), or a user definable value. And finally, given three separate inputs, for God's sake make the ground connection more accessible (it's right below the IEC input) and capable of readily accepting three separate grounds; how about a terminal strip?

The Calypso seems almost prosaic in comparison to the Rhea's astonishing level of adjustability – but then it is only a glorified source select and volume control. Even so, the slim-line casework contains a fully differential and dual-mono tube circuit. There are five inputs, two sets of main outputs and a tape output (all either balanced or single-ended), with remote switching for all functions including absolute phase and the Theatre Bypass mode. Volume is set in 88, 1dB steps, using a discrete resistor ladder – and if you are wondering where the volume control is, the display window is also an up/down rocker switch. If you want to

get really picky you could point out the lack of a balance control or individual gain settings for the various inputs, but in my experience those things are rarely used in the real world – and the Rhea takes care of gain matching the record player.

How many facilities can you build into a power amp? Well, how many power amps have five front-panel buttons? Topologically speaking, the Atlas is a fully differential, balanced bridge design, using bipolar solid-state input circuitry and a single 6SN7 tube in its gain stage, to drive 300 Watts of bipolar solid-state output. That's into 8 Ohms; it delivers 600 Watts into 4 Ohms) It also boasts an incredibly complex power supply, with no fewer than three AC transformers (one dedicated to the high-current supply) and multiple chokes. The B+ supply is independently regulated and fed from its out choke input. But once again, Aesthetix goes that extra mile: two sets of inputs (both offering single-ended or balanced connection) allow the user to choose between a direct, full-bandwidth hook-up, or one that incorporates a high-pass filter. The latter allows the amp to be used in systems incorporating separate or integral powered sub-woofers, the roll-off characteristics and inputs being selected via two of those front-panel switches. The other three offer standby, mute and display control; like all the Aesthetix units, the display on the Atlas can be defeated for superior sonic performance. That mute is a nice touch too – especially with 300 Watts on tap. The Atlas amps – and the Rhea/Calypso – were shifted in and out of the system multiple times. Never once did they complain or misbehave; never once did I contrive to screw it up.

From their reassuringly solid yet elegant aluminium casework to their stainless steel shrouded AC circuitry, one look at the Aesthetix products instils a sense of confidence. That confidence is only bolstered by the units' substantial weight, even the line-stage being a grunt inducing lift. That impression of solid engineering, carefully executed extends to the range of facilities on offer. There's nothing superfluous here – just what you need to guarantee the best possible performance, arranged so that you will actually use it. Everything is on the front-panel – and it's duplicated on the remote. For once, here's a range that's inspires musical and operational confidence in equal measure, making these products a joy to use.



▶ switch, I could ensure that both cartridges were operating with identical input settings. However, what is of more interest to the domestic user is the fact that both record players could have been perfectly optimised had they been carrying different cartridges; that and the sheer clarity with which the Rhea laid bare the contrasting sonic characteristics of these two 'tables.

Listening to Karajan on the VPI after time spent with the Wand SACD replayed on the Wadia 581, came as quite a shock. The sheer power and sweeping majesty of Karajan's reading left Wand's previously impressive efforts sounding rather polite and restrained. If the bass dynamics from the digital disc had been impressive, the impact off record was positively explosive, a result of the Rhea's combination of substance and enthusiastically energetic delivery. Of course, these are qualities it shares with the Classic and in truth, as entertaining as the results undoubtedly were, the greater poise and balance of the ClearAudio 'table definitely delivered a more thoughtful and balanced overall performance, whilst still benefiting from the sense of musical substance

THE SWEET SPOT...

The Signature editions of the Aesthetix electronics are a sonic *tour de force* – and compared to the competition they constitute something of a bargain. However that's not the same as saying that they are affordable, or even close to it. At close to £30K there's no escaping the serious cost of ownership involved here. Which brings me to some rather intriguing options...

Of course, there are always the standard versions of the Rhea and Calypso and those should certainly not be overlooked. But for those who can make do with a single, still fully configurable MC input, there also exists the Janus pre-amp. Essentially consisting of a Rhea input and gain stages added to the Calypso circuit and housed in the same box, just with more buttons, it is available in both a standard and Signature version. Okay, so you forego the separate chassis and dedicated power supply that the Rhea gives you, but at £6,400 for the standard version and £9,700 for the Signature, that's a cost/performance compromise that could be very attractive indeed unless you are a really dedicated vinyl listener or you need the three inputs on the Rhea (which amounts to pretty much the same thing).

But even more interesting is the existence of an Atlas stereo amplifier. Using identical casework to the mono-blocs, and offering exactly the same switching and operational options, it delivers a 'mere' 200 Watts into 8 Ohms (400 into 4), more than enough for many a listener's needs. Price? £7,700 – which amounts to more than half the amp for less than half the money! Once again, there are some component changes between the two, but the possibilities are enticing indeed.

Now, I haven't heard the Janus in either version – or the Atlas stereo – but they've got to be worth investigating, especially the power amp. Including either in the equation saves some serious money and brings these products into the price bracket that many people consider the upper reaches of personal expenditure. Much like the (sadly defunct) Hovland RADIA, the Atlas stereo might well prove to be all things to all men, that magical balance of virtues that seems to suit most people, most systems and quite a few pockets. I might just have to hold the mono amps hostage until a stereo heaves into view...

and emphatic dynamics delivered by the phono-stage. Having said that, shifting gear to Gabriel or Black Uhuru's 'Red' swung the balance back towards the VPI. Which brings us to the point; while the Rhea Signature retains the welcome musical enthusiasm and sheer solidity of the standard version, it has succeeded in harnessing it to a better balanced and much more subtle framework, delivering a far more convincing musical foundation.

Changes in cartridge are equally apparent, the benefits of Clearaudio's da Vinci over the Dorian being clear to hear. The greater detail, refinement and transparency of the (much more expensive) cartridge raised the game of the Rhea Signature yet again, underlining the fact that what we are dealing with here is a phono-replay system as a whole. The phono-stage takes what the record player delivers and passes it on, in this case without stripping away any of the essential vitality generated by a decent cartridge turntable combination. What's more, the adjustability means that you'll get the best out of the cartridge, whatever it is. The resulting sense of convincing musical substance is rare indeed in these days of ever higher-definition systems with their tendency to the lean and mean; but what's really impressive is the way that the Rhea Signature lends these positive qualities to the performance, whatever cartridge is delivering the signal – the better the front-end the better the results. Indeed, the combination of the Lyra Titan and the Rhea Signature is a marriage made for music, the micro-dynamic finesse of the former, the weight and body of the latter, adding up to a near perfect balance of virtues.

Like the Calypso, the Signature version of the Rhea offers better bass textures and definition than its standard stable-mate, but the natural advantages of analogue also allow it to show off the increase in air and space, colour and finesse that it provides right up to the highest frequencies. If the line-stage has gained weight and body, the phono-stage has significantly honed an already solid physique. Still leaning to the energetic side of positive, it's unfailingly engaging and entertaining, whilst its more refined texture means that its tearaway tendencies have been tamed to the point where you could safely introduce it to ▶

▶ any well-behaved turntable. It might lack the micro-dynamic resolution, the immediacy of a unit like the Connoisseur, or the capacious soundstage of the ARC, but it has greater energy and macro dynamics than either, establishing it as a musically valid and versatile alternative to these stellar performers. In fact, the one thing lacking to make it the uncontested high-performance phono-stage value champ, is the switchable EQ available on the ARC. We've got the Rhea and the Signature version; might we see a "Reference" version in the future?

Which brings us to the second half of this review and the performance of the Atlas mono-blocs. The pre-amp components from Aesthetix, especially when used in combination, offer a sense of natural balance that prevents their sonic categorization as either tube or solid-state. Instead they succeed in offering the musical and operational strengths of both whilst sounding like neither, which is a neat trick indeed. The power amps attempt the same thing, but travel by a distinctly different route – the potentially poisoned chalice of hybrid design. Excuse my sceptical nature but all too often, amplifiers that combine tubes and solid-state in an attempt to deliver the best of both end up delivering the strengths of neither. The world is not littered with great hybrid designs and my heart generally sinks when another hoves into view. Imagine then my relief, my surprise, my pleasure in discovering that the Atlas, just like its siblings, delivers a musical performance that leans not to silicon nor to vacuum tubes, but is rooted firmly in the music itself. Living proof then, that it's not what you use but how you use it that matters – and, that things aren't quite as simple as they seem.

Let's start with the whole issue of just what does constitute a hybrid design? Traditionally, hybrid amps tended to use tube input and driver stages, coupled to solid-state (usually Mosfet) output devices – thus dispensing with the heat, cost and bulk of multiple power tubes and the output transformers that go with them. Audio Research turned that topology on its head, coupling solid-state front-ends to tube output stages – although the resulting amps didn't represent their finest hour. Now, the Atlas uses solid-state input circuitry, a 6SN7 gain-stage and bi-polar output devices. It seems that the church of hybrid is broad indeed.

However, let's consider line-stages for a second or two. A unit like the Pure Sound L300 is proudly, almost obstinately, pure tube, with every possible power supply and signal function given over to the glowing bottles. But what of units that use solid-state regulation and rectification to feed their tube signal circuitry – like the Rhea and Calypso?

Aren't they, in a very real sense, hybrids too? I would argue that they are, and that this blurring of the boundaries signals a greater understanding of just what valves and solid-state devices can bring to the audio party. Certainly, if the success of these Aesthetix designs is any gauge, the question of what's inside the box is fast becoming secondary to the appreciation of what comes out of it.

The Atlas amps are at once delicately responsive and effortlessly powerful, capable of driving most speakers but doing so without ever sounding muscle-bound. There is a tendency amongst the audio

community, when faced with large, powerful amps, to reach for the smallest, most difficult to drive loudspeaker that they can find, hook them up and advance the volume. The Atlas monos are only too happy to play those games, but they don't really reveal just how good these amps really are. Indeed, one of the happiest combinations in which I used them was with the Focal Stella Utopias – all wide bandwidth, 95dB sensitivity and lightning response. If ever a speaker was going to reveal short-comings in the agility of the Atlas monos, this was it, but they absolutely thrived in each others' company. The bottom-end of the Aesthetix mono-blocs is just as solid and stable as the other units in the range, allowing musical dynamics and expression the firm footing they need to grow and breathe with natural life and presence.

If pushed to it, I'd have to say that the amps lean ever so slightly to the dryer side of the tonal palette, although that's through the mid rather than the lower frequencies, and by just about the same degree that the line and phono-stage pairing favours the romantic. Used with the Connoisseurs up front, the Atlas monos fed avidly on the textural and micro-dynamic niceties they were delivered, showing no shortcomings when it comes to subtlety and finesse. In fact, it's only when you put them up against amps like the Bernings that you notice a subtle grain to their textures and limitations in transparency. There is also, in absolute terms (though not in comparison to any but the very best of the competition) a subtle but consistent thickening of the bass frequencies. Does that contradict my earlier



observation? Yes and no: on the one hand, you'll hear it in comparison to an amp like the Quadrature Z (which knows no peer in this regard, at least as far as I'm aware); on the other, in general you won't notice it. What you will notice, and love, are the weight, substance and musical momentum that results, and the seamless and above all, natural way in which it underpins the musical performance. Likewise, the ultimate in acoustic definition, the space in which a recording is made, is achieved through greater bass transparency and definition – but then I'm not in the habit of perching atop a mike tree or dangling on wires from the concert hall's ceiling. The Atlas amps (in common with the other Signature units) deliver a just off pinpoint sense of image specificity which has far more to do with the sense of orchestral spread that I hear live from my generally preferred rows (F or G).

Like the line-stage and phono-stage, the real ability of the Atlas monos lies in their ability to step aside and stand behind the music. Listen for them – if you must – and you can identify their subtle influence on the music's passage. But they make it awfully easy to forget about them altogether. If the signal demands then they respond, but even under extreme duress (did I mention the way they encourage the use of "realistic" levels) their grace and unburstable enthusiasm delivers the music devoid of harshness or strain. Used as a set, the results are even more beguiling, making listening an immersive and musically compelling, at times almost propulsive, experience. I'm not convinced that they excel in any single musical respect, save their sense of musical energy and purpose, but they are oh so close in so many ways that perhaps it should be no surprise that as a system they come so close to the hi-fi and musical ideal of genuinely being all things to all men. After all – what's not to like?

When I reviewed the original Calypso and Rhea I alluded to their clever bass voicing, the way the subtle tailoring in the mid-bass in particular, fed their potent musical performance. In these three Signature designs that strength has been further refined, retaining the power but reducing and better integrating the tendency to the point where it is all but aurally invisible – yet loses none of its musical impact. Their musical presentation has a substantial and holistic quality, an evenness of energy from bottom to top, an absence of steps, dips or suck-outs that draw attention to themselves. It arrives as a whole and you hear it as a whole and that's what makes it such a convincing and immersive experience. The result is a range of electronics that should have the more established and certainly better known competition looking to their laurels.

A wise woman once wrote that, "There is a world of difference between truth and facts. Facts can obscure truth." I know just what she meant. Listen to these Aesthetix electronics as a set and yes, there are undoubtedly electronics (though not many) that are more accurate to the facts of a performance. However you'll travel a long way to find amplifiers that deliver a greater sense of the music's truth. I've

spent many happy hours listening to these Aesthetix Signature electronics – and mostly just for the pleasure. I would happily spend many more. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rhea Signature Phono Stage

Tube Complement: 4x 12AX7LP, 4x 12AX7, 2x 6922

Inputs: 3x single-ended, independently configurable

Gain: Switchable, 7 values from 38dB to 75dB

Input Impedance: 47k, 10000, 5000, 2500, 1000, 500, 250, 125 or 75 Ohms

Phono Equalization: RIAA

Outputs: 2prs single-ended, 2prs balanced

Output Impedance: 1 kOhms (single-ended)
600 Ohms (balanced)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 454 x 95.25 x 457.2mm

Shipping Weight: 18kg

Calypso Signature Line Stage Preamp

Tube Complement: 2x 12AX7, 2x 6922

Inputs: 5x line-level – single-ended RCA or balanced XLR

1x tape – single-ended RCA or balanced XLR

Input Impedance: 40 kOhms (s-e), 80 kOhms (balanced)

Outputs: 2x single-ended RCA/phono

2x balanced XLR

1x tape – single-ended RCA or balanced XLR

Output Impedance: 1 kOhms (s-e), 600 Ohms (balanced)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 454 x 95.25 x 457.2mm

Shipping Weight: 18kg

Atlas Signature Mono Power Amp

Type: Hybrid (tube input) mono power amplifier

Tube Complement: 2x 6SN7

Inputs: 1x single-ended RCA, 1x balanced XLR

Input Impedance: 470 kOhms

Input Sensitivity: 60 mV (1 Watt), 3.1V (full power)

Rated Output: 300 Watts/8 Ohms, 600 Watts/4 Ohms

Output Connections: 1 set Cardas type binding post

Dimensions (WxHxD): 457 x 205 x 482.6mm

Shipping Weight: 31.8kg

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