

# Aesthetix Callisto Signature Linestage and Io Signature Phonostage Preamps

Jonathan Valin

**D**esigner 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.

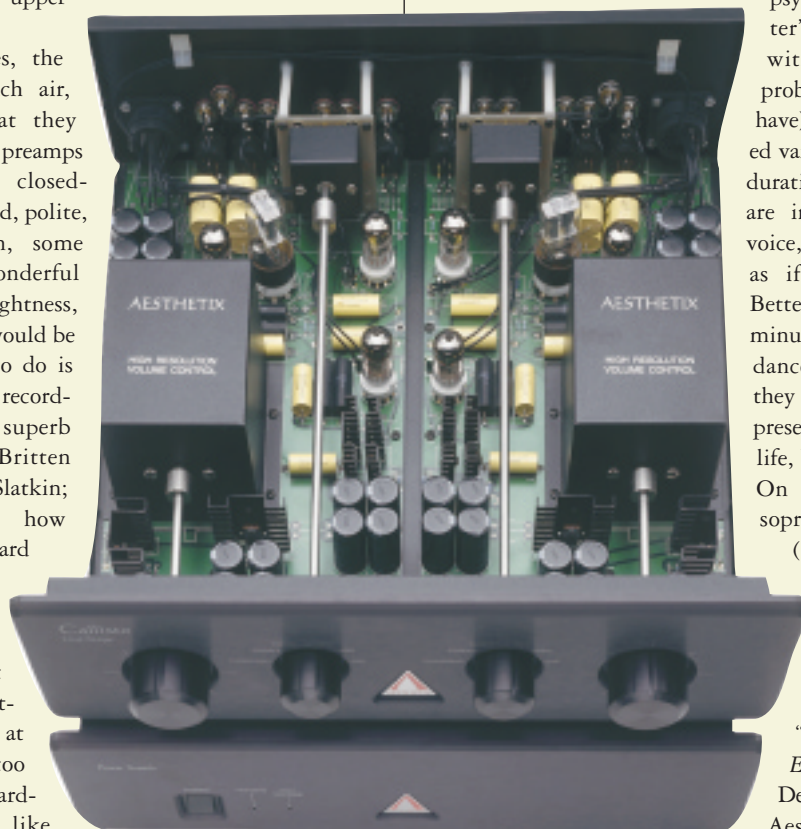
In the top octaves, the Aesthetix add so much air, light, and bloom that they make these other great preamps sound closed-in and closed-down—overly controlled, polite, hi-fi-ish. Once again, some might hear this wonderful influx of energy as brightness, but, once again, some would be wrong. All you have 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



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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.

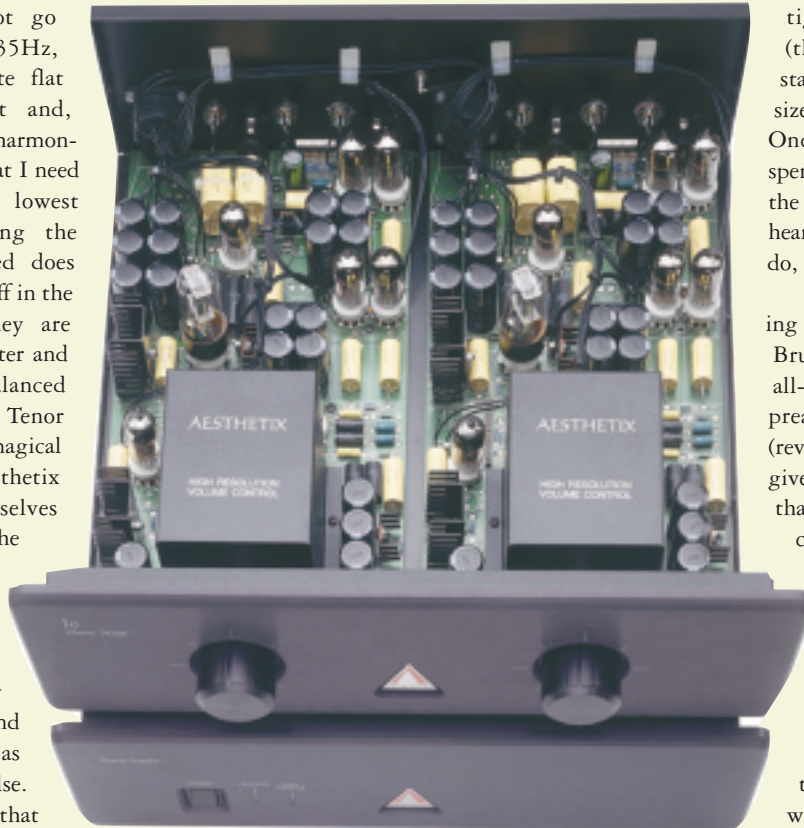
Fourth, the Io is a 12AX7-based phono preamplifier, which in part accounts for its bigness and bloominess (and its light, airy, beautiful treble). It also accounts for some of its susceptibility to hum and for a (typical-for-12AX7) slight, fine, gritty grain and a bit of upper midrange brightness. Though 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-

ence speakers do not go down much below 35Hz, though they are quite flat down to that point and, because of their rich harmonics, usually tell me what I need to know about the lowest octaves. Second, using the Aesthetix single-ended does involve a slight trade-off in the mid-to-low bass. They are more extended and faster and better defined in balanced mode. Thirdly, the Tenor 75Wp amplifiers—a magical combo with the Aesthetix preamps—are themselves just a bit loose in the bottommost octaves. None of this means that I find the Aesthetix problematic in the mid-to-low bass; they are as full and rich and bloomy there as they are everywhere else. But I wouldn't say that they are the equals of the Lamm L2/LP2 Signature or the Krell KPS 25sc in definition or extension in these octaves.

Sixth, I am reviewing and recommending the Aesthetix duo primarily as a phono preamplifier in their single-power-supply-per-preamp configuration. However, as a linestage-only preamplifier, the Callisto is almost as big, spacious, and bloomy as it is with LPs. At the same time, its beguiling "tubey-ness" is more marked with digital media, most obviously in the bass but, really, everywhere. Though I like the Callisto's bigger, warmer, breathier, airier, more laidback presentation on CD, I can see where some would prefer the lower noise floor, tighter image focus, crisper detailing, less recessed midband, and enhanced transient definition of a solid-state preamp or a tube/solid-state hybrid.


Seventh, as noted, for an extra \$4500 (\$2250 per unit) you can add two more outboard power supplies—one each for the Callisto and the Io—to the two that come with the "standard" Signature preamps. Though you needn't spend the extra \$4500 to get the sound I described above, which is that of the four-box configuration, you will get more of almost everything I described with the six-box version—and then some. In particular, you will hear a fineness and delicacy of detail that is even more breathtakingly realistic, a dynamic ease and power that the four-box unit doesn't quite achieve, considerably more articulate, more controlled, and deeper-reaching bass, near-Lamm-level transparency, somewhat lower noise, somewhat



tighter image focus (though without a substantial reduction in image size), and much less grain. Once again, you needn't spend the extra money to get the best sound you've ever heard; it's just that, if you do, the best gets better.

Eighth, as I was finishing this review, I received Bruce Wulach's \$25,000 all-tube, two-box linestage preamp, The Messenger (review forthcoming), and it gives the Callisto, a product that I did not think had competition, competition. I'm not at all certain at this very early stage whether the Messenger, whose companion phonostage I have not yet auditioned, is the equal of the Aesthetix Callisto/Io with LPs, but fed by the Lamm LP2 Signature

phonostage—a pairing, I am compelled to note, that will cost you \$12,000 more than the four-box Aesthetix!—it is in the running, in what is thus far a high-stakes two-horse race. Interestingly, the two preamps do not sound exactly alike, though they share the virtues of dynamic bloom, air, and extremely fine resolution of low-level detail.

As of this writing, the Aesthetix are the best preamps I've heard—and by a considerable margin. Indeed, the Callisto and Io are, given the caveats I've enumerated, landmark designs, like the ARC SP3a-1 or SP10 MkII—preamps that open a new horizon line, particularly with LPs. To put this differently, as my friend and former *Fi* contributor Steve Sullivan did when he heard the Aesthetix in my system for the first time, "It's like I've never truly heard stereo before." That about covers it. 

#### DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

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Price: Callisto Signature, \$11,000 (second power supply,

\$2250); Io Signature, \$9000 (second power supply, \$2250)

## MANUFACTURER COMMENTS

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### **Aesthetix Io and Callisto**

Editor,

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Mr. Valin for his incredibly thorough review. His consideration of the Io and Callisto as “landmark designs” like the ARC SP10 MkII or SP3A-1 was the most poignant for me, as I have long been a fan of those legendary designs.

The Io and Callisto were originally designed in 1994. The circuit design remains identical to this day, although huge sonic improvements have been attained in the Signature versions through carefully selected capacitor, resistor, and wire upgrades. The earlier versions have been reviewed in TAS, and received awards and recommendations; the Signature versions reviewed are truly improved. Upgrades to earlier versions are available, with no difference between a newly manufactured one and one that has been upgraded. We can also add a second power supply to any version of the Io or Callisto.

The Io and Callisto are not for every consumer, because of their size and price. We have endeavored to bring their performance to a more accessible level with our new Saturn Series. Consisting of the Rhea phono, Calypso line and Janus all-in-one preamps, these are single chassis components that are direct descendents of the Io and Callisto. They use fewer tubes, solid-state discrete regulation, full remote control (even phono gain and loading), consume less power, and produce less heat. Their cost is roughly half of the Io and Callisto.

Mr. Valin’s comment about “having to get off one’s fat ass” to adjust the Callisto is true. I have been working on a motorized remote control system for the Callisto that will adjust volume, balance, phase and allow direct muting. It should be available by fall. Lastly, while Mr. Valin preferred single-ended connections in his system, it should be understood that a preference for either is highly system dependent.

Jim White, Aesthetix

### **Plinius SA102 Integrated Amplifier**

Editor,

Further to our investigations of the SA102 reviewed by Wayne Garcia we have found that some incorrect resistor values were inserted into pre-driver section in both channels of the amplifier.

Under certain circumstances this would cause a small burst of high-frequency oscillation that may have been the smearing that Wayne reported. Although this is of a very low level it is conceivable that this could be detected in a high-resolution system. Our factory records showed that five SA102s manufactured on that day were affected and all were delivered to the U.S. Our U.S. Distributor, Advanced Audio, has located and modified these amplifiers and our factory test routine has been updated to prevent this happening in the future.

We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience and hope that another look at the SA102 by TAS will show its true capabilities.

Peter Thomson

### **Spendor S3/5se Loudspeaker**

Dear Editor:

There was always something magical about the sound of the Spendor S3/5 mini-monitor and its predecessor, the legendary LS3/5a. When we designed the new S3/5se, we were determined not to lose the captivating sound that has always characterized these ‘BBC inspired’ reference class loudspeakers. We also wanted to demonstrate that under its new ownership Spendor is in safe and caring hands. So we were very pleased to read your accurate review of the Spendor S3/5se loudspeaker in which Paul Seydor has examined its full capabilities with amplifiers ranging from normal to exotic. We were delighted that Paul felt able to assure your readers that “Spendor is still Spendor.”

Philip Swift

Managing Director, Spendor Audio Systems Ltd

### **Sugden A21a Integrated Amplifier**

Editor:

We’d like to focus on three elements we found particularly noteworthy in Neil Gader’s thoughtful review.

1. Temptation. Neil experienced a phenomenon common among listeners of the Sugden A21a—the temptation to turn up the volume to hear even more of the natural presentation our Class A “full-throttle approach” can offer, until the amp runs out of steam as all amps eventually do. Other types of designs of higher power rating can exhibit more audible distortion well before the onset of clipping. The more subtle dimensionality and ambience Neil notes also reflect the absence of distortion and noise in the A21a. For these reasons you may just end up listening to it more comfortably for longer sessions. One thing the A21a will not sustain is head-banging at a rave. As much as we’d like it to happen, it can’t be done. Sorry, mate!

2. Caveat. “Careful system-matching is a must rather than an option.” However, this may be as much a matter of the inherent quality of the speaker design itself as its efficiency. NG writes “at lower volumes it sounded awfully sweet [by implication microdynamic] on the [inefficient] ATC SCM20SL.” This is largely due to our Class A design which offers splendid late-night/apartment listening—rare among amp designs with lower current.

3. Philosophy. J. E. Sugden and Co. indeed follows the adage NG invokes: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” A pioneering and classic design handmade in West Yorkshire by a family-owned company still speaks strong value and validity 30 years on—even if the A21a profile is retro and the siren call of its bells and whistles is inaudible. What better hi-fi investment and experience can one offer?

George Stanwick

Stanalogue Audio Imports

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### Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy System 7

Editor:

Our thanks to Robert Harley for his concise, yet insightful assessment of the Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy System 7. We especially appreciated Mr. Harley's complete understanding of the performance capabilities of the system in spite of his relative lack of prior in-depth experience with our products. In some respects, this is the situation experienced by many new purchasers of our products, so Mr. Harley's comments are quite relevant to the prospective consumer. Two aspects of the review were particularly gratifying to me, personally.

The first is the clean, unambiguous, and efficient language of the text. The review lucidly presented the merits of the WP-7 and the reviewer's response to them. Refreshingly absent were any hints of self-aggrandizing elitism (which is offensive to the target party and boring to everyone else) or sophomoric specious conjecture. Every detail was well researched and accurately portrayed.

The second satisfying aspect was the

realization that when you are investing in *any* high-end work of industrial art, you are acquiring more than the hardware. Parts of the "product" include elements as practical as customer service and as profound as the depth of the *quality of execution* of the concepts embodied in the hardware. Those elements should be part of every high-end product assessment as they were so clearly in this fine review of our Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy System 7!

David Wilson

Wilson Audio Specialties

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### Plinius

Editor: