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## Aesthetix Rhea and Rhea Signature Phono Stages

Since its inception, in 1993, Aesthetix Audio Corporation has been known for its tubed phono stages. Specifically, the all-tubed Jupiter Io (named for the innermost of that planet's moons) has made a claim as the phono-stage champion for over 15 years, especially in its most extreme version, the Total Eclipse with dual power supply (\$6500-\$23,000 USD, depending on configuration). The Io's little brother, the Saturn Rhea, joined the fray in 2002, offering single-box elegance and operational efficiencies. Initially hailed as an affordable giant-killer, the standard Rhea (\$4000) was recently joined by a hot-rodded variant, the Rhea Signature (\$7000). (Rhea, Saturn's largest airless moon, is named for "the mother of the gods" of ancient Greek mythology.) With two Rheas now orbiting Saturn, a few questions arise. Has the standard Rhea held its own over the past seven years? Do the performance gains of the Signature justify the increased scratch? Like an astronomer, I felt compelled to seek answers from the heavens.

### It's hip to be square

To protect the Rhea from even the most haphazard of delivery personnel, it arrives sheathed in thick poly wrap and nestled between the upper and lower halves of a closed-cell foam encapsulation. Its ten tubes are individually packed in numbered boxes, themselves constrained in bubble-wrap in two groups of five (one set each for the left and right channels). The top cover is secured by a hook-and-loop fastener (think Velcro) exploited by several high-end companies for its antiresonant qualities, and is easy to remove and reattach. The manual is not only well written and complete, but a diagram and step-by-step instructions make tube insertion a snap. Inserting those tubes, I saw the true beauty of the layout of the Rhea's dual-mono design. The interior's discrete and identical left and right channels are separated by a stainless-steel channel that shields the AC wires from the sensitive audio circuitry as they travel from the enclosed rear receptacle to the voltage transformer of the choke-input power-supply. But once the tubes had been inserted and the interior admired, it was time to replace the cover and settle the Rhea into the equipment rack.

The standard Rhea is a full-sized component that shares the same chassis as its Saturn-series stablemates, the Calypso line stage and the Janus full-featured preamplifier. It weighs more than 30 pounds and, at 18"W x 4 3/8"H x 17 5/8"D, is nearly square -- it used up most of the depth of my rack. The black, brushed, and anodized aluminum of the chassis and side panels is complemented by a front panel available in silver or black. Very elegant. The pushbuttons, each a reproduction of the Aesthetix logo, hint at the Rhea's expansive feature set.

Flexibility is a key theme. Enabling a setup comprising multiple turntables and/or tonearms are three separate single-ended (RCA) inputs, each of which can be set for a different gain and loading. Eight gain settings from 38 to 75dB are selectable, along with nine different load options ranging from 75 ohms to 47k ohms. The front-panel buttons for Input, Mute, Gain, Loading, Demagnetization, and Standby are duplicated on the remote control, making cartridge optimization from the listening position more than just a convenience. Each channel has two sets of XLR and two sets of RCA outputs. A heavy-gauge IEC power cord is included, but owners are free to use their preferred audiophile-approved AC cord. Also included is a built-in moving-coil demagnetizer -- a nice touch, and unique in my experience.





## System

I auditioned the Rhea exclusively in my main rig: Vandersteen 5A loudspeakers, Ayre Acoustics KX-R line-stage preamplifier, Ayre MX-R monoblock power amplifiers, and a VPI Industries Scout turntable with a Benz Micro L2 cartridge feeding the Rhea or my reference Ayre P5-xe solid-state phono preamp. Wiring consisted of Ayre Signature interconnects and externally biwired speaker cables, along with Cardas Golden Reference AC cords and Ayre L-5xe passive power conditioners. The MX-R monoblocks, sitting atop custom Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 platforms, reside next to the speakers to minimize the speaker-cable length to 1m. All my other equipment is supported by a custom Billy Bags rack, the turntable resting on another HRS M3 platform.

## A toe-tapping extravaganza

It didn't take long to warm to the Aesthetix Rhea. With familiar LPs playing and remote control in hand, I quickly dialed in my Benz Micro cartridge to perfection (2500 ohms loading and 56dB of gain worked best). Although Aesthetix cautions against forming any conclusions until at least 100 hours of break-in have elapsed, the Rhea made a compelling case for itself straight away. I couldn't help but have a smile on my face and a swing in my step as I pulled record after record from the shelf. There was such an infectious, musical joy at work in the Rhea that I logged those first 100 hours in mere weeks.

Yearning for some bluegrass fun, I fired up *So Long So Wrong*, by Alison Krauss and Union Station (Rounder/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL 2-276). The high-speed duel between banjo and mandolin in "Little Liza Jane" had my heart racing and my toes tapping. The Rhea kept up with the frenetic fretwork; its sorting of out the dynamic interplay of the distinct instruments made it clear why "Little Liza Jane" won the 1998 Grammy for Best Country Instrumental Performance.

For a more visceral test, I turned to the title track of Metallica's *Master of Puppets* (Warner Bros. 470908-1). Between Cliff Burton's bass and Lars Ulrich's percussion, this track -- often cited as the greatest heavy-metal song of all time -- is a torture test for any system, but the Rhea was not fazed. Certainly the 45rpm, 180gm treatment Warner Bros. has lavished on this album deserves some of the credit, but I found myself cueing up the song three times in a row.

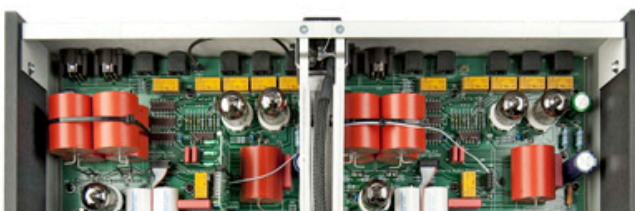
From the fast and the furious, my listening sessions took a more contemplative turn, with Frank Sinatra's *Only the Lonely* (Capitol/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL 1-326) then hitting the VPI 'table. The melancholy was so palpable that by the end of the album's final song, "One for My Baby (And One More for the Road)," I felt I needed a drink. The Rhea showed not only what a great album and a great pressing this edition of *Only the Lonely* is, but also highlighted the singularity of Sinatra's timing, voice, and expressiveness.

During the several weeks the Rhea was out of my system being upgraded to Rhea Signature status, I had time to reflect on comparisons with my Ayre P-5xe, itself a tremendous performer and a bargain at only \$2500. Being a solid-state component, the Ayre requires zero attention -- it's simply "on" and ready to go at all times. By contrast, the Aesthetix manual recommends placing the Rhea in Standby mode whenever it's not in active use, instructions I followed to a T. In Standby, the Rhea powers everything but the tubes themselves, which keeps startup time to a mere 30 seconds. Nevertheless, this extra step is a slight inconvenience, and a reminder that operational differences between tubed and solid-state gear are genuine.

Also, the basic Rhea lacks the Ayre P-5xe's jet-black noise floor. Although never an issue while music was playing, the noise floor was noticeable in the silences between tracks, sides, and albums. Nor did the Rhea possess the Ayre's unflappable neutrality throughout the audioband. That's not to say the Rhea was adding those euphonic colorations usually attributed to tubes. Rather, it seemed to introduce a slow rolloff in the top octave or two -- certainly expected, with its cascade of four all-tube gain stages -- while the lowest bass, although authoritative, took on a very slight bloom. Those quibbles aside, the fact remained that, during its absence, I truly missed the Rhea's palpable musicality and ability to engage me. The countdown to the arrival of the Rhea Signature was excruciating.

## What's in a Signature?

At \$7000, the Signature is almost twice the price of the basic Rhea, but the only external differences are a set of custom HRS Nimbus Couplers replacing the stock feet on the chassis's bottom, and a subtly stenciled "Signature" on the lens of the display. The HRS devices are certainly effective at damping the chassis, but their high-grip design -- almost like suction cups -- require that you be prepared to *lower* rather than slide the Signature into position on its shelf.



But the Signature is one book you can't judge by its cover. Inside, the differences from the standard Rhea are legion -- designer Jim White simply couldn't let the mod shops have *all* the fun with his baby. The 2uF coupling capacitor between the first and second gain stages of each channel is traded for a 4uF Dynamicap by Peter Moncrief, while custom interstage hybrid coupling capacitors of Teflon replace the polypropylene units between the second and third and the third and fourth gain stages, for a total of four per channel (given the balanced nature of the circuitry from the second gain stage onward). Similarly, four 4uF Dynamicaps per channel replace the 2uF output coupling capacitors. Unlike the standard caps, which look like M-80s, the new capacitors resemble bundles of miniature oilcans. Furthermore, highly specialized, adjustable air-core capacitors (primarily employed in the radio-frequency realm) are installed and adjusted to fine-tune the circuit, calibrating each channel to a rigid standard (and to each other) to optimize the high-frequency response under the RIAA curve. According to Aesthetix, the collective effects of these superior parts are, primarily, increases in resolution and dynamics and a reduction in grain. But seeing where the extra money was spent is one thing; hearing its effects is another.



### The black is back

Immediately following power-up, and before I'd dropped the needle on the first record, the Rhea Signature showed its hand with a jet-black background every bit as quiet as the Ayre P-5xe's. In fact, I did a double-take to confirm that I hadn't inadvertently activated the Mute button -- I hadn't. This was undoubtedly the cumulative effect of the HRS couplers, the upgraded capacitors, and the Signature's ability to be dialed in, and I was confident that this first observation was a harbinger of things to come.

I revisited *Master of Puppets* to test whether the Signature could pull the strings of this metal masterpiece's rhythm, pace, and drive. The increase in low-end control was complete. The interweaving of complex lines cut through the maelstrom just as does James Hetfield's barked chorus of "Master, master." Returning to Sinatra's passages of lament, I felt as if I were that lonely guy shrouded by cigarette smoke, downing yet another cocktail to dull the pain of heartbreak.

As the records spun, a clear increase in resolution and dynamic/microdynamic cues unfolded, this time with no identifiable grain or noise to obscure or distract. The Rhea Signature built on the strengths of its namesake while minimizing or even eliminating the few compromises evident in the original. Without any remaining evidence of deviation from neutrality, the Signature's suitability as a reviewer's tool was obvious during the nuanced leadership of John Coltrane on "All or Nothing At All," from *Ballads* (Impulse!/ORG ORG 012). A certain solitude lurked beneath the notes as the melody was captured and conveyed with aplomb.

Thankfully, the fun quotient and emotional force evident in the sound of the standard Rhea was not diminished but enhanced in the Signature. The conveyance of the intimate, personal, raw, often angry emotions of Liz Phair was manifest throughout her uncompromising debut album, *Exile in Guyville* (ATO 21627). A deft mix of the excitement of independence and the malaise, disillusionment, resentment, and uncertainty of youth, this album has been a favorite of mine since its release in 1993 -- but its 15th-anniversary reissue on 180gm vinyl made me want to toss my well-worn CD original.

Objectively, the standard hi-fi qualities of soundstage, timbre, and timing were all present, as were resolution, drive, and continuousness. Yet to focus on these individual attributes is to miss the point of the Rhea Signature -- a component that demands a holistic realization of music reproduction. A perfect example of the Signature's ability to convey the engrossing nature of the sublime was evident when I spun Sonny Rollins' *Way Out West* (OJC/Stereo Records S7017). Never before had I been so vividly transported to the dusty streets of the Old West when listening to "I'm an Old Cow Hand."

The differences among the Ayre P-5xe, the Rhea, and the Rhea Signature may best be explained via a film analogy. Music through the P-5xe is akin to watching a digital projection of a movie: everything is technically correct and razor-sharp, and the 100th showing is exactly the same as the first. Listening through the standard Rhea was like watching a 35mm print on opening night: there might have been a bit of film grain, but the organic, continuous nature of the film could be more engrossing. The Rhea Signature was more like a 70mm "show print" projected on a CinemaScope screen: film grain was eliminated, the depth of information was increased, and the viewing experience was enveloping. Perhaps the *10 Total Eclipse* would be the equivalent of an IMAX showing.

### Planets, moons, and poetry

Contemplating the nature of the Aesthetix Rhea, and especially that of the Rhea Signature, led me to revisit a passage from Daniel Dreiberg's essay "Blood from the Shoulder of Pallas," the following partial adaptation of which captures the essence of my conclusions (the essay was actually written by Alan Moore, who attributes it to Dreiberg, aka Night Owl, as the same appears at the end of chapter VII of Moore's *Watchmen*):

*Is it possible, I wonder, to study a component so closely, to observe and catalogue its peculiarities in such minute detail, that an understanding of its true character evaporates? Is it possible that while fastidiously scrutinizing its harmonic distortions or the depth of its soundstage, we somehow lose sight of its poetry? That in our pedestrian descriptions of a polished or anodized visage, we forfeit a glimpse of living canvases, cascades of carefully toned allegros and andantes that would shame Monk, misty explosions of symphonic color to rival Beethoven? I believe that we do. I believe that in approaching our subject with the sensibilities of statisticians and dissectionists, we distance ourselves increasingly from the marvelous and spell-binding planet of imagination whose gravity drew us to our explorations in the first place.*

*This is not to say that we should cease to establish facts and to verify our information, but merely to suggest that unless those facts can*

*be imbued with the flash of poetic insight, then they remain dull gems; semiprecious stones scarcely worth the collecting.*

Ultimately, the essence of the Rheas proved to be their ability to capture the gestalt of the music being played -- a communication of the wholeness of the performance with its emotional impact intact. These phono stages are more than just the sums of their parts, more than their features and flexibility, more than the soundstages they throw, their grip on timing, their illumination of individual players and instruments and the spaces between them.

The standard Rhea deserves the accolades it has received over the years, and continues to prove a value leader at \$4000. That it now marks the beginning of an upgrade path makes it a fantastic musical investment. Which takes us to the Rhea Signature, shining brighter than Saturn itself on a clear night. The Rhea Signature has elevated my system's ability to transfix and transport me, and is well worth the \$3000 surcharge, if you can swing it. I have no need to consult an astrologer to know the future. It is here: The Rhea Signature has become my reference system's new phono preamplifier.

. . . Peter Roth

[peter@ultraaudio.com](mailto:peter@ultraaudio.com)

**Aesthetix Rhea Phono Stage**

**Price: \$4000 USD.**

**Aesthetix Rhea Signature Phono Stage**

**Price: \$7000 USD.**

**Warranty (both): Three years parts and labor.**

Aesthetix  
5144 N. Commerce Ave., Suite A  
Moorpark, California 93021  
Phone: (805) 529-9901

Website: [www.aesthetix.net](http://www.aesthetix.net)

American distributor:  
Musical Surroundings  
5662 Shattuck Ave.  
Oakland, CA 94609  
Phone: (510) 547-5006  
Fax: (510) 547-5009

Website: [www.musicalsurrroundings.com](http://www.musicalsurrroundings.com)

Canadian distributor:  
Tri-Cell Enterprises  
176 Monsheen Dr.  
Woodbridge, Ontario  
Phone: (800) 263-8151, 905-265-7870, 905-265-7869  
Fax: (905) 265-7868

Website: [www.tricell-ent.com](http://www.tricell-ent.com)