

Aesthetix Io Signature phono stage

Imaging and Soundstaging

Most of you know this isn't the most important thing to me, but I do expect any good system to let the speakers disappear, and most importantly, for the soundstage to never distract from the enjoyment of the music. You know I had rather talk about scale, depth, and space than pinpoint imaging or how exciting it is to hear a voice or an instrument coming from a foot or two outside the speakers. The reason for this is that when I go to hear live music, which I do often, I seldom hear a soundstage or pinpoint imaging.

Still, the soundstage and imaging of the Aesthetix was everything I have come to expect from truly musical tube preamplifiers. It was holistic, had great scale, and a solid presentation. It did all this without any of that unnatural floating instruments and voices in space like some abstract work of art. Not that I don't like abstract art, I even own a couple, but I find that kind of imaging kind of distracting when listening to music. Overall, the soundstaging was superb, with great depth, width, and even a nice vertical presentation. Likewise, the imaging was superb in my book; it had a nice cushion of air around the instruments, but still the imaging was very solid without ever having that phasey sound.

Dynamics, Micro-dynamics, and Flow

The Io Sig MkII has superb dynamics, as well as great micro-dynamics. Both of these are qualities that greatly allow you to be emotionally involved with the music. Another important part of emotionally involving music is the flow factor. Along with dynamics and micro-dynamics you need to have rhythmic bass that is well controlled to have great musical flow. The Io Sig Mk II was very good in this area, but this is one area that it was just a hair behind the Shindo preamps.



Specific Examples

I love bass, cello, and violin music. I listened to three Gary Karr albums and in every case, the Io plays cello with warmth and life without a hint of bass hangover or even the slightest amount of boomy-ness. Violins were sweet and extended easily into the upper registries without ever seeming bright or strident. It did seem very intense and sometimes even aggressive, as it should on this piece. In fact the pace and timing was just uncanny.

The emotions you experience as the bow is slowly pulled across the strings are so moving I had to write this after it was over. You can hear layers and textures of the tones of the strings as you hear the differences they each make as the bow passes over them.

Ella and Louis is one of my favorite albums. On cut 2, 'Isn't This a Lovely Day,' the Io lets us hear the beauty and lushness of Ella and the gravelly power of Satchmo. The voices are very prominent, and the horn seems a little too polite, but the overall experience is to just want to listen. I don't want to overstate the case, but I sat down to listen to two cuts and ended up listening to the whole album. Then I got up and put on Billie Holiday, not for reviewing, but just because I wanted to hear her on this set up.

Elvis is Back has Elvis' version of 'Fever' on it. This cut will tell you if a system is all about slam and tightness or if it's about emotion, music, and feeling what the musicians and singer are trying to convey. It can be about both. I discovered with the Io in my system it came closest to having both I have achieved so far in my room. It also still lets you hear the decay, the reverb, and how close Elvis is to the mic.

Listening with NOS Tubes

As good as this phono preamp is, and it is one of the very best, I still couldn't resist Garth's offer to hear it with NOS tubes. He called one day near the end of the review and said he had purchased a complete set, and if I would I like to have them shipped directly to me. Like I said, I couldn't resist. Man what a set of NOS tubes they were. There were three different matched quads of 12AX7s. The first was a quad of Telefunken small shield, round rib 12AX7s, the second quad was Philips Miniwatt 12AX7s, and the last quad was round getter, rib plate Mullard 12AX7s . The 6922s were Philip Gold Pins, and the 6sN7 GTBs were Raytheon Short Bottle tubes. Like I said, a very nice group of NOS Tubes.

So what do the NOS tubes do for the sound? Well that depends on how you use them, but my favorite was with the Telefukens in the first stage, and the Mullards in the second stage, and then the Miniwatts in the last stage. This produced the most transparent sound and a top-end with nice detail and air, but no tendency toward edginess.

Overall the preamp had a more beautiful top-end, a more transparent and more organic sounding midrange, and more tuneful bass with the NOS tubes, but I would not want anyone to think they have to spend the kind of money these tubes cost to enjoy this wonderful preamp. These tubes could come later or not at all and you will

still have one of the very best phono preamps available at any price.

A Few Words of Caution

None of these have to do with the sound, but I do have a few words of caution to anyone thinking about purchasing this state-of-the-art phono stage. First, like a great sports car the Io Sig MkII is not for the casual user. This is an all out attempt at making the very best, and sound was never compromised for convenience. There is the assumption that the buyer of a phono stage at this price point is capable of reading and following instructions. Second, it's big, very heavy, and takes up a lot of room. Not only does it take up a lot of room, it also can't just be placed anywhere you happen to plop it down. I got hum when I set it too close to its own power supply or my power amp. Third, even though I didn't have any problems, everyone I talked to about the Io Sig MkII warned me to be careful that it was fully powered down before changing anything, and it takes nearly twenty minutes to power down. I heeded these warnings and had no problems at all. Lastly, it uses lots of tubes and if you want to put the kind of NOS tubes in it that were supplied to me, it will cost a small fortune. Still, as I have already said this is not necessary for the Io to sound incredible.

Now having given those few warnings, let me say for those of you who value the very best of tubes combined with the very best of solid-state, it will surely be worth the effort. For you will be rewarded with a truly realistic and musical experience.

Conclusion

The Io Sig MkII is a very special product. It has as much and as natural-sounding air than I have ever heard. The same is true of its bloom and harmonic correctness. When it comes to dynamics, it's the best I've ever heard. The Io Sig MkII does all this while adding very little of its own sound to the music. I have my doubt that there is anything out there that could really better this, but I'm always game to try to find it and tell you about it.