

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Integrated hybrid amplifier. Rated at 150W/8ohm
Made by: Aesthetix Audio, California, USA
Supplied by: StoneAudio UK, Dorset, UK
Telephone: 01202 630066
Web: www.aesthetix.net; www.stoneaudio.co.uk
Price: £8725 (£1500 for phono and DAC options)

AUDIO FILE

hi-finews
OUTSTANDING
PRODUCT

Aesthetix Mimas

A high-end, high-power, configurable tube/transistor hybrid integrated amplifier – tightly targeted but the Aesthetix Mimas could easily seduce the separates purist
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Aaah, downsizing: if it keeps the high-end healthy, I'm all for it. US boutique brand Aesthetix's Mimas integrated amp joins a sector that's increasing in numbers if not dimensions, set to satisfy the modern affliction of space shortages, especially for city dwellers. Along with Wilson's TuneTot monitor [HFN Nov '18], the all-in-one SME Synergy turntable/phono stage package [p36], TechDAS's Air Force V [HFN Jan '19], and other ultra-compact-yet-truly-high-end items, the Mimas demands little room.

Even its £8750 ticket is in the lower reaches of high-end pricing. While the sample here is entry-level and line-only – the optional modules are a few months away – it's a powerhouse that easily accomplishes in its 434x140x449mm (whd) volume what is achieved by separate pre/power combinations. To put that into context, it's no larger than a circa-1979 AM/FM receiver from Yamaha or Trio.

COMPACT HYBRID

What you get in this compact box, offered in silver or black, is music to a purist's ears, especially when you discover that all of its five inputs are available on both balanced XLR and single-ended RCAs. Also addressing those who are either indecisive or prefer to have their options left open, the Mimas is a tube/solid-state hybrid like the McIntosh MA252 [HFN Jan '19] and Unison Research Due [HFN Feb '19], hybrids satisfying those who want a taste of tubes and transistors.

Aesthetix has created a merged version of its Calypso/Atlas pre/power amplifiers. It uses the same volume control as the Calypso, with 88 steps in 1dB increments, employing individual switched 1% metal film resistors. The Mimas's precision and 'quietness' are admirable, especially for listeners sensitive to precise level setting. The preamp section also injects warmth

RIGHT: Separately regulated PSUs [centre and under plate] feed the 6DJ8 (6922) triode-based preamp stage [top] and separate L/R balanced bridged power amplifiers, each mounted on internal heatsinking [left and right]

and 'holography', thanks to a pair of 6DJ8/6922 valves, one per channel, in a fully differential, balanced configuration.

For the power amp, which PM shows exceeds its stated specs [see Lab Report, p53], the company looked to its Atlas amplifier. Thus the amp section is a fully-discrete, fully-differential, zero (global) feedback, DC-coupled, balanced bridge output design operating in Class AB mode, fed from a massive power supply. With noise and distortion-cancelling advantages comes a caution over its connectivity – see PM's boxout, p51.

The amp's cryptic front panel (like the heavyweight remote, which is simple but vital) forces the owner to read the instruction manual because the Mimas is firmly part of the current wave of totally

configurable control units, with enough options and settings to challenge the unwary or unprepared.

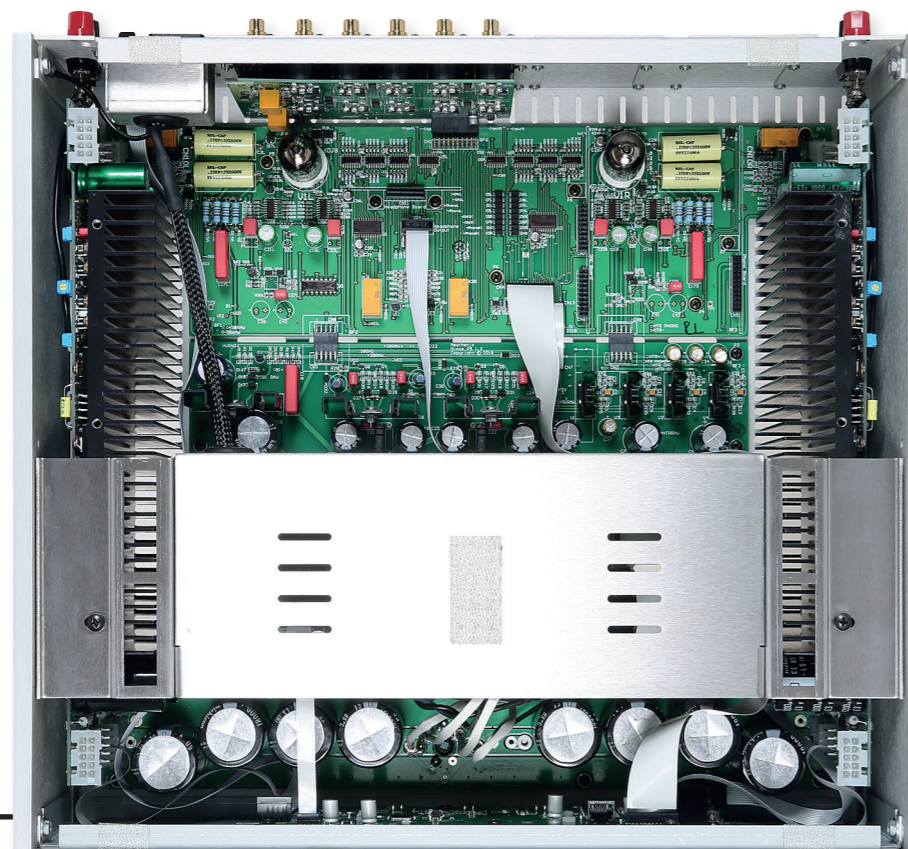
MEET THE PANEL

I cannot overstate how fully-equipped this amplifier is, even without the optional boards. The ¼in socket headphone output – rated at 0.3W/32ohm – drove various Audezes with ease, but there is also an optional 1W/32ohm, fully discrete, Class A amp. The unit automatically mutes the speakers when you

insert the jack, and the display informs you that you're in headphone mode. You can also select between them via the remote if you choose to leave the 'phones *in situ*.

It was pointed out to me that many might miss this trick: the display panel is

'I took two seconds to well up and reach for the Kleenex'



actually a rocker switch. To increase the volume, you press the right-hand side of the display panel, while to lower the volume, you press the left-hand side of the display. Most of the menus also use this method for up/down adjustment.

Meanwhile, home theatre bypass allows every input to be defined as a bypass input, and the preamp output can be used for a subwoofer. The LED display has adjustable brightness and Aesthetix's room light sensing, and it displays the selected input name, and the current level. Each input can be given a four-letter name, have its level match other sources, or be set completely to 'off'. Other commands include headphones turned on or off in software, balance, switch-on level, maximum level, display settings and the restoration of the amp to its factory presets.

Although I didn't get to try them, those tempted by the Mimas should know that the upcoming options include an MM/MC phono card with variable gain and loading, and a DAC with pairs of coax and optical ins, and one USB, handling files to 192kHz/

24-bit only. Gratingly, Aesthetix has just confirmed that its 'Upgraded Remote Control' with illuminated keys is now included as standard [see p53].

MIMASTONISHING

Once I'd acknowledged that our review sample was line-only and decided not to tamper with the settings as tested by PM, I fed it from my Marantz DV8300 SACD/CD player and analogue front-ends including an Otari MX5050 reel-to-reel deck and SME 30/12 turntable with DS Audio Master cartridge [HFN Dec '17]. Connecting everything is a joy as the back is so orderly, accessible and comprehensive, while the multi-way binding posts readily accepted the Crystal Cable feeding my Wilson Yvette loudspeakers [HFN Feb '17].

Admittedly, the opening blast came from a disc that seems to make everything sound great – a Reprise DVD-A of Donald Fagen's *Kamakiriad* – but that didn't stop me from relishing anew such an open, airy presentation of what is by any measure a truly great album.

ABOVE: Don't let the Mimas's minimalism fool you: the five buttons are augmented by a 'trick' display with touch functions and the headphone socket obviates the need for a standalone unit

Fagen is known to be a sound quality obsessive and the opening notes of 'Trans-Island Skyway', a masterpiece of funk, treated me to some of the richest bass I've ever heard from a hybrid. With ears used to all-valve sound, one tends to anticipate a certain sacrifice when solid-state stages interfere, but Aesthetix has found a near perfect balance, even if its tuning is slightly on the dry side.

Where the solid-state aspect showed its command was in the crispness of the percussion, such as the backing in 'Tomorrow's Girls', which was taut, fast and punchy. Even better were the moments in the song when the backing vocalists spread out across the room.

WITHOUT WALLS

This highlighted another aspect of the sound that ensured I wasn't going

to be distracted by the superlative bass during the listening sessions. This unit conveys air and space, even the artificial layout of a studio-sourced recording, with so much grace, such aplomb, that I began musing about how it's not just the

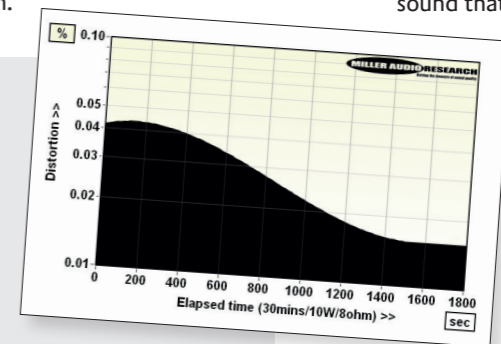
Mimas's conventional, wholly-acceptable-in-domestic-conditions 434mm girth that deals with literal space concerns. Its soundstage is one that ignores walls.

Currently on a female vocalist jag, I have been wallowing in dirt-cheap multi-disc sets from the likes of Doris Day and Connie Francis – stuff now out of reach ☞

TAKE NOTICE

The warnings on the rear of the amplifier and on the cover of its user manual are very clear – 'neither + nor – output [speaker] terminal can be shorted to ground'. The consequences of hooking the Mimas up to an active sub or any other terminal with a route to ground are, says Aesthetix, 'not covered under warranty'. This is because the Mimas's power amp stage actually comprises two matched amplifiers per channel – one handling positive-going signals while its 'mirror' handles the negative-going signals, the ensemble connected as a balanced, bridged output.

Lab testing such an amplifier must proceed with extreme caution! Moreover, the pair-matching of these positive/negative amplifiers is arguably more critical than the matching of the 6922 triodes in its line stage, not least because Aesthetix eschews the application of global compensation (feedback). The subjective benefits of low-feedback amplifiers are legion among audiophiles, although the drift (hysteresis) of distortion with temperature [see inset Graph] is also not uncommon with such designs. But it does sound glorious! PM

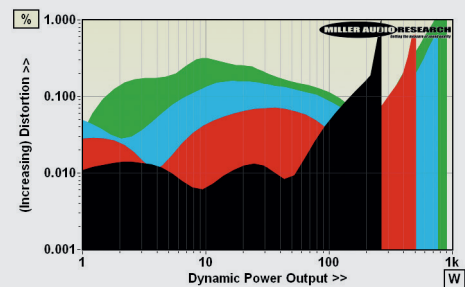


LAB REPORT

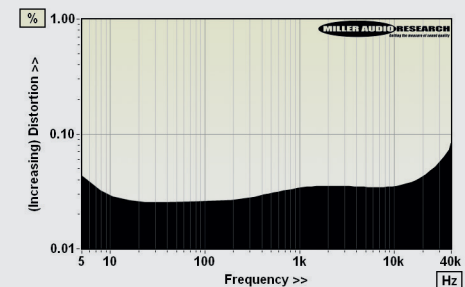
AESTHETIX MIMAS

The last Aesthetix amplifier tested here was the mighty Atlas Signature [HFN Dec '14] and, like that tube/transistor hybrid, the new Mimas's continuous power output is also generously in excess of Aesthetix's 150W/300W 8/4ohm rating at 230W/385W, respectively. Similarly, its A-wtd S/N ratio is a little below average at 81dB (re. 0dBW) while its output impedance is uniformly high at 0.24-0.26ohm from 20Hz-20kHz. The latter will cause some modification of the amp/speaker system response depending on the impedance trend of the speaker itself but this, the moderate noise and very high +48dB overall gain are all functions of Aesthetix's very sparing use of compensatory feedback [see boxout, p51]. Distortion, while impressively uniform with frequency [see Graph 2, below], increases steadily with power output from 0.011%/1W to 0.036%/10W, 0.11/100W and 0.15% at the rated 150W/8ohm.

The distortion behaviour under dynamic conditions is less predictable [see Graph 1, below], reinforcing the fact that the solid-state balanced bridged output is probably injecting more 'colour' into the performance than its tube preamp stage. Nevertheless output is prodigious under transient, music-like conditions where a full 265W, 510W, 780W and 750W (or 27.4A) was recorded up to 1% THD into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads, respectively. So the Mimas really is a powerhouse, its 135W idle power consumption falling to a still-significant 53W in 'normal standby' setting (1-2W would be standard here)! Finally, the stepped attenuator volume control is accurate to ±0.05dB over the top 60dB of its dynamic range while channel separation is a fine >100dB through bass and midrange. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 27.4A



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended frequency from 5Hz-40kHz at 10W/8ohm (one channel driven)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	230W / 385W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	265W / 510W / 780W / 750W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	0.240-0.261ohm / 0.277ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.15dB to -0.32dB/-3.5dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/150W)	11mV / 138mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/150W)	80.5dB / 102.3dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.035-0.055%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	135W / 675W (53W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	434x140x449mm / 23kg



ABOVE: Pictured here in its most basic form – note blanks in place over optional MM/MC phono bay [far left] and digital input bay [left] – the Mimas offers five line inputs and one pre-out (on RCAs and XLRs) plus fully floating 4mm speaker terminals

of copyright lawyers in certain territories, hence the £11 price tag on the 10CD set, *Connie Francis: 19 Original Albums & Bonus Tracks* [Intense Media 600261]. Yes, 19 albums on ten CDs.

Being in a maudlin, soppy mood on my late mother's birthday, I subjected myself to 'My Yiddische Momma' and 'Mom-E-Le' to see how long it took me to well up and reach for the Kleenex. Two seconds – that's all. Thank goodness I wasn't listening while writing or I'd have shorted my computer keyboard.

Piano so far stage left that it was in another room. Connie just to the left of centre. Slight echo filling the area of this voice-and-piano-only intro. Then the strings... *oy-oy-oy*, such rich, cholesterol-laden schmaltz like you've never heard.

Mournful, dark, so poignant that the sense of loss and love caused me to blaspheme (in musical terms): here was a singer who could wrench as much angst and aching longing from a lyric as, yes, Aretha Franklin. 'Mom-E-Le' proved to be just too much, as I am not prone to weeping uncontrollably at 11am.

For those of you not in touch with your inner Oedipus, the texture of the strings – even via a cheapo CD – was reminiscent of the finest RCAs, which led me to my trusty Otari reel-to-reel. But instead of some silky soul challenger, I turned instead to the rousing masterpiece that

LEFT: The HRC-3 handset offers control over input selection, volume, mute and the Mimas amp's menu



is *Hail, Sousa!* [Vanguard Stereolab VTC1650 [7½ips/¼-track] which boasts 'The Largest Band On Records – 100 Men Strong'.

OK, OK, so Sousa is another of my guilty pleasures. But then I'm old enough to remember when the USA hosted parades for any and every occasion, and it was the sound of marching drums and Sousaphones that long preceded my love for music based on The Beatles. With this tape comes crescendos and bursts and explosions to embarrass the Telarc *1812 Overture* and other legendary woofer busters.

ROCK THE RAFTERS

With the smiling spirit of Wilson Audio's late Dave Wilson looking over my shoulder, me recalling his delight when I told him I was a Sousafan, we revelled in the handiwork of his son Daryl, the Yvettes handling whatever the Mimas fed them. Rocking the rafters and rattling the roof tiles, all I could come up with was a very un-PC sentiment, as this unit conveyed all of the majesty of 100 musicians.

In light of what just happened to a famous tissue product, I am loath to call an amplifier 'virile'. But that's what this is. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

It's not an uncommon recipe – integrated, hybrid, with loads of options – but the execution of this fabulous-sounding amplifier means that the Mimas is a triumph, and must be added to any shortlist of sub-£10k all-singing/all-dancing amps. Yes, the utterly non-intuitive, inspired-by-Klingon iconography is frustrating, but that's a bonus: your headphone-attired kids won't be able to tamper with it.

Sound Quality: 87%

