

Tube Line Stage Preamp: Aitos 303

Crown Jewel

by Marco Kolks

Have you heard of Herman den Arend? If not, then perhaps of the Aitos brand? No? Then read on, as you've been missing out on something these past 25 years.

Herman den Arend is Dutch. This tall, lean, grey-haired man of fifty-something years is courteous and eminently likable. In daily life, he has a demanding job as a graduate engineer and researcher in information and electronic technologies. His true love, however, is music, and it is the love of music that has awakened in him yet another passion. For the past 25 years, Herman has been designing and building electronic components under the Aitos brand name for the reproduction of music. These lovingly hand-crafted pieces are made available in strictly-limited numbers,

For years, Herman had been preoccupied by the disparity between the quality of live music in the concert hall and that of recorded music played in the home. With a close friend who made recordings for Philips, he would often discuss the quality of available playback equipment. Both men shared high standards, and a common frustration with the sonic limitations of what was commercially available.

For this reason, Herman decided to design his own equipment. Both professional work and musical interests now benefit from his around-the-clock focus on circuit design. One result is that Herman says he can recognize the sound quality of a circuit merely from its diagram on paper.

In his Preamp 303, Herman uses selected tubes similar to the E88CC type. In the power supply- each stage is electronically stabilized- a special American tube is used. For the rest, Herman prefers tubes from Czech or Russian stocks, which lend themselves to exact matching in pairs. This approach is costly, but is one of many reasons for the high resolution capability of his equipment, which has a frequency bandwidth from 3Hz to 350,000 Hz. No expense is spared in the printed circuit boards, whose traces are silver-plated copper. Internal wiring is of highest-grade copper, silver, and gold. Physical separation of the power supply prevents electronic interference, while an integral test circuit shows mains polarity. An abundance of high level inputs populates the rear of the main unit.

Also built-in is a jack for use of high-quality headphones. On the faceplate, one finds dual volume controls which allow unusually fine balance adjustments, in increments of one-tenth of a dB.

Prospective Aitos owners will appreciate the architecture of these units, which allows upgrades from the very earliest to the very latest specifications. Beyond the model 303 lineamp, the Aitos product range comprises the model 402, a full-function preamp with RIAA phone stage and built-in headamp; the model 101 standalone headamp; and OTL monoblock amplifier models 801 and 900 (90 and 160 watts, respectively).

Listening Comments

„Alive!“—is how this line amp sounds. Sudden dynamics and subtle nuances of sound are managed effortlessly. The head of a snare drum is presented not only with lifelike impact, but also in resonant, finely etched detail. Perhaps even more impressively realized are the dynamics, from soft to loud, found on large choral recordings. Individual voices can be heard with remarkable clarity. The Aitos line amp can be mild and whispering or forceful and assertive, just as the music itself dictates. I'm acquainted with some renowned tube equipment which has a soft quality, and others which range in character from aggressive to sharp. The Aitos line amp is unbelievably balanced, but not only that—there is more. It has such a transparent, fluid realism in the treble that, by comparison, other tube equipment which I appreciate for its unaggressive character, seems veiled. The 303 simply conveys more information, is freer, airier, and has less „overhang.“ Audio „haze“ is removed, with the result that it becomes very difficult to return to other equipment.

Skeptics should place a favorite female vocal recording on the turntable. Female voices, always difficult to reproduce, appear purer and more nuanced, with less obscuring graininess. But at the same time, they appear more immediately present, more vivid emotionally, and they tickle the listener's ear just a bit more. If it is true that the components of this line amp were often selected by ear, then let me compliment the designer on the result of his choices.

Let it not be misunderstood, however: the Aitos sparkles not only on female voices; it is distinguished by its balance throughout all frequency ranges. Bases are reproduced as outstandingly as sopranos. And string basses are as convincing recreated as violins. Orchestral string sections are harmonically layered, as in real life: one perceives the spatial and acoustical relationships between the violas and their neighbors. Instruments which are often difficult to distinguish, such as saxophones from clarinets in their high ranges, are clearly separated. Mind you, these same instruments might be lost entirely when heard on another preamp. With such reproductive clarity on hand, it is not surprising that even the smallest dust particles also make themselves heard.

Conclusion

By comparison with the outstanding sound quality, and the high standard of internal parts and workmanship, the exterior design leaves a bit to be wished for. My wish for Herman Herman is for some assistance in this department.

In all other respects, the Aitos belongs among the very best, whether tube or transistor, that can be found in the marketplace. A true jewel—a tribute to the promise afforded by continuous development and updating, it embodies a long—and inseparable—audiophile friendship.

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The Product:

Aitos-Linestage 303

Heard with:

Analogue Turntables: Transrotor Eternita, Transrotor Fat Bob, Pluto 12a; Tonarme: SME V (2x), SME 3012R, Pluto 5a Special;

Cartridges: van den Hul Black Beauty, Transfiguration New Spirit, The Cartridge Man, Scheu-Benz, Ortofon Rohmann, SPU Meister, Clearaudio Victory H;

MC Transformer: Ortofon SPU T 100;

CD-Player: Burmester 916, Consequence Audio Silver Block (mod. by Realite); Phonosophie Impuls 2 Netzteil und Power Control 2;

DA Converter: Burmester 980, Goldmund SDRA, Audio Alchemy DTI Pro 3.2, Burmester DAC II;

Preamplifiers: Burmester 808 MK V, Beck RV, Tessendorf TE1 (Filternetzteil), Phonosophie Bi-Control 2;

RIAA Stage: Blue Amp Model 42, EAR 834, TE Audio Phono (Tessendorf/MC -Teflonausführung) und Filternetzteil, TE Audio Phono (MC-Teflon), Transrotor-Phonostufe

Power Amplifiers: Burmester 911 MK II (Mono), Beck RE1, Phonosophie Bi-Stage Twin 1/4; Integrated Amplifiers: Unison Research Simply 845 (Triode), Symphonic Line RG 14 (Version 2001);

Loudspeakers: Acapella Violoncello, Sonus Faber Guarneri Homage, Newtronics Skate und Gate, Gate aktiv, Bella Luna von CD-Konzertmöbel, Consequence Audio Pavane;

Cabling (Audio/Power): Acapella (Silber), Bastanis Epilog, Dolphin Yellow und Black, Flatline SPMReference,

Acoustic Balance Black, Ortofon 5000er
Reinsilber-Phonokabel, Phonokabel von SAC,
Phonokabel Sun Wire, Phonokabel van den Hul,
Aural Symphonics (digital), Voodoo von Dope
Sounds, Elon III, Bülow, XLO-Netzkabel, Voodoo-
Netzkabel (Prototyp), Netzkabel von Burmester
und Phonosophie, WBT-Kabelschuhe,
Netzsteckerleisten: Beck Elektroakustik ,
Phonosophie, XLO, Sun
Accessories: Burmester Powerconditioner, Copulare
Tonbasen, Acapella Musikbasen (auch für
Lautsprecher), Big Block und Speed Block von
Acapella, Acapella Pucks (Prototypen), SSC, Racks
von Audio Magic, Bedini Disc Clarifier, Sound
Dynamics FoculPods, Sicominplatten, Ducal-
Kabelträger von Copulare, Kabelträger von Audio
Magic, LP-Waschmaschine von Sota, Tonbase
Plattenspieler (eternita) von Realite, Roomtooning
RFA 78 von Harmonix, Shun Mook, Shaktis,
Enacoms, CD-mat von ART, Ring-Mat,
Entmagnetisierer von Audio Physik;
Reinigungsmittel: Audiotop (Acapella), Pro Gold
(Fast Audio), Last;

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