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YAMAHA's Digital Sound Projector

One Box, 42 drivers & DSP galore



2 from Plinius

Kiwi components
show real high-end
zeal



Onkyo's New TX-SR503

This sub-\$300 AVR
exceeds expectations

Triangle Odyssey 5.1 Speaker System



Delightful surround
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Plinius CD-101 CD Player & 9200 Integrated Amplifier

Kiwi components show real high-end zeal

Consider for a moment the concentric spiraling façade of the Guggenheim in New York, the fanciful stainless steel sails of the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, the sensual bodywork of a vintage Ferrari Lusso—each exemplifies the difference a simple curve can make in a world of right angles. Kudos to Plinius of New Zealand and the creativity of Ross Stevens, the firm's design director, for touching pen to paper and rethinking the standard box of electronics. From any angle the curvaceous, flowing design of the Plinius CD-101 CD player brings to mind words like fresh, simple, and inspiring. With only a single push button adorning the brushed aluminum front panel, the CD-101 becomes the *ne plus ultra* of minimalist-chic. But Plinius is smartly conveying another message—it's not about buttons, numerical displays and data—it's about the music, mate. And oh my, it most certainly is.

Monastic though the player's front panel appears, its sound is lavishly musical. The CD-101 is an attention

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grabber with drive and pace, so that, rhythmically-speaking, it bounces on the balls of its feet as if wearing a fresh pair of Nikes. The player's transient speed and resolution make for a sound that is neither warm, nor edgy. Instead, its hyper-detail and trans-



Plinius CD-101 CD player

parency suggest a slightly cool, clinical personality—an emphasis that may not entirely warm the hearts of some. At the very least, you'll know immediately you're not listening to tubes, though with this level of immediacy you won't be missing them either. This is not the sort of player that personifies a laid back, "whatever" brand of music reproduction. Its personality is direct. While my first impression was of a slightly forward perspective, that perspective forced no sacrifices in overall soundstage dimensionality. The player thrives on the complexity of symphonic music and sophisticated harmonic interactions, and it is at its best on material that is sensitive to the relationship between an instrument's natural acoustics and the surrounding ambience of the recording venue. Essentially, the more information you throw at the Plinius the more satisfying the musical returns. With its low, low noise floor and freedom from distortion, reproduction of micro-subtleties proved to be one of the CD-101's greatest strengths. Whether distinguishing delicate shifts in volume during a pianist's performance of Glinka's *The Lark* [Kissin; RCA] or the tuning of

a bass drum or tympani in a large hall [*Pictures at an Exhibition*: The Met, Levine; DG] the player maintained an unbroken connection between fundamentals, overtone structures, and harmonic decay characteristics.

The CD-101 has got a hell-or-high-water responsiveness that makes dynamic and transient information sound as if someone slipped a kangaroo-juice cocktail into the recording. Stewart Copeland's complex drum patterns in "Murder By Numbers" sound so vivid that the impact of each drum stroke stands out in almost geographic relief [*Synchronicity*, The Police: A&M]. When Kasey Chambers sings "More Than Ordinary" [*Wayward Angel*: Warner Bros], the Plinius' sound conveys the sheer physical reality of the singer and backing instruments; Chambers' vocal pushes towards you so that you can sense her diaphragm and breath control and there's an instantaneous pop off the snare that creates an almost tactile pressure wave that precedes the actual tone.

The facility to focus unerringly within a maze of complex images was a defining attribute. At the beginning of

the Rutter *Requiem* [Turtle Creek Chorale, Reference Recording RR57] a distant tympani joins with a very low organ pedal note, so that the hall is activated by a steady wave of low frequency energy as soprano Nancy Keith comes in. It is the strength and detail of the bass reinforcement and the immediacy of the vocal that moves the CD-101 toward the head of its class. When the full chorus joins in, new waves of acoustic energy move toward the listener, originating from very specific lateral and vertical points

The Plinius CD-101 is a reference quality product. Though not inexpensive, it doesn't require a banker's endorsement to afford either.

within the soundstage. The ability to reach deep within the musical panorama to differentiate sections and specific voices without congestion was a trick that the Plinius repeatedly turned during my lengthy listening sessions.

Similarly, a pop recording like the Springsteen track "Paradise" [*The Rising*: Columbia] mixes a pulsating synth deep in the soundstage with the warm, ripe, resonant sound of an acoustic guitar entering from the right, with the sound of a flat-pick against strings conveying just the right amount of convincing, percussive transients. When Bruce sings "...and your kiss/the breath of eternity/ on your lips/" the sibilance of his "s" sounds had the contrasting flavors of bite and padding that, to me, connote reality.

A couple ergonomic and technical points: Absent a numerical display, tracks are indicated with a row of bright micro-LED pin lights, a gently pulsating beam signifying the active track. It's a little disorienting at first, but identifying tracks quickly becomes second nature. Number freaks may quibble, but I think it's an elegant solution. And there's always the option of dimming or shutting off the light show altogether.

The blue-toned back panel houses both RCA and balanced outputs, a digital output, a ground-lift toggle, on/off

rocker and IEC socket and an IR sender for external third-party remote controllers. The CD-101 uses a CD-ROM drive-based transport which is thoroughly isolated. The tray is well supported with a robust bearing system, and the entire chassis is highly damped both acoustically and mechanically. There are separate power supplies for analog, digital, and digital-control stages with an oversized power supply and 300VA transformer to support the entire player. The CD-101 uses an 8x oversampling filter (in

effect an 8x synchronous upsampler) creating a 352.8kbps data stream. Burr-Brown 1704 multi-bit DACs are used without any high frequency output filtering, which, Plinius claims, would otherwise reduce sonic quality. And they add that any noise is at such a low level and high frequency (above 300kHz) that amplifier stability is not



Plinius 9200 integrated amplifier

an issue. The hefty remote control is hollowed out of a single block of aluminum like a high tech didgeridoo.

The Plinius CD-101 is a reference quality product. Though not inexpensive, it doesn't require a banker's endorsement to afford either. I've heard it in the company of some pricey

Plinius CD-101 CD Player **STRENGTHS**

Exceptional transparency & resolution, Innovative micro-LED display, High build quality.

WEAKNESSES

Lazy CD-ROM transport reaction time, Over-built remote control.

machines and it gives them all a stiff run for the money. In my view, quibbles among the cognoscenti will likely be more a matter of personal taste than sonic performance. The Plinius CD-101 has reset the bar for excellence in this range. Borrowing an expression from *Down Under*—this is one fair dinkum player, mate.

Plinius 9200 Integrated Amplifier: Welcome Back

A Plinius integrated amplifier has been a part of my reference system in one form or another for the better part of six years. From the original 8150 through the 8200 MkII the series has

steadily evolved, power has been increased, refinement enhanced. However, a surge in popularity in the integrated market within the last couple of years has unleashed the dogs of competition, and they've been nipping hungrily at the mighty Plinius's heels. In comparison to the best contenders it

was sounding a little wiry up top, less convincing harmonically, and a bit paunchy in the bass. The Plinius was losing its edge.

Hello, Plinius 9200. Outwardly, the 9200 sports the same shapely contours as the CD-101 and matches its exquisite fit and finish. Technically, Plinius states that power is up slightly (although still quoted at 200Wpc) and with its strong Class A bias, this Class AB design still runs pretty warm to the touch. Changes to the output stage have yielded more linear high frequency performance while a fully regulated amplifier pre-driver and input stage reduces noise. The phono preamp is all new, providing internally switch-selectable gain settings akin to those offered in Plinius' Jarrah outboard phono stage.

Sonically, the 9200 is much like an 8200, only fully matured. It's less brash tonally and more harmonically rich. Its overall tonal character is slightly darker than its forerunner, but only to the extent that it has become the least colored version of all. Through the 9200, Delmoni's violin [*Bach, Kreisler, et al; Water Lily*], for example, has a warmer and fuller body resonance in its middle

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range, less of an edge in the treble and significantly more presence. It's also got a deeper, more complex voice, with treble at least as extended as before, but that now sounds more airy and full, with more body.

The feather light piano arpeggios that flutter around Mary Stallings vocal during "Sunday Kind of Love" [*Live At the Village Vanguard; MaxxJazz*] have never been as meticulously rendered, with the 9200 revealing new layers of micro-dynamics and low-level harmonics. The same can be said of the interplay between Clark Terry's trumpet and each of the guest pianists on the

Plinius 9200 integrated amplifier STRENGTHS

Wide open, airy treble and rich mid-range, World class dynamics and response, Superior phono stage included.

WEAKNESSES

Remote control lacks features, No balanced inputs for CD-101.

tracks from *One On One* [Chesky]. Terry's trumpeting also served notice of the new amplifier's explosive dynamic reserves and transient action, which has all the verve of a Leyton Hewitt backhand. In this sense the 9200's behavior is much like that of the CD-101—it has an ability to surprise, even to shock the listener with the immediacy of the reproduced sound.

At first blush, ultimate bass extension actually seems slightly lighter and not as darkly ominous as on earlier models. But over a wide variety of music, bass is more controlled so that the details that serve to distinguish

tympans from bass drums, for example, and the manner in which these integrate into a vast acoustic space, are more accurately represented. However, I feel the jury is still out on the matter of bass extension.

While most of my listening was compact disc-based, the new phono stage that is bundled with the 9200 is at least as good as the standalone Plinius Jarrah phono stage I heard a few years ago. The new one is marvelously quiet and sensitive, at least with my high output Shure doing the tracking. To be fair, however, at least part of the difference—the improve-

ment in dynamics and the quieter backdrop—must be laid at the feet of the 9200's refreshed topology.

The 9200 is a major leap forward. Just *how* good remains to be seen. Its excellence will be truly tested later this year when *AVguide Monthly's* sister publication *The Absolute Sound* will host a survey of the best integrated amplifiers out there. And the 9200 will most assuredly be on hand—once again starring in its familiar role as my reference integrated amplifier.

SPECIFICATIONS

Plinius CD-101 CD player

Price: \$4495

Outputs: Balanced XLR, unbalanced RCA, coaxial digital

Dimensions: 4" x 17.75" x 15.75"

Plinius 9200 integrated amplifier

Power: 200Wpc into 8 ohms

Inputs: Four analog audio, and one phono (60dB low gain/66dB high gain)

Dimensions: 4.75" x 17.75" x 15.75"

Weight: 30 lbs.

Price: \$3695

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

Plinius Audio Limited

Manawatu, New Zealand

www.pliniusaudio.com

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

ELITE AUDIO VIDEO DISTRIBUTION

PO Box 93896

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V pick-up arm; Shure V15VxMR cartridge; Accuphase DP-57, Simaudio Equinox; ATC SCM35/SCM20-2, Triangle Altea, PSB T55; Nordost Blue Heaven cabling, Kimber Kable BiFocal XL, Wireworld Equinox III; Wireworld Silver Electra & Kimber Palladian power cords; Richard Gray line conditioners