

Plinius CD-101

By Brent Burmester

Plinius CD101 CD player. \$4995

For almost a quarter century, New Zealand's own Plinius Audio has been associated with one thing: amplification. Pre-amps, phono stages, power amps, and integrated models, all winning a loyal following and securing Plinius an enviable international reputation. A casual observer would be forgiven for mistaking the silvery object on my hi-fi rack for the brand's latest integrated, the 9200. However, this particular shiny box of electronics won't savage the national grid like its stablemates. It's a CD player.



No, Aston Martin isn't making tyres, Pizza Hut hasn't launched a new range of burgers, and there's no sign of a beer from Bollinger, so it's not something in the water. What we have here is a bold move from a company that won't be cut any slack just because it's trying something new. Discerning owners of Plinius amps, delighted to find a matching source component, will be mightily irked by a digital dud.

What lies beneath?

Perhaps surprisingly, the CD-101 does not represent the very latest in upsampling voodoo. Under the sturdy top cover is a design that capitalises on the virtues of tried-and-true digital engineering, involving standard PCM DACs and synchronous oversampling. Don't take this to mean the 101 is unsophisticated, however. This is no CD-player-on-a-chip from Taiwan – Plinius have gone to great lengths to implement a circuit design of their own, with great attention to power regulation, filtering, and clocking, built using quality parts to the company's typical high standards.

Built tough

If the CD-101 sounded only half as good as it does, it would sell on looks alone. Clad in the new livery of the Plinius range, the 101 is an impressive creature. The front panel, a thick plate of aluminium, curves around the front edges to form the sides of the box, and

if the player were a little larger it would make a terrific nuclear fallout shelter. Thanks to Plinius, when the balloon goes up, some CDs will survive to repopulate the Earth.

Round the back, the first thing you'll notice is the disconcerting bright blue rear panel, but, on acclimatisation, the presence of balanced outputs becomes apparent. RCA sockets for unbalanced left and right channels and SPDIF-out are also found, and one less common item, in the form of a switch to select between a chassis- or floating-earth. This 'ground-lift' switch can help tame hum if it's a problem in a particular system.



At the business-end, the CD-drawer chassis is machined from aluminium, and looks great, but the actual CD tray is that same old flimsy plastic thing you've seen 100 times before. Although the drawer gives the game away, there's little else to indicate the true nature of this piece of industrial art. No display, you see. To indicate track number, a white light pulses through one in a line of pinprick holes in the front panel. Very cool, but not so very practical.

A remote prospect

The CD-101 comes with what Plinius describe as a 'distinctive' remote control unit. It is that. It's a colossal square-sectioned aluminium extrusion, with big black round buttons and a blue LED. As a design statement, it's extraordinary, and if your habitat is an assemblage of design statements, you might well love it. I found it needlessly cumbersome and not a strong visual match with the CD-101. It also struggles to make its presence felt when used at shallow angles. On the plus side, should your new CD player tempt thieves, you can bludgeon them into submission with it before phoning the police.



A player so devoid of controls demands a remote that doesn't deter the user, something ergonomically-pleasing rather than credulity-straining. There's no reason for it to be drab, as Shanling and Cambridge Audio have recently demonstrated. Furthermore, as the CD-101 lacks a display panel - of one of the few charms of digital devices - why not put a display on the remote itself?.

Speaking the truth

When the rumour began to circulate that Plinius was working on a CD player, I speculated on what their engineers were using for a reference. Something from Wadia, Chord, or Meridian? A Naim, perhaps? Now I've heard the CD-101 in action, I wonder if the inspiration for the CD-101's sound was, of all things, a speaker. I have in mind the legendary LS3/5a monitor, designed and used for years by the BBC and a host of dedicated hi-fi enthusiasts, a legend for its ability with the human voice, and proof that if a hi-fi component can get that right, nearly everything else will follow. Like the LS3/5a, the CD-101 gets voices right.

Contrary to popular belief, reproduction of singing and speaking is not something CD players do very well. Sure, even on cheap gear you can distinguish between Tenacious D (Jack Black) and The White Stripes (Jack White), but it's a revelation to hear articulation, inflection, and emotion properly restored by a machine that knows its business. Set your thrash metal aside and charge the CD-101 with something imbued with irony, wistfulness, or longing, and just listen. Magic.

And the CD101 is no one-trick pony. Because it has such a facility with the toughest act of all, it sails through the remaining tests. Soundstaging is excellent – stretching beyond the speakers and reaching forward into the space in front of and around the listener. The player's resolution is also to marvel at, but unlike so many other highly detailed CD players, there is no edge or fussiness about the presentation, instead there is an almost liquid quality to the sound. Everything is quite unforced, both neutral and natural.

Cynics in the audience might make another comparison between the CD-101 and LS3/5a – light on bass. They'd only be half right – the BBC speaker has nothing much to show for the low frequencies, but the CD-101 plays the full gamut right down to the foundation-shaking stuff. What it doesn't do, however, is over-emphasise the low notes to give the player a 'big' sound. For this the company should be congratulated. If the

CD-101 sounds thin to you, you've been tricked by the heavyweight aesthetic of the casework, or the manufacturer's history with powerhouse amplifiers, into expecting subterranean rumbling from a piccolo.

Beginner's luck

A big thumbs-up for Plinius's new baby. The company has clearly understood how important it is to get it right first time. The CD-101 won't be easy to come by, as demand will be stiff, but audition one when you get the chance. It's just a shame the player looks so good, because when it's running your eyes will close automatically and you will become, as the saying goes, all ears.

As three of the AudioEnz team had the opportunity to listen to the CD-101, comments from reviewer Michael Wong and AudioEnz Editor Michael Jones are included below.

Michael Wong says...

The eagerly awaited Plinius CD-101 is an excellent sounding CD player, guaranteed to bring a smile to music lovers and new and existing Plinius owners alike. The CD-101 matches the new Plinius physically and sonically, offering a warm and highly musical, yet detailed, alternative to the big name high end CD players.

Music is reproduced with a naturalness that is rare with digital source components.

In my system the only aural niggles were a very slight tendency to be a little too kind and laidback, (a touch more immediacy please) and a little leanness in the mid/lower bass in single-ended mode, slightly overcompensated when run with balanced cables. Somewhere in-between would be spot-on.

Sort out the few ergonomic issues and this could be as close to perfect as the pricing allows.

Michael Jones says...

There's something about a really good CD player – and there's no doubt in my mind that the Plinius fits that description. But before commenting on the sound, here are some thoughts about what I don't like.

I'm a great admirer of people who go against the norm because they've found a better way of doing things. But doing something different merely for the sake of being different gains no admiration from me.

To me, Plinius are being different for the sake of being different with the ergonomics of the CD-101. The lack of a play button on the player, the lack of a display and the requirement that the player can only be operated from the remote control strikes me as being difficult. My guess is that the next Plinius CD player will operate more normally than the CD-101.

But to the sound. I had less time with the CD-101 than either Brent or Michael, but in that short period of time I was mightily impressed. Most CD players - even expensive units - have a (sometimes almost subliminal) roughness to their sound, like fine sandpaper. What struck me with the Plinius was how this roughness seemed to be gone.

The second aspect of the sound that struck me was the immense amount of detail that the CD-101 pulled off the CD. This wasn't pushed forward at me like with hi-fi

equipment often described as “detailed” or (shudder) “ruthlessly revealing”. Instead the detail was served up. I could choose to listen to it or not. Or focus in on part of the performance, if I chose to.

Voices were incredible. They seemed more audible and easier to hear the words than before, without being pushed forward in the mix.

It's possible that the CD-101 is a touch lacking in bass power (that's unusual for a Plinius product) but I didn't have time to delve any further before the player went off to Brent for review.

I was very impressed with the performance of the Plinius CD-101. I've not heard a CD player that beats the CD-101 in the areas where it has its strengths. Well done!

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