

Plinius SA-201

Plinius SA-201 power amplifier.

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After carefully lowering the stylus onto the vinyl, there's a moment's silence as the stylus traverses the lead-in groove, then music bursts forth from an inky blackness as the National Philharmonic blasts off with the opening bars of Bernard Herrmann's *On Dangerous Ground* film score (RCA Classic Film Scores series, one of my favourite reference LPs).

That's the sort of impact Plinius made a few short years ago with the new Odeon. Sonically and aesthetically the Odeon set new benchmarks for domestic amplifiers. Here was a modular, multi-channel amplifier that could go head to head with the best of the two channel world.

Not unexpectedly, the Odeon influenced the new generation of Plinius product like the 9100/9200 integrated amplifiers and the M8/P8 separates.

Now we have a new amplifier that uses two Odeon modules mated to a new dedicated two channel power supply. In this simplified configuration we get a 225w/40A per channel powerhouse, running in Class AB. The eagle eyed and curious will be asking why this amp got the prestigious SA designation, previously used on Plinius' Class A amps. According to Plinius this is in recognition that the SA-201's sound quality gets very close to the top of the range models.

Big, black and blue

Out of the box the SA-201 looks like



a ¾ scale Odeon.

There's the same solid, curvaceous casework and folded lid, with gaps allowing glimpses of the powder blue inner chassis. At 25kg, the SA201 is less than half of the Odeon's 54kg. Like the rest of the Plinius range, the SA201 is available in either black or silver.

The fascia features an engraved Plinius logo, a manual standby switch and LED status indicator - simple and elegant. On the back panel we get the choice of RCA single ended or XLR balanced inputs (only one set is active at a time, selected via a small toggle switch), two sets of sturdy multi-way speaker binding posts, the very useful ground lift switch and a 12V trigger input.

Installing the SA201 was as straight forward as it gets. Plug in the sources to preamp (Krell pre section or Plinius M8 in this case), connect preamp to power amp and switch on. Listen for any extraneous buzzing or hum, if necessary, adjust the grounding switch. Single ended versus balanced connection resulted in no preference, as none of my sources are balanced, single ended it was.

Music comes first

Sonically the SA201 follows the Plinius playbook to the letter. The first thing that strikes the listener is how smooth and coherent the SA201 is. The high frequencies, while not the most detailed or extended, are more than adequate, being clean and sweet with good transparency and totally grain free.

The midrange has a touch of warmth, avoiding the stark, threadbare sound that plagues many solid state amplifiers. Together the highs and mids have a good degree of liquidity without becoming glazed. Bass is full and flowing with good extension and articulation that makes bass lines so easy to follow. A touch more tautness and snap and it would be near-perfect.

Spatial performance is excellent. The soundstage is expansive with good width, depth and height. Images had realistic size and a nice, well rounded, holographic quality. There is plenty of detail, presented in a natural fashion without being in your face.

Dynamically the amp is a gentle giant that ably conveys the scale and colour of music but doesn't quite make



you jump out of your seat or send goose bumps down your spine. Transients are reproduced with a relaxed quality, sometimes a bit too relaxed. The initial part of a transient sounds slightly softened and reduced in impact but the follow through of the ensuing harmonic envelope is sublime.

Like the best components, this amplifier isn't about the highest highs, deepest bass or fastest dynamics. With the SA201, the listener soon forgets about audiophile benchmarks and just gets on with enjoying the music. The Plinius reputation of capturing the best aspects of vacuum tube musicality with none of the traditional weaknesses of solid state amplifier design continues unabated.

Compared to its more expensive brothers, the SA201 is not quite as transparent and misses some of the sense of authority, control and the seemingly bottomless reserves of power that the SB-300 and Class A models possess. Where the big brothers rule absolutely, the SA201 is more down to earth, a little less dictatorial.

A well placed intermediary

The SA201 proved to be another well built and good sounding Plinius. Sound quality was more than commensurate with the not inconsiderable price tag.

Initially it was thought the SA201 may have been a fish out of water but after a couple of weeks listening, it fully justified its place in the Plinius lineup as the bridge between the entry level P8 power amplifier and the more expensive models—*Michael Wong*