

Powerful Urge

Alan Sircom investigates the latest amplificatory offerings from Meridian.

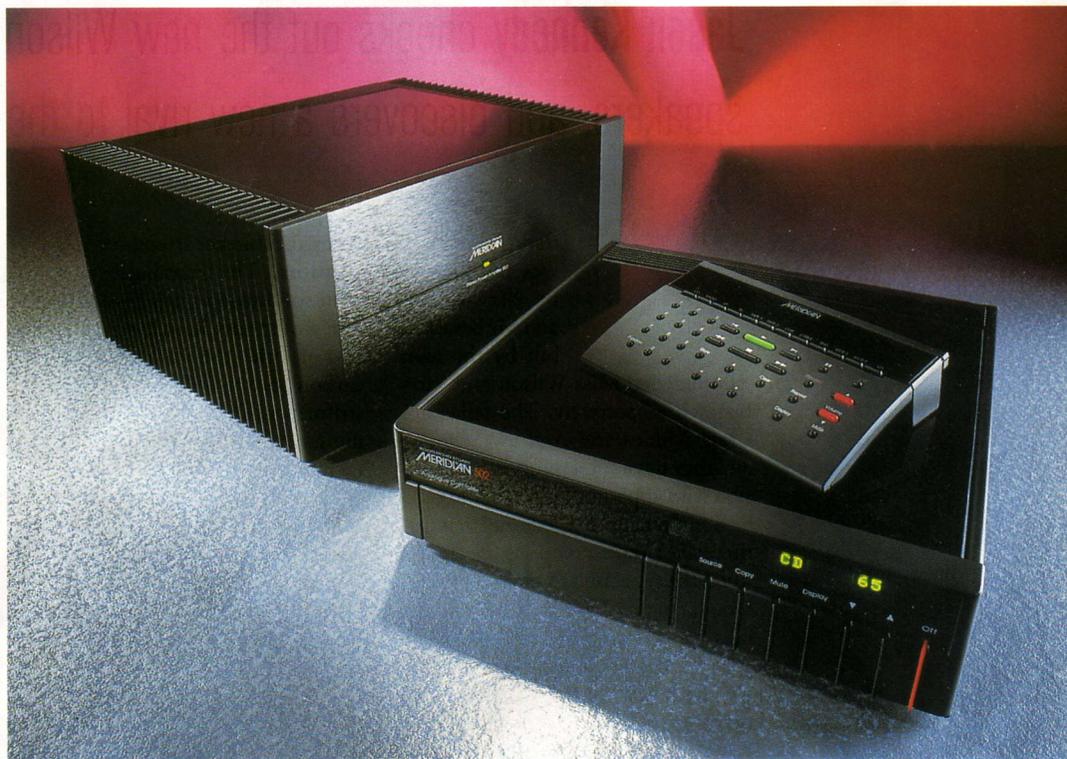
Now best known for its masterful digital audio and video products, Meridian once stood for state-of-the-art amplifiers. Back in the '80s, the modular *100 Series* of slimline amplifiers were considered by many to be the best at the time — so good that second-hand examples are rare.

With Meridian's investment in CD players, it's not surprising that the company's amplifiers were neglected. There were exceptions, like the *605* monoblok, but since the days of the *100 Series*, Meridian has been famed for its CD players — until now.

The new £1,295 *502 Analogue Controller* (or preamp for the hard-of-thinking) and £1,400 *557* stereo power amp have put Meridian's amps back in the same league as its digital products. They retain that high-tech appeal, yet have the sonics of some of the best analogue electronics around — at a sensible price.

Both products are in typical Meridian *500 Series* livery, albeit steroid-enhanced when it comes to the *557* power amplifier. The *502 Analogue Controller* has as much technology as a series of *Tomorrow's World*. Basically, it has four single-ended (phono-plug) and three balanced line inputs, two pairs of single-ended tape outputs and a balanced and single-ended main output. The first line input can be fitted with the 'reference' *RIAA* phono equaliser (not available at the time of writing).

But Meridian does not stop there. Each input can be user-configured to be either a line or tape input. These can then be assigned labels, the gain of each input can be equalised, and — if needed — the source assigned to the correct address. It is also possible to use Meridian's own communication link for *500 Series* CD players or tuners — earlier Meridian comms settings will be accommodated. The 200 Watt *557* can even be adjusted for bridged mode operation. Fortunately,



once set up, the *502/557* is remarkably user-friendly, especially if used with the £70 *Meridian System Remote*.

There is a school of audio sadism that believes the amount of difficulty encountered in day-to-day operation is in direct proportion to sound quality. These people know that the *502/557* combination is a work of the Devil, since it combines remarkable ease of use with the sort of sound quality that stands head and shoulders above its price rivals — and beyond.

What makes it so good? Having 200 Watts or more on tap is a blessing when driving most loudspeakers, yet these Watts are not delivered with the sort of sluggishness often associated with big power. Likewise, the preamplifier — given a day or more of running in — has a remarkably fast and tidy persona that holds on to any style of music like a Terrier.

It's far more transparent than you'd expect at the price, especially given the *557's* sheer output. It will not be as transparent as the best, but for that last degree of openness, you need considerable amounts of moolah. That aside, it has almost everything you'd want from a good amplifier, including near-holographic imaging and first-rate depth, an excellent sense

of rhythm, responsive dynamics and detail that makes you feel you are in the studio — when partnered with sympathetic ancillaries.

Most of all, there is flexibility in the sound itself. It retains a Levinson-like darkness throughout, but sounds different if used in balanced or single-ended mode. I preferred the more even-handed sound in balanced mode from my *508.20* CD player to the *557*, using the excellent (but day-glo green) £130 *Cable Talk Broadcast 2* XLR cables, but single-ended had a rhythmic sound that was alluring.

I will hold on to this pre/power combination. It's the perfect benchmark: open enough to reveal what sources are doing, powerful enough to drive almost any speaker, yet not so expensive that only the elite few can afford it. Of course better amplifiers exist, but they are either more expensive, more tweaky or less freely available. The *502/557* sounds fantastic and enjoyable, whatever I play on it. At any price, this would be a good amplifier combination, but at this price, it is a true bargain. ▲

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Meridian's dynamic duo: the 502 Analogue Controller (£1,295) is on the right; the 557 power amp (£1,400) is on the left.