

MERIDIAN 200 CD

Designed to give sonic benefits over the 206B single unit Bitstream CD player (see CB's review Nov '90), the 200 transport has been designed to partner the highly successful £500 203 outboard DAC (reviewed by MC in Aug '90), which is, in essence, the guts of a 208. Taking up two of Meridian's black box extrusions, the 200 transport is hardly a snip at £750. Add to this the cost of even an inexpensive converter and the price is unlikely to be below £1000. Indeed, the combination with Meridian's own 203 takes the total to £1250. At this level it would have to outperform many a rival to justify its position.

Designer Bob Stuart has opted, on sonic grounds, for a Philips mechanism in favour of one sourced in the Far East. The standard Foucault single-beam laser tracking system with its radial tracking arm is therefore incorporated, with the latest fast-response version of the Philips CDM4 disc loading mechanism.

Description

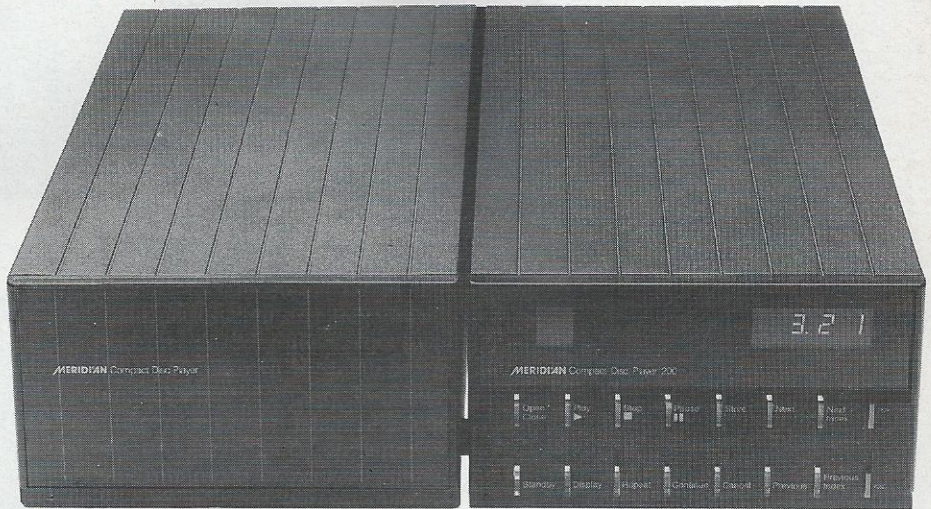
In usual Meridian fashion, the focusing lens is in full view when the drawer (sited on its magnesium casting) is open, making it vulnerable to damage. However, a benefit with this arrangement is that the centre hub is also accessible, enabling any size of CD to be correctly placed without the need for adaptor rings. It was also felt by Meridian's designers that a conventional loading drawer would be too flimsy and would allow external noises to enter. A rubber gasket on the 200 boasts attenuation of outside noise by -35dB.

The two-box arrangement is necessary to ensure the servo signals generated are completely isolated from the other electronics. Thus the CD transport and optical system are housed in the left hand box, while that to the right, cluttered with rows of awkward-looking plastic buttons, is partitioned and screened to isolate digital from display circuits.

Optical and coaxial outputs are provided to the rear. Since these are not switched, it would be possible to feed two digital destinations simultaneously. Also located on the rear panel are a 3-pin, fused IEC socket, and on/off switch. A 5-pin DIN socket allows interconnection to other Meridian multi-room components.

As I placed the first CD on the hub and tried to knock the drawer shut, the mechanics refused to budge. Grasping the remote handset and pressing a variety of buttons expecting some reaction, I soon had the 200's logic totally confused.

Having entered a [sensible!] command, it is necessary to wait patiently until the



Maintaining its prolific launch of new products, Meridian announces the 200 CD transport

by Trevor Butler

transport responds. Access times are intolerably slow (up to 5 seconds), not just with the standard Track 15 test but even between adjacent index points of the same track! The normal display parameters are available with the exception of track time remaining, which is perhaps the most useful of all.

Sound quality

Before auditioning the Meridian transport I had become spoilt with the sonic qualities of the Marantz CD94II. Some of these proved just too much for the 200. From the first CD it was clear that the 200/203 combination has its moments, not least the capability of immense detail and resolution, even if it was less dynamic overall than the Marantz multi-bit player. A common thread through the line-up of Meridian electronics seems to be this lack of real driving bass and ultimate slam in favour of ambient information and a more rounded and natural sound. The deficiencies were obvious from the opening track of the recent 'live' recording of *The Wall* which was on the verge of losing its spontaneity, and atmospheric feeling. Nevertheless, this track did reveal excellent reproduction of bass drum in what was a clear and detailed presentation.

Overall width seemed slightly reduced with the Meridian line-up, most noticeably on 'Say It Isn't So' from Hall and Oates' *Greatest Hits*. Matters did not improve significantly when switching to Peter Gabriel's *So* where 'Sledgehammer'

took on a disjointed presentation lacking in harmony. The detail was evident but the tune appeared laboured. An improvement was shown by 'Don't Give Up' where Kate Bush's voice was combined in an altogether more uniform performance. The 200 does have an extraordinary ability to maintain drive and pace – it had no trouble with Eric Clapton's 'August', where lesser players have fallen down.

More mainstream material tried included Paco Pena's recording of Spanish Guitar music [Nimbus], which sounded generally dull, lacking the light sparkle normally associated with this CD. The story was similar on larger classical works, too. While the Meridian 200 excels in several areas, notably treble purity, tonal balance and transparency, the sound remained characteristically 'Bitstream' with a softening of transients and relaxed view of dynamics.

Comparisons made between the optical and coaxial outputs suggested differences which were so minor as to be barely significant, although the optical connection made it by a short head.

Conclusion

While lacking overall excitement and that 'get up and go' feeling, the Bitstream influences of the 203 were evident and matched well with the 200 transport. In certain areas the 200 performs remarkably well, notably with respect to transparency and neutrality, but it is these qualities which in my view contribute to its downfall. The rock enthusiast will almost certainly find the result too refined and laid back. This combination will doubtless appeal to certain tastes, but I was relieved to return to the softness and warmth of the £900 Marantz CD94II. **Supplier:** Meridian Audio Ltd, 13 Clifton Road, Huntingdon, Cambs PE18 7EJ.