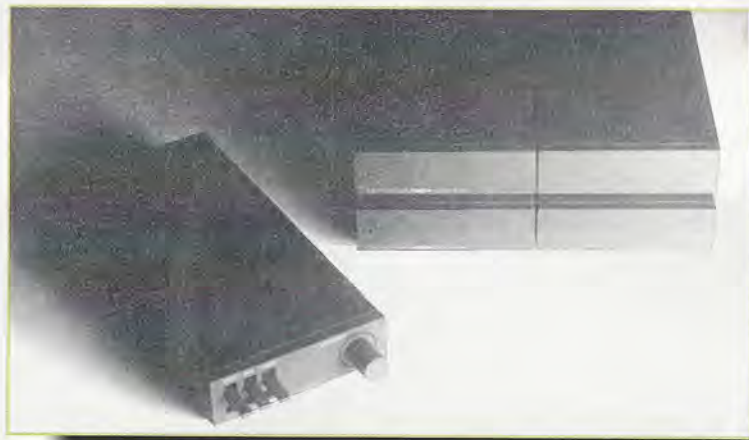


modular magic

Meridian's earliest products showed the company's distinctive approach to hi-fi design. David Price revisits the 70s with the 101/105 pre-power combination.



Compare Meridian's very first 100 series pre-power amplifier to the current 501/555.

Both are subtle but elegant examples of industrial design, with an economical feature count allied to flexible connection options. Both have a characteristically smooth, self-effacing and even-handed sound, and both are built to last. You could also go on about the classy, albeit oddball finish, the modular construction, the top quality matching tuners that partner both combos, the fine phono inputs and the muscular power amp sections. Despite the twenty years that separate them, neither combos could be anything else but Meridian.

It's a testament to the design and engineering partnership of Messrs Boothroyd and Stuart that the 101/105 seems so damn modern even today. Aside from its DIN sockets, limited inputs and lack of remote control, it could almost be an early twenty first century design. Indeed, give the beautifully hewn slabs of aluminium alloy that encase the power amplifiers a splash of silver paint, and you'd think they were the latest brainchild of some esoteric high end lifestyle audio brand! In truth though, we're talking matt dark brown - well it was the seventies!

£700 bought you these five little boxes, each measuring 140 x 50 x 300mm. The idea was that you or your dealer connected them up by their DIN umbilicals, configured the

101 preamp for whatever cartridge you were using in your LP12/Ittok at the time (well it was the only turntable back then, especially if you believed what you read in hi-fi magazines) by changing a natty little disc module inside, and switched the whole lot on via the single rotary volume control. A couple of dinky little LEDs would light up from the separate monobloc power supplies to signify motive power, and then it was time to spin that new Steely Dan or Doobie Brothers LP and revel in the sound issuing forth from your impossibly large and inefficient monitor loudspeakers... KEF 104abs, perchance?

The 105s drove power hungry seventies speakers with relish. Punching out well over 100 watts per side, they were substantially more grunty than even Naim's NAP250. True, they didn't have quite the same fearsome low frequency grip, or brightly lit midband for that matter, but they could certainly do any job asked of them without drawing attention to themselves. In a hi-fi world offering the choice of a full-on Naim pre-power or any one of a number of ludicrously over-sexed Japanese super amps (Rotel RA1312, anyone?), the Meridians were an extremely welcome new option.

Like its NAC32 rival, Meridian's 101 wasn't exactly overburdened with facilities. It was one of the first preamps to follow the minimalist

school of audio design, whereupon filters, variable frequency tone controls and balance controls were dispensed with in the name of straighter signal paths. Nowadays it seems bloody obvious, but in a world where most amps' front panels looked like something from a power station control room it was pretty radical stuff. Three toggle switches to switch between mono and stereo and 'disc', 'radio' and 'tape' were your lot.

Although Meridian's latest fare sounds considerably better than the 101/105s, it's still not a bad performer. Fans of classical music will particularly enjoy its dry, even presentation, with strong stereo imaging, confident (if a touch loose) bass, good detailing and crisp treble. True, you could say this combo sounds a tad unengaging by today's standards, but many will like its seventies-style big hearted, effortless character. Showy it is not.

So if you're looking for a classy sounding piece of kit that's also a design classic and a slice of British hi-fi history to boot, you could do far worse. The only trouble is that many 101/105s around are a tad overpriced - sellers delude themselves that they're worth over £500, whereas £350 for a mint boxed set is closer to the mark. Find a decent example though, and you'll come to love and respect Meridian far more than you do now. And who knows, you may just by some new stuff to partner it! ■