GMT-the Great Meridian Tuner



Boothroyd-Stuart were among the first companies to introduce boxes-no-bigger-than-they-need-to-be with a highly successful range of amplifiers. Paul Benson has been weighing up the size and sound of their brand-new £198 Medridian 104 tuner.

Television designers have known for a long time that what we want of a domestic receiver is simple fool-proof operation coupled with a picture that isn't offensive to look at and a sound quality that just about does the job. Or if we don't actively want this combination we seem to be willing to put up with it. Radio tuner designers have known for just as long that what the hi-fi enthusiast wants from a domestic radio receiver is a complicated, difficult to operate, feature-laded product that gives a sound quality that is offensive enough to make your friends realise that it sounds radically different from his portable and thus must be better.

The classic tuner, especially those from the East (although it has to be said that things are changing at the moment) is a large box mostly full of air with a huge front panel with a load of knobs, switches and dials that only reference to the instruction manual will explain.

Meridian think differently. They have assumed that what we all want from a tuner is the ability to listen to the radio. A rash and perhaps foolish approach I know, but one that warms my heart. Boothroyd-Stuart, the designers, describe the 104 as a high performance, limited facility FM tuner.

In fact the facilities aren't that limited — perhaps as 'inconspicuous' would be a better description than limited. Basically, the only facilities missing are those that allow optimum orientation of an aerial. There is no tuning strength indication, no provision for the 300ohm indoor aerial and no facility to listen to the multi-path signal as is often found on tuners of this sort of price.

But then if you buy a £500 TV set, you would be an idot not to spend the £20 it costs to have a proper aerial fitted. The same is true with a tuner, and not providing the 300ohm facility on a £200 tuner is a sensible move when seen in this light.

The 104 is obviously styled to match the rest of the Meridian range of electronics and immediately converts one of their amplifiers to a receiver — it doesn't look like an extra box stuck on top as most tuners do; it looks as though it was meant to be there!

All Meridian units have mains outlets on them and the 104 is designed to plug into the spare one on an existing amplifier and will thus be switched on along with the power amps when the pre-amp is turned on. A separate mains on/off switch is provided on the rear so that it can be used with other equipment.

Six pre-set stations are provided as well as stand-by position. The purpose of the latter is to allow the tuner to be switched on and thus 'warm up' to optimum operating conditions without putting out an audio signal. This facility is included so that if the pre-amp being used suffers from breakthrough from the tuner inputs to others then you can still listen to a record before selecting the radio with no breakthrough from the latter.

The six stations are tuned using the screw-driver supplied which turns the rotary pots in the panel beneath the meter. Each station is then selected by turning the knob on the right of the unit to one of the six positions. To the left of the meter are two lever-type switches labelled 'Tune' and 'Mono'.

The tune switch disables the AFC and converts the meter to a centre-zero tuning indication thus making tuning both easy and accurate. The meter normally acts as a station indication by giving the frequency of the station selected by the rotary switch on the right. The mono switch is really for receiving weak signals. By converting the output to mono it enables signals that are too weak for noise-free stereo reception to be quietly enjoyed in mono and also by turning the muting circuits off allows weak and distant stations to be received.

The Meridian 104 tuner has been designed to keep all the distortions known to man as low as possible. The radio circuit combines a dual gate MOSFET input stage with a double band mixer and a linear phase IF as well as an 'advanced' stereo decoder section. The useable sensitivity is claimed to be 1.2μV which is very good with the figures for 50dB signal to noise ratio being 2.3μV for mono and 20μV for stereo.

Although important to the designer such considerations are irrelevant to the purchaser. What we really want to know, surely, is if the £198 (inc. VAT) the 104 costs is going to get us a tuner that will pick up all the stations we are interested in receiving and if it makes noises that are nice to listen to.

The problem with evaluating tuners is that the limitation is not always the unit itself but the quality of the transmitted signal. For instance, listening to Nicky Horne's top ten albums on Capital radio I was able to compare nearly all of them directly with the disc. Needless to say disc reproduction is far ahead of radio, the main faults being the turntables used by the radio station and the amount of frequency equalisation used. Capital in particular comes over as if the loudness button was permanently in circuit.

I compared the 104 with a Pioneer TX9500 MkII which is generally regarded as one of the better Japanese offerings and, to keep things brief, all I have to say is that the 104 wiped it out. The typical oriental top end of the 9500 was clearly apparent in comparison with the smoother Meridian.

Readers of the query section will know that favourite tuners from Britain are the Edinburgh Wireless (£150) and A&R T21 (£157). Unfortunately neither of these were to hand to compare but David Prakel kindly provided his Nytech the tuner section of which is the same as the Edinburgh Wireless design. The Nytech regularly receives out highest praise mainly for its amplifier section which, as I say elsewhere in this issue, I regard as amongst the top six designs at any price in the world. I have never really evaluated the tuner section, regarding it as a bonus for the amplifier purchaser, but the comparison showed that it comes very close to the 104. At times in fact we were hard pressed to tell them apart (mainly due to programme material) but eventually both I and the Nytech owner, dgp, were convinced that the 104 showed up some colouration in the Nytech in the form of a tendency towards nasality.

This was very slight though and it took a cello to really convince us that it was a genuine effect. This has to colour my recommendation for the Meridian. At £258 the Nytech is only £60 more expensive and, as I said, includes a great amp section. So, while I have no hesitation in describing the Meridian 104 as the best tuner I have heard, I have to say that it should only be considered by those who already own a really good amplifier. If you are not one of these happy souls then I have to say that the £60 extra for the Nytech would result in a better buy in terms of overall enjoyment of your system.

But I don't want it to be thought that I am knocking the Meridian. I feel that reviews should be of ways of spending money and not of products in isolation, and this is the basis for the remarks above. But having said that, let me say that the first thing I liked about the Meridian 104 was the looks and size which I think set a standard in both the realm of aesthetics and domestic appeal. The second thing I liked is the way it effortlessly picked up everything I asked it to. And the last thing is the way it reproduced what it did pick up; smoothness and good extension of reponse coupled with extremely convincing imagery characterised the sound of what I have to report is the best tuner I have heard to date.