

Meridian Digital Theatre

Prepare to be impressed as Meridian hits the market with the first music-cum-high-end surround system.

There could have been no more delicious irony. For months I had been carefully planning and assembling my version of a no compromise, music-cum-THX system, and was on the point of completing the write-up for *HE* (see page 54) when I was offered a sample of the only system available over the counter designed to do this job — the Meridian *Digital Theatre and Surround Sound System*.

Although described as digital home theatre, this is primarily a hi-fi music system which has been stretched to fulfil a home cinema role rather than the other way around. The company has always been music-led, and the impetus for this system would appear to stem from a realisation that its in-house DSP (digital signal processing) expertise could pay dividends in the design of algorithms for Dolby, THX and other forms of spatial stereo. In fact, home cinema is just one of this system's capabilities.

The *Digital Home Theatre and Surround Sound System* is not a fixed combination of components. There are choices and options, but the system presented here is typical. It includes four *DSP5000* speakers (not THX-approved) which are used as the main left and right speakers at the front and back of the room, and a single *DSP5000C* centre speaker. Also making up the system is a *565* Surround Sound Decoder (which includes a THX processor section), and a *562V* Digital Controller. Finally, Meridian saw to fit to throw in a compact disc transport (not player) — the *500* — for music listening. It has no video role, and is treated for our purposes as an extra, albeit a desirable one.

I describe the *DSP5000/5000C* as speakers purely as a matter of convenience — each is actually a complete audio system in its own right, except that there are no source components. The simplest *DSP5000*-based system consists of a pair of *5000*s, a CD transport and a remote control to talk to the master speaker, which then passes commands back to the player as required. In this case, however, the source feed is a digital preamplifier whose main task is to accept inputs from a range of analogue and digital sources, and to convert them into a digital feed in a format the *DSP5000*s understand. Each *5000* converts the signal back to analogue, and each contains three 75Watt amplifiers — one per drive unit — along with much of the system intelligence that allows it to be configured for its role in the system.

A DSP in each speaker allows for a great deal of customisation. For example, midband equalisation is available depending how far the speaker is from the wall, to vary the overall tonal

FEATURES AND FACILITIES



The nerve centre is an active, three-way speaker system with digital inputs and DSP functions for listening axis, boundary/open space use etc.

The centre speaker boasts the same general features as the *DSP5000*, turned through 90 degrees. It's large enough to sit underneath many TVs, although, as is usually the case, it sounds better above.

Each 500 series component is housed in matching non-standard width in compact and elegant cases with concise front panel controls.

balance, to adjust for different listening axes, and even to account for asymmetric speaker placement. My rear speaker was closer to my listening seat than the other, which was compensated for by using digital delay to simulate the extra distance.

The system took over an hour to set up and almost every element in the system is 'soft' — in other words, there's much to be programmed from scratch, but the adjustments all contribute something useful. For example, designating one of the five speakers as a master — in charge of two-way communications with the rest of the system — allows the user to choose the speaker with the clearest line of sight to the system remote control.

The musical roots of the Meridian could be heard in everything it played. As a stereo system, it has all the familiar Meridian hallmarks. With a taut,

dry and supremely well controlled style of delivery, the impression is of a system at ease with both itself and with the source material and, therefore, one that as a listener you will immediately feel relaxed with. Tonally it is near neutral in the bass and midband with a perceptible increase in output in the upper midband, which gives the system an attractively incisive quality, although this can be tuned out using the tone 'tilt' facility.

Because the system is dry and controlled — and even slightly bleached of tonal colour when compared to, say, the Martin-Logan-based system — when the bass finally turns on, it does so with an impact out of proportion to its actual weight and depth. In fact, bass quality is quintessentially Meridian. It is surprisingly attractive, but not always entirely realistic: the organic, breathing



The system preamplifier (digital controller with video switching, in Meridian-speak) sports an unusually large range of inputs — analogue and digital.

The 565 surround sound decoder performs a wide range of spatial processing in DSP, with outputs in digital and analogue form.



▶▶ quality of real bass gives way to a tauter, almost clipped presentation, which lacks the fire-breathing quality associated with good THX bass, for instance. In common with the Martin-Logan system, bass delivery would count as full range in most people's terms, and for many there will be no pressing need to augment the bass simply in order to conform to THX strictures on the subject. Nevertheless, Meridian is currently developing a matching subwoofer for this system. For the majority of the time, I chose to use the REL *Studio* subwoofer from the Martin-Logan system, which worked well with the otherwise all-Meridian package. I was impressed by the benefits the extra octave of true bass conferred, especially because it encouraged the system to revel in its more organic and impactful delivery.

As a home cinema system, the Meridian has an unevenly impressive mix of abilities, the bottom line being that while the front of the soundstage sounded brilliant, the surround channel showed signs of being over-engineered. The presentation of sound overall was consistent with the two-channel stereo findings, with the same accomplished, ultra-clean and spacious quality, positive and precise location of voices and instruments, near-THX standards of vocal intelligibility and an extremely accurate, uncoloured tonal quality.

These findings held true at the rear of the soundstage too, and in the end this was the problem. Although the electronics are definitely THX, it is the speakers that dominate the spatial attributes of the sound, and they are strictly Dolby Surround. The surround channel was throwing up too many anomalous discrete images that the ear could latch onto. Some of the generalised ambient sounds from the superb THX-mastered version of *Jurassic Park*, for example, were firmly locked to the speakers rather than the space around them, and the special effects — animal noises and other surprise effects — were echoed by splashes of sound from the rear. THX handles these necessarily ambiguous effects in a more appropriately ambiguous and diffuse way, avoiding the anomalies that were too obvious here. In my long, but relatively narrow, room, I also found that the enforced long distance between the front and rear pairs of 5000s had a detrimental effect on imaging, with a broad pool of

sound at the sides of the room, making way for a more defined imagery behind the listener's head.

Such is the flexibility of the system and the range of set-up options, it will almost certainly be possible to improve on these findings, by spacing the speakers more appropriately, by adjusting the seating position and/or rear channel delay, and by setting up the rear speakers at a lower level than the test tones suggest. This said, I don't think the Meridian package will fully meet its home cinema brief until supplementary dipolar speakers are introduced as an addition to the basic system.

This aside, I still have nothing but praise for the Meridian's performance standards with good movie-based material. A strong sign of its underlying excellence was the way the sound seemed to improve almost without limit as the quality of the recording improved. The aforementioned THX-mastered *Jurassic Park* was simply stunning from the first to last, as was a THX-mastered recording of *Speed* (shame about the movie itself...). The steering logic did its job remarkably well; there was none of the audible highlighting of background sounds on the dominant channel that makes many analogue processors sound palpably synthetic (though THX processors are generally better in this respect), and the Meridian remained convincingly consistent over a remarkably wide dynamic range. Above all, sit down in front of this system, wind up the volume with a good LaserDisc, and it is virtually impossible not to react with an involuntary 'Wow!'. This is one classy act. *Alvin G.*

SPECS-R-US

Model: DSP5000

Features Digital active loudspeakers with 2x 160mm bass drivers • one 25mm aluminium dome tweeter • each unit has its own 75Watt amp with overdrive protection and DSP-based configuration
Sockets Two digital-only inputs • phono sockets for 32kHz, 44.1kHz and 48kHz clock rates • digital out for second speaker in pair • communications sockets for various Meridian components
Dimensions 210(w) x 295(d) x 900(h)mm

Model: DSP5000C

Features Digital active centre loudspeaker with 2x 160mm bass drivers • one 25mm aluminium dome tweeter • each unit has its own 75Watt amp with overdrive protection and DSP-based configuration
Sockets Two digital-only inputs • phono sockets for 32kHz, 44.1kHz and 48kHz clock rates • digital out for second speaker in pair • communications sockets for various Meridian components
Dimensions 670(w) x 275(d) x 200(h)mm

Model: 562V

Features Multimedia controller (preamplifier) which selects from a range of analogue and digital inputs, and provides a digital signal for the Meridian digital loudspeakers • analogue and digital tape loops
Sockets Nine analogue and five digital inputs (phono) • six composite video in/two composite video out • 2x S-Video in • 3xS-Video out • digital main out • digital tape out • communications sockets
Dimensions 321(w) x 332(d) x 88(h)mm

Model: 565

Features DSP-based surround sound processor with on-board algorithms for Dolby Pro-Logic • THX • Music (prop) • Trifield • SuperStereo • Ambisonics • output available in analogue and digital form
Sockets Digital in: one electrical, one optical (Toslink) Analogue out: Two surround • two mono subs • stereo sub • centre • main L/R • Digital outputs for four pairs of speakers max • assignable in software
Dimensions 321(w) x 332(d) x 88(h)mm

VERDICT

Meridian Digital Theatre: £10,472

+ Astonishingly flexible, state of the (digital) art universal audio system, suitable for replaying any two-channel source through a bewildering range of sound processing algorithms through up to five speakers. DSP features mean that the system is extensively customisable to suit different circumstances. The system is sweet, assured and highly capable on audition.

- Although the electronics are THX compliant, this doesn't follow for the speakers, which shows in a less than ideal surround channel performance with Dolby material. Sometimes the system sounds a little too clinical and tidy to be real, and the very comprehensives of the system will prove an impediment for some.

Sound Quality	▶▶▶▶▶
Build Quality	▶▶▶▶▶
Features	▶▶▶▶▶
Ease of Use	▶▶▶▶▶
VALUE FOR MONEY	85%

Models & Prices

Model	Price	Price total
DSP5000 x4	£2995 per pair	£ 5990
DSP5000C	£1595	£ 1595
562V	£895	£ 892
565	£1995	£ 1995
System Total		£10,472

Also examined: Model 500 transport, £1095

Meridian Audio Ltd, 14 Clifton Road, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE18 7EJ ☎ (01480) 434334