

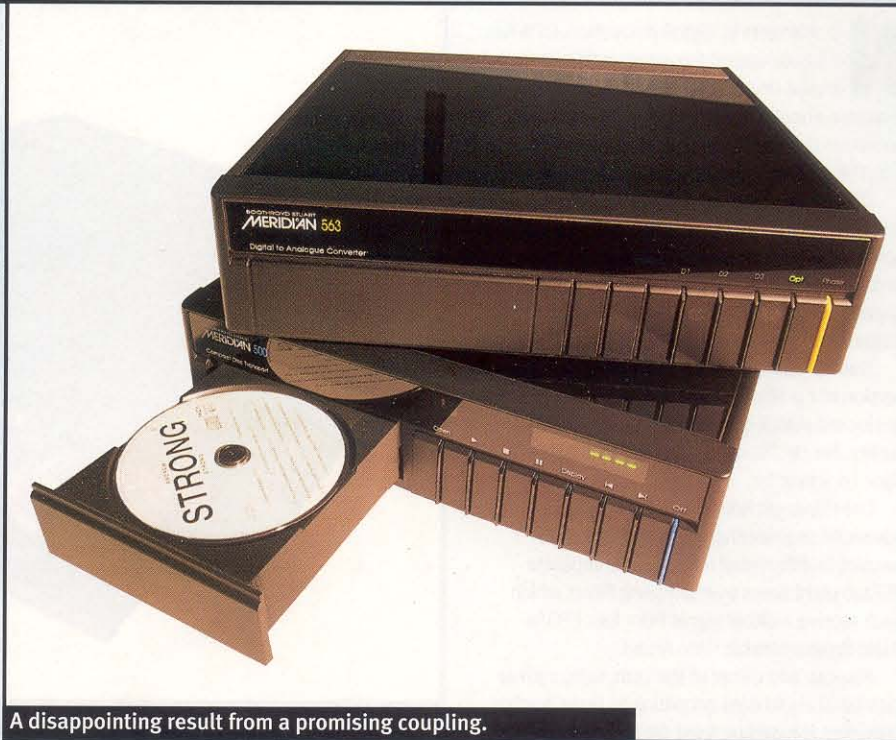
MERIDIAN 500/563

A salutary tale this, that serves to demonstrate how even past masters of the digital art can miss a flawed canvas from time to time. Superficially, there's nothing amiss with this 500-series combination, a matching and elegant pair that combines the distinctive ergonomics of its forebears with a new and somewhat softer outline.

The combination of an alloy chassis, moulded plastic fascia, black textured-enamel and glass top-plate also confers a deal of added stability to the 500 transport. Its innards have evolved from the 602 (issue 96) but benefit from a new and lightweight carbon-fibre disc-clamping mechanism, separate keypad and servo microprocessors (each programmed by Meridian), plus an improved dot-matrix display.

Once again, Meridian has retained the Philips older swing-arm CDM4 mechanism and SAA7310 decoder — a combination that still provides unparalleled tracking of discs that aren't top quality or in the best condition. Then there's the digital output itself, still fired-up by Philips' PCF2705 ADOC, but now re-clocked and reinforced by a separate line-driver amplifier.

Its partner, the 563, hasn't changed from issue 127 but remains the only outboard converter equipped with a differential pair of Crystal's popular CS4328 Bit Stream DACs. Notable features on the 563 include a phase-invert option and balanced AES/EBU digital input. It's a pity the 500 doesn't feature an AES/EBU output to match.



A disappointing result from a promising coupling.

Sound quality

Glancing back at my notes from issue 127, I discovered that the listening panel had in that gently chastised the 563 converter for sounding very slightly forward and also a little anxious with busier passages of music. Nevertheless, these trivial foibles were readily tempered by the

sophistication of a superior transport.

But now, some six months and 500 units on, this 500/563 combination was described in deprecating terms by our panel as lacking in real substance. Certainly it seemed rather forward and brash, lacking bass weight and momentum. Our jazz selection sounded harder and brighter than usual, as if the saxophonist had fitted a harder grade of reed.

Mary-Chapin Carpenter sounded particularly busy and vigorous with plenty of low-level detail brought to the fore (note the compressive linearity trend in the test figures on page 54). But sadly, there's little gradation or dynamic expression. It's a loud and tiring performance rather than one that reflects the true contrasts of the music.

Conclusion

Despite achieving a Recommendation in issue 127, this particular 563 converter, in tandem with Meridian's own 500 transport, marked a significant downturn in performance.

Interestingly, many of the minor indiscretions noted in issue 127 were cited at the forefront of its

problems here, despite our use of various digital cables, including both Audioquest Video Z and Goldmund Lineal.

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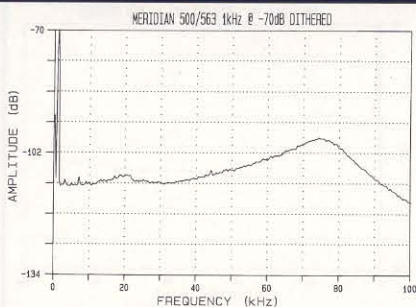
At the eleventh hour, Meridian confirmed this sample was faulty. We will report on a kosher machine as soon as possible.

LAB REPORT

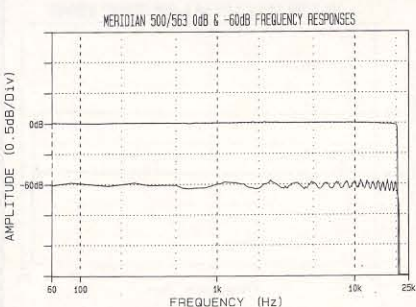
Subject to a fresh overhaul in the lab, this 500/563 combination failed to maintain the performance of the 563 tested in issue 127. Sure, there's a reduction in peak-level THD to 0.0007 per cent midband but a massive increase in THD at -30dB from 0.002-0.008 per cent to 0.02-0.025 per cent.

Its low-level linearity is also slightly wayward with errors of just -0.45dB (issue 127) increasing to +2.40dB in this instance. This, plus the rippling of its low-level frequency response, suggests a possible problem at the LSB of one DAC.

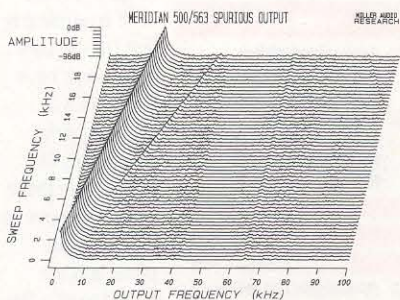
Otherwise, the suppression of stopband noise and wide 103dB signal-to-noise ratio remain equally impressive for this unique 'double-Crystal' implementation.



Typical pattern of ultrasonic noise emerging from Crystal Bit Stream converter as used in the Meridian DAC.



Obvious ripple in low-level response was absent in 563 converter which was tested in Hi-Fi Choice issue 127.



The innocuous 2nd harmonic visible on the 3D plot should have been removed by Meridian's differential DAC.

VERDICT

▲ Plenty of get-up-and-go; will liven-up even the dullest and dustiest of hi-fi systems.

▼ Too insistent, urgent and fatiguing; light and bright; insufficient weight and gravity.

SOUND ★★★★★

VALUE ★★★★★

PRICE £975/695

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