

Meridian 500/563 CD DAC & transport revisited

This is the third time the Meridian 563 DAC has come under my scrutiny. The first review of the DAC appeared in the March issue this year and resulted in the award of a Recommendation. With such a favourable result it came as a surprise last month to discover that in combination with the 500 transport the sound produced was far from praiseworthy.

What proved to be minor performance foibles in issue 127 (March '94) had escalated to major blights by the time of issue 133 (August '94). A slight sense of anxiety with busy orchestral recordings had become a tiring loudness, the music lacking gradation and dynamic expression.

It wasn't only the views of the listening panel that were contradictory, the results from the test bench also identified a shift in performance. Specifically, there was a deterioration in low-level linearity, an increase in mid-level distortion and an unusual rippling of low-level frequency response.

Obviously, something was seriously awry with August's

sample. Ultimately, Meridian identified a faulty component in the second-stage PLL. This was causing the system clock to 'bounce' and modulate the output of the Crystal Bit Stream DAC. Hence, the rippled response. Therefore, in order to present a true assessment of a healthy combination, *Hi-Fi Choice* has taken a second glance at a fresh sample.

This time the performance was far closer, though not identical, to the 563 converter tested for March. Specifically, resolution has tightened-up (showing errors of just $+0.1/-0.85$ dB across a 100dB dynamic range) while distortion at -60dB has fallen from 0.84 to 0.40 per cent (the original 563 clocked-up just 0.28 per cent). The -60dB response plot (lower trace) also shows the rippling reduced by a factor of three yet, unlike the 563 from issue 127, it's not completely eliminated.

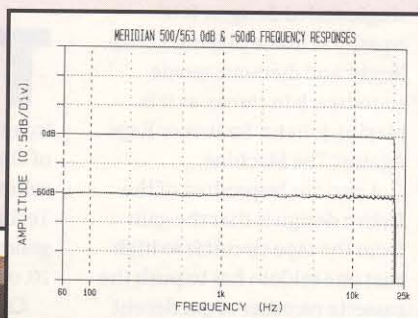
The upshot is a 500/563 combination that sounds far closer to our Recommended sample in issue 127 than the unexpected results in issue 133. During my re-

test I found that a sense of apprehension or tension with classical strings and brass was, once again, an occasional rather than persistent feature of its sound. The music was generally underpinned by a very secure bass with strong vocals sounding a little forward but undeniably expressive.

It was gratifying to see the correlation between lab and lounge — the DAC with a defect revealed itself both on the test bench and in the listening room. However, it was a shame that the initial impression of the 500/563 was marred as this combination is a highly-evolved and elegant piece of digital engineering which, at its best, is a genuine credit to Meridian's latest range.

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We requested a fresh sample of the £975 Meridian 500 transport and £895 563 DAC, after an abnormal performance in last month's test suggested something amiss. Our expert listeners were spot on — Meridian's engineers discovered and corrected a fault, and the result was a much improved response plot (above right).

