

MERIDIAN 501/555



Despite regular appearances in our CD player, transport and DAC tests, Meridian's amplifiers have avoided the tender mercies of our blind listening panel for at least seven years. So the time is ripe, if not fully perished, for Meridian's 501 preamp and 555 power amp to strut their high-tech stuff.

And, sure enough, the 501 does feature its fair share of novel thinking, despite being Meridian's only 'analogue' design. All sources are addressed via electronic input switching which flashes up information on a yellow four-digit display. Simply press the 'Source' button to cycle through its six line inputs, one of which can be loaded with an optional £75 MM or MC phono module. In similar fashion, Meridian also offers an additional video input switching module to enhance the 501's compatibility with AV systems.

Another key, labelled 'copy', lets you assign different input sources to both tape and main outputs. This is the equivalent of independent record-out switching. But few other amps come complete with two and three-room multi-room software allowing the 501 to display CD or tuner information from products in another room, for example.

Furthermore, this internal software is user-configurable, allowing you to re-assign new input sources and legends using the MSR system remote (£49). All this, plus muting, display on/off and a 99-step switched-ladder volume control from just six function buttons!

By comparison, the 555 power amplifier is positively conventional, even if its styling, with a black perspex top-plate and midi-sized casework, is clearly struck from the Meridian mould. It's a twin-mono design, DC-coupled throughout with fully complementary circuitry

that's reinforced by pairs of bipolar Motorola output transistors. These are bolted to fluted heatsinks that run the length of the 555. Dual 4mm binding posts, for instant bi-wiring, complete this tidy package.

Sound Quality

The general lack of humanity displayed by this combination was summed up by Cassandra Wilson's *Come On In My Kitchen* where, our listeners suggested, "instead of sounding seductive, she simply invited us in to do the washing up". So although the amplifier does not sound overtly bright or aggressive its music can still sound a little hard and mechanical, lacking both spontaneity and inspiration.

Nevertheless both Robert Cray's *Things You Do To Me* and Freddie Hubbard's *Plexus* benefited from a decent sense of acoustic

LAB REPORT

despite the former's voice sounding "slightly stilted or cropped" and the latter's tenor sax adopting the register of an alto. All were in agreement that this amp "places an accent on the upper registers of its music".

Our second panel described the 501/555 as "pear-shaped with a shock of orange hair", referring to its blend of brilliance with a weighty but leaden bass. So Victoria Williams's CD may have sounded more complete than it had with Audio Innovations' euphonic combo; yet for all this apparent composure, it still ended up sounding too intense.

These listeners also remarked upon the amplifier's emphasis of upper-mid detail by complementing its quick and lucid handling of El Malo's percussion. Unfortunately, Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto* now suffered a loss of colour, contrast and range, prompting our panel to suggested "the ensemble were there simply to make up the numbers".

Sadly, because the 501/555 tends to drain music of richness and colour, its purpose often becomes difficult to discern, leaving us listening to a collection of individual players with little sense of musical community.

Conclusion

All things considered, this is a very unfortunate result for Meridian, which has clearly tried to keep its 501/555 combination on the technical straight-and-narrow. Nonetheless, by providing something of a "wide open window" on the music, this vista also exposes the unsympathetic effects of both RF and very low-level IM distortions suffered by power amp and preamp respectively.

This may well account for the slightly "dry, mechanical and uncompromising" sound described by two successive panels of

listeners. A great pity then, bearing in mind both the existing flexibility and upgrade potential of this design. Having forwarded all my data to Meridian, I'm confident it will soon bounce back with customary innovation.

VERDICT

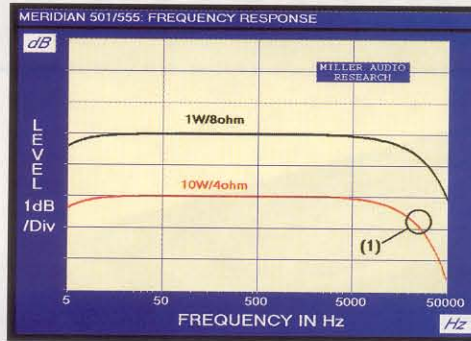
- ▲ Keeps things spinning along with a tight and positive sound.
- ▼ Dispassionate sound, lacking fluidity; sounds too intense at higher listening levels.

SOUND ★★★★★

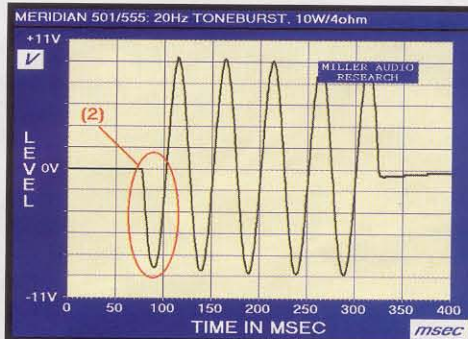
VALUE ★★★★★

PRICE £695/
£625

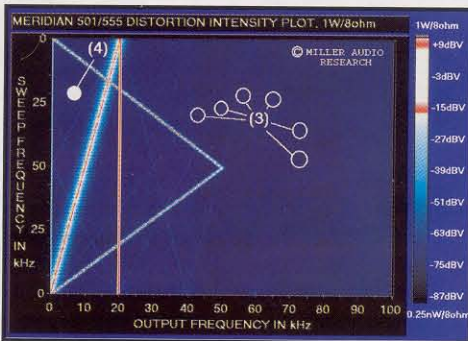
Meridian Audio Ltd, 14 Clifton Road, Huntingdon, Cambs PE18 7EJ
(01480) 434334



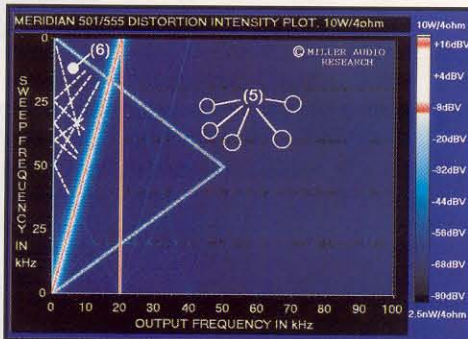
Frequency response



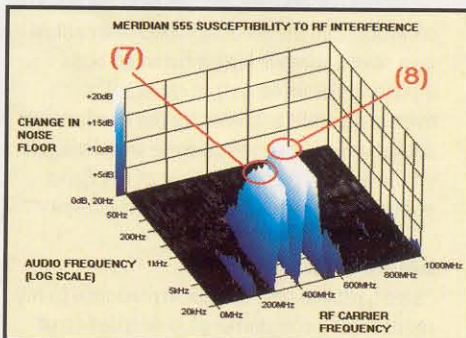
20Hz toneburst



Distortion intensity – 1W/80hm



Distortion intensity – 10W/40hm



RFI susceptibility

Having secured its technical front-door, Meridian's own 'cleverness' has let a number of gremlins in via the back gate. Let me explain. At first sight the +1.8dB power increase from 83W to 125W into 4ohm seems pretty generous as does the +1.2dB headroom for musical peaks. Yet, into trickier loads, its maximum current is limited to just 5A (25W into 10hm) as a result of its comprehensive thermal and DC offset protection which, with the benefit of hindsight, seems a little too invasive for its own good.

Furthermore, by placing an inductor in series with its output, thereby ensuring full stability into silly speakers with silly capacitive cables, the 555 now has a higher 0.12Ohm output impedance. This, in turn, could modify its HF response, already -0.6dB down at 20kHz (1), with certain cable/speaker combinations. Then again, Meridian's DC-coupled 555 with its single-pole feedback network ensures a clean, first-order response with transient signals. Do note, however, the 501/555 is phase-inverting (2), so it may be worth swapping over your red and black speaker cables.

Then there's the issue of noise versus distortion. On the one hand Meridian has engineered a fabulous 1W/8ohm S/N ratio of 90dB – quite the best in this test. Distortion, meanwhile, has been squidged down to around 0.001 per cent at all frequencies and output levels. A technical tour-de-force, and no mistake. However, the setting of the tape function apparently influences the nature of the amp's low-level but extensive-order intermodulation (IM) patterns (3) in addition to limiting the 501's input headroom.

Unfortunately, this busy nest of IM distortions, which extends beyond 7th and 8th orders, sails directly into the audioband (4) and remains unassuaged by higher power levels (5). In case the blue IM patterns get lost in the magazine printing process, I have highlighted the worst offenders with a series of white dashes (6).

Sadly, these peculiar and unmusical artefacts would have been buried by an inferior S/N ratio, which might also have served to disguise the 555's clear susceptibility to RF interference around 300MHz (7) and 450MHz (8). In practice, if the 501/555 were 'noisier' or bathed in the warmth of moderate 2nd-order distortions, it may well have fared better in our listening tests...