



# BLACK TO THE FUTURE

Simon Pope gets stylish with the 501.2 & 556 pre/power combination from Meridian Audio.

**T**HERE'S no denying it: no matter how many times I've seen Meridian gear before, I'm still impressed. The solid black mass of the 556 power amp says simply "I'm cool, don't mess!". Rather like their Huntingdon neighbours Cyrus, Meridian's distinctive look has been around for quite a few years and yet still has the knack of looking cutting-edge.

This is the new, lowest-priced pre-and-power combination in the Meridian stable, and although not cheap when compared with some similarly priced kit we've encountered, you certainly get your money's worth when it comes to build and finish (black textured enamel and glass!).

**VERSATILITY IS** the key word to the pre-amp. Six analogue inputs, CD, Radio, LP, TV and two tape inputs enable many upgrade possibilities. Although very much a company dedicated to all things digital, there is an optional MM or MC phono input on the 501.2, albeit for an extra £93. The front panel boasts a four character LED display with the volume level in decibels. The midway point is about 65dB down on full power - I say 'about' because the volume is controlled by up/down buttons rather than a knob. In use this is a bit of a mixed blessing.

Rated at 100W per channel into 8Ω, the 556 power amplifier uses eight transistors in the output stage with Meridian's own self-adjusting bias correction keeping an eye on load levels.

Meridian amplification equipment has always sounded somewhat clean and

precise; its detractors would say hard. This new combination sticks to the Meridian guns, but seems to have raised the level of transparency a step higher. Plenty of beef here: owning a pair of power hungry Magneplanar SMGa 'speakers gave an ideal opportunity to test Meridian's claim that the 556 is "ideal for driving difficult loads".

After a few weeks or so with the amps in the front room of *maison* Pope, I found myself using the pairing on quite a regular basis. Like certain records, they are definitely 'growers'.

It must be said that they perform better with certain types of music. Over-warm music and recordings, like the **Vienna Philharmonic's Brahms' Fourth** tended to sound a bit thin through the amps and lacking rhythmic clout. All this changes with brassy and 'cold' music such as **Sibelius'** impressions of the bleak Finnish landscape. The desolation of the last movement of the *Fifth Symphony* sounded magnificently powerful and detailed, with the brass section clean, violins crisp and bass strings firm and smooth.

**THIS TREND** continued in Rock and Dance music. Punchy, hard music such as the insensitive ranting of **Rage Against The Machine** powered gloriously through the 'speakers with considerable muscle. The same impressive results were achieved with **Underworld's Second Toughest In The Infants** album. The Meridians kept tight supervision on rhythm, so the electronic beats maintained their mechanical edge and the slightly 'glassy' sheen of the sound - not



always welcome - suited the space-suit clinical nature of the music.

Because these amplifiers sound so 'solid-state', the top end could sometimes sound a trifle hard-edged. This lack of warmth contributes to shallower sound-staging than some of the competition. These points aside, this cracking-looking combination has plenty of cajones, as the Spanish say, and with exciting material delivers the goods with impressive clout and clarity. ■

Meridian 501.2 control Unit £750  
556 power amplifier £950

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## WORLD VERDICT



Impressive with high octane music, but lacks that bit of warmth to bring out the best in laid-back material. Great build.

Measured Performance see page 119



## MERIDIAN 501/556

Meridian's 556 power amplifier has a lot of muscle: it produces 112watts into 8ohms and no less than 182watts into 4ohms. There'll be no problem in getting high volume, even with insensitive loudspeakers or large rooms.

There was some typical transistor crossover distortion, with an extended harmonic structure - an unusual sight in a Meridian amplifier. I rather suspect this unit has less feedback applied than usual, in an attempt to get more openness and stage depth. This is a balancing act, but since distortion levels never rose above

0.1% I suspect its effects won't be audible.

The pre-amp and power amp in combination have a wide frequency response of 3Hz-43kHz. Sensitivity was high at 180mV, so there will be no incompatibility with sources like old cassette decks and tuners producing 300mV or so.

The Meridian combination measured well in all areas. **NK**

Power	112watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	3Hz-43kHz
Separation	76dB

Noise	-90dB
Distortion	0.08%
Sensitivity	180mV
dc offset	2.2/0.6 mV

