

Meridian 502 Analogue Controller and 559 Power Amplifier

Sue Kraft



For someone whose “home theater” system consists of a microscopic thirteen-inch TV and a VCR from the Dark Ages, it’s inspiring to know that a company with the technical credentials of Meridian hasn’t forgotten about us old-fangled two-channel diehards. Not that I didn’t think a fully balanced 500 Series Meridian system wouldn’t sound good. I just didn’t think, at least for the money, it would sound quite *this* good. Retailing at \$3895, \$2575, and \$4495 respectively, the 588 compact-disc player, 502 analog controller, and 559 stereo power amp may not be the least expensive components I’ve reviewed, but they are easily the best I’ve heard in their price range. And here’s the kicker. If the siren song of multichannel surround ever does become too overpowering to resist, you won’t be left with a couple of white elephants lying around collecting dust. Meridian’s building-block design philosophy allows you to use the 559 (for example) in bridged mode for each of the front channels of a 568 digital surround processor. Fifteen-hundred watts per (into 4 ohms) ought to set you back in your listening chair! Or take advantage of the two-room

software that comes nested in the 502 controller to link sources in the main room to a second location such as study or family room. Or if you want to pursue the minimalist approach and alleviate the angst of fussing with interconnects, simply connect the digital output of the 588 CD player directly to one of Meridian’s DSP loudspeakers.

The 502 controller has been designed as a reference-quality partner to the 500 series amplifiers or M60 active loudspeakers. Inside the simple yet elegant slim-line case is a fully balanced, dual-mono preamp utilizing separate, isolated printed circuit boards and four separate DC supplies for both its left and right channels. A separate DC supply is also used for the microprocessor section. High-quality components include Nichicon and polypropylene capacitors, ultra-linear amplifier stages, four-layer PCB construction, low-flux toroidal transformers, and gold-plated connectors.

The 502’s many features include a pair of balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) outputs, seven inputs (3 balanced, 4 unbalanced), two unbalanced tape outputs, user-adjustable sensitivity, and a phonostage option with mc or mm plug-in modules for each channel. The front panel has an LED display with a row of seven buttons directly beneath it to control various functions such as source, mute, off, and volume. I didn’t think I’d like the up/down volume control at first (knobs are so much easier to use when you’re in a hurry), but it turned out to be a moot point, as I ended up using the included Meridian System Remote (MSR) 99% of the time anyway. At first glance, the four-dozen or so buttons of varying shapes, colors, and sizes may look a bit intimidating, but for the purposes of operating the preamp and CD player, I found the MSR to be fairly simple and straightforward. I only needed to refer to the owner’s manual once to figure out the phase button.

According to Meridian, the “core design of the 559 employs a radical new amplifier topology first featured in the Meridian flagship DSP8000 loudspeaker.” This new topology is an implementation of several RF techniques and novel circuit designs, resulting in a low-feedback design with distortion that measures as low as conventional amplifier topologies. Like the 502, the 559 is also fully balanced and features dual-mono construction. In fact, to drive the amplifier unbalanced via the RCA inputs, the signal

is first balanced using a proprietary “superbal” op amp input configuration before being applied to the amplifier. Twin low-noise high-mass 1.2kVA transformers and more than 80,000pF of audiophile-grade smoothing capacitors deliver a staunch 300W per channel into 8 ohms and a staggering 1500W into 4 ohms (when used in mono—bridged—configuration). The only parts the left and right channels share are the enclosure; even the soft start on the mains primary side is shorted out when the amplifier is running to avoid any possible interaction.

Unlike the svelte 502, the 559 is housed in a substantial 82-pound rack-mountable steel chassis with brushed aluminum faceplate. Internal heatsinks make for a clean and environmentally friendly appearance. Controls include front-panel standby and rear-panel balanced/single-ended inputs, twin gold-plated high-current binding posts for bi-wiring, and a switch for stereo/ bridge mode.

For the cable tweekers out there, I settled on a Kaptovator power cord for the 559 amp and Elrod Signature 2 for the 502 pre. The Elrod can be a bit unruly to work with (it's the size of a small fire hose, only not as flexible), but a sonic wonder when it comes to opening up the midrange. It would have been nice to try a second Elrod on the CD player, but the 588 had to settle for stock. My Harmonic Technology interconnects seemed to be the best choice once again, along with a pair of Coincident Total Reference speaker cable.

My first impressions of the Meridian trio were that of a remarkably well balanced, naturally smooth, musically satisfying, and all-around listener-friendly system. A seductive sense of dynamic ease and effortlessness immediately catches the ear, along with a notably broad, enveloping soundstage. Bass is solid and extended, with unwavering control over the dual 10" woofers in the Coincident Totals. The presentation is remarkably linear from top to bottom, with no discernable forwardness in any frequency range. Solid-state gear can sometimes become so thin you feel as if you are hearing *through* images instead of around them. With the Meridian, images were not overly lush by any means, but had a palpability and substance more reminiscent of tubes than transistors. If you like folksy bluegrass music, Misty River's *Live at the Backstage Gate* [MRCD] is right up your alley. With the Meridian, the bass fiddle on “Black Pony” actually sounds like there's a hollow wooden box attached to the strings. Vocals are temptingly smooth, natural, and articulate; the last track is a four-part harmony (*a cappella*) rendition of “America the Beautiful” that will bring tears to your eyes.

The XRCD version of Dave Grusin's *Discovered Again Plus!* [LIM XR] is a superb recording that could have been tailor-made to accentuate all the positive attributes of the Meridian. I don't think I've heard XRCD sound better on my system. Transients were quick, clean, and precise; high frequencies sweet and clear; and separation of images superb. I'm not sure exactly how to describe it, but there was a black background that seemed atypical of solid-state, making images appear more rich and distinct in contrast. I didn't hear any hint of that “white-ish” quality associated with some transistor designs. On the Brazilian flavored “Captain Bacardi,” percussive instruments hung magically in mid-air, seeming totally detached from the speakers and everything else around them. The sound was more than just enjoyable; it was kickback-in-your-favorite-easychair comfortable. And by that I don't mean laid-back or polite. It just had a rightness and ease about it that allowed you to forget about the stack of machinery in front of you, and savor the music.

Although the main focus of this article centers on the 502 and 559, the technical and sonic merits of the 588 compact-disc player are equally (if not more) impressive than the analog equipment under review. I spent a fair amount of time mixing and matching components, and although the best synergy was ultimately achieved when using the three Meridian pieces together as a system, I wouldn't have been unhappy with any of these units on its own. The 502 preamp was perhaps a little less open and spacious than the Ayre K-5x, but exhibited better clarity and focus, along with a smoother and fuller midrange presentation.

I was particularly impressed with how well the 559 performed against the \$8500 BAT 75SE tube amp. Throwing a tube amp into the mix may be one of those apples and oranges things, but I can remember thinking at the time how the 559 could have been the solid-state sibling of the 75SE. It didn't have the extraordinary level of three-dimensionality or spatial detail, but was almost as clean, smooth, and refined as the 75SE.

So, is there anything I don't like about the 502/559 combo? For one thing, the fact that I'll have to send it back. In separate listening tests, I slightly preferred the 559 amp over the 502 preamp, but when partnered together, along with the impressive 588 CD player, it was tough to find any faults worth the ink to complain about. What's not to like about a rig that is clear, focused, naturally smooth, palpable, effortlessly dynamic, and, above all, well-balanced and sonically gratifying? Add to that the built-in system flexibility that comes with all Meridian components, and you have a package that's tough to beat.

I can't help but be reminded of a quote from the classic children's story Goldilocks and the Three Bears: “She tasted the porridge from the first bowl. ‘This porridge is too hot!’ she exclaimed. So, she tasted the porridge from the second bowl. ‘This porridge is too cold,’ she said. So, she tasted the last bowl of porridge. ‘Ahhh, this porridge is just right,’ she said happily and she ate it all up.” Like that last bowl of porridge, the Meridian gear was “just right!”

Specifications
588 Compact Disc Player With System Remote
Outputs: One coax digital SPDIF/IEC1937; one each unbalanced (RCA) and balanced (XLR)
Dimensions: 3.46" x 12.64" x 13.07"
Weight: 14 lbs.
502 Analogue Controller With System Remote
Inputs: Four unbalanced (RCA), three balanced (XLR)
Outputs: One each unbalanced (RCA) and balanced (XLR); two unbalanced tape
Phonostage gain: N/A
Phonostage input impedance: N/A
Features: user-adjustable sensitivity, optional phono modules
Dimensions: 3.46" x 12.64" x 13.07"
Weight: 10 lbs.
559 Solid-State Stereo Power Amplifier
Power output: 300Wpc into 8 ohms
Dimensions: 7.85" x 18.90" x 18.98"
Weight: 82 lbs.

Associated Components
Ayre CX-7 compact disc player; Ayre K-5x, BAT VK-3i and VDH P1 preamps; Ayre V-5x and BAT 75SE amps; Coincident Total Eclipse speakers; Coincident Total Reference speaker cable; Harmonic Technology Pro Silway II and Purist Audio Design interconnects; JPS Kaptovator and EPS Signature 2 power cords; PS Audio Ultimate Outlet; Symposium Svelte Shelves and Rollerblocks

Manufacturer Information
Meridian America Inc.
Suite 122, Building 2400 3800 Camp Creek Parkway Atlanta, Georgia 30331 (404) 344-7111
Prices: 588 CD player: \$3895; 502 preamp: \$2575; 559 amp: \$4495

The Absolute Sound 2003