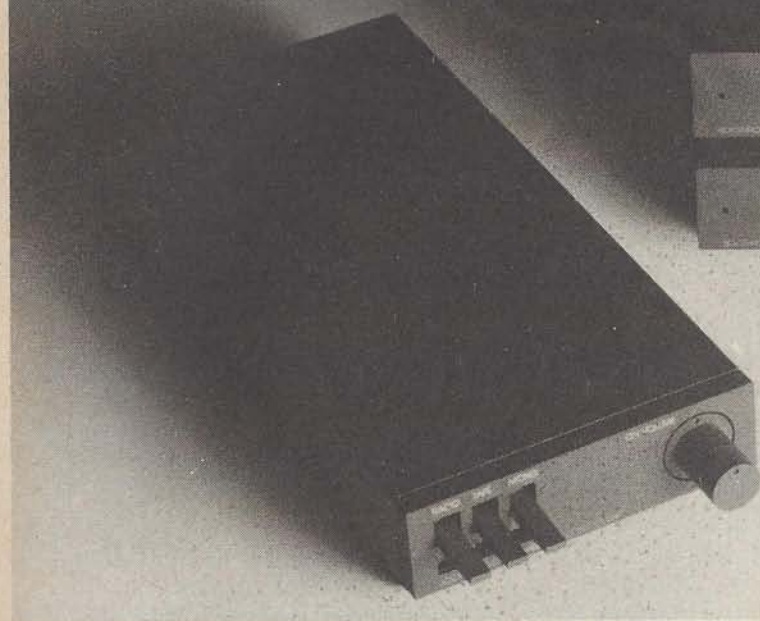


Meridian's high noon



And out of darkness came forth light — well balanced sounds with a good dynamic range. Our great luminary Peter J Comeau took his heavenly body along to listen to the Meridian 105 and compares it with some famous Naims.

The Meridian 105 power amplifier is basically a high powered version of the 103 tested in the September issue of *HFA*. With a rated output of 100 watts per channel and a price tag of over £500 when complete with 101 pre-amplifier, it merits inclusion in our Superfi class, and must be a challenger for the apparent supremacy that the Naim shows in these columns.

As such our powers of concentration were turned towards the subjective evaluation of this unit, not only in the 'how accurate is it' sense, but also with regard to the amount of musical pleasure it can give. But first a little description.

The 105 power amplifiers are mono designs, each linking with its own power supply, and a single channel retains the same appearance as the previously tested 103 power amp. A stack of five boxes — two power amps, two power supplies and a pre-amplifier — is thus to be found on the shelf of my listening room at the moment, though this is not as clumsy an arrangement as at first might seem. Some considerable thought has been put towards making the inter-connections as simple as possible, and the result is a neat brown block without the mass of wires at the rear which I normally associate with separate power and pre-amplifiers. The 105 power amp and power supply also interlock mechanically and can be hidden away if required, leaving only the slim 101 pre-amplifier on show.

The 101 is basically the same design as the earlier tested version, but has been 'tidied up' in some ways. The power amplifiers are switched

from the on/off volume control of the pre-amp, the mains outlet at the rear of the 101 now carrying a more easily inserted plug than the previous Bulgin type. All signal inputs and outputs are via five-pin DIN plugs, which are used partly to retain a compact and slim case, and also I suspect because when inserting or removing a DIN plug the signal contact breaks *after* the earth contact. This eliminates those annoying and speaker destroying buzzes which occur if one forgetfully leaves the volume control turned up. Not that I wish to defend the DIN plug as a method of interconnection — it still seems to have been designed by an electronic sadist when it comes to wiring the plugs for a tape deck — but it does have this particular superiority over the phono plug.

It *is* too easy to leave the volume turned up on the 101 because of the lack of markings, but otherwise the lack of reference I find refreshing in some ways. The volume knob is now provided with a small hole so that you can see just how far 'round the clock' it is (the earlier sample had no markings at all!), and if aligned vertically the unit is off. This position also coincides with the central setting of the concentric balance control, and a little more friction would be useful on the movement of the latter to avoid its accidental adjustment by the ham fisted. In some ways the lack of indication of volume setting is an advantage in that it provokes adjustment of the listening level subjectively rather than by picking a number up to ten. I like this, and get on well with

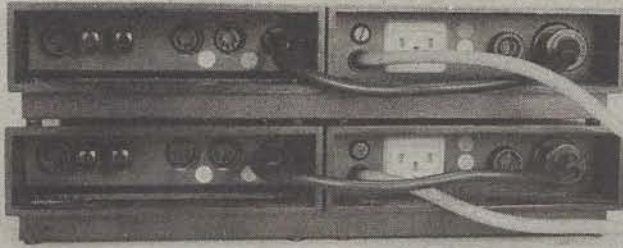
it, but I can quite see that others may find it annoying.

Besides these rotary knobs the only other controls on the 101/105 are the stereo/mono switch, and tuner and tape selectors. The power amps have no speaker switching or headphone facilities, speaker connections accepting bared wires to a respectable thickness, and the unit is obviously meant to appeal to the man who likes simplicity. For those to whom hi-fi is synonymous with a battery of equalisers, cassette and reel-to-reel decks, two turntables and so forth, I suggest a nice Japanese amp, such as the Hitachi Mosfet would be more suitable than the Meridian.

Modular

Meridian have now increased their range of phono input modules, which now in general carry a fixed subsonic roll off to comply with the new IEC standard of -3dB at 20Hz (I believe this can be modified if the owner wishes), to suit a range of moving coil cartridges, and a matching module for the Decca London or Gold, as well as the standard magnetic type. The 101 preamp case has, thankfully, been modified to allow the easier withdrawal of the electronics, and changing the plug in module is a five minute job in all. Little coloured stickers can be applied to the rear of the case to indicate the module inserted by the dealer, and the modules themselves are date stamped rather than being given a serial number.

All these modules showed low noise results,



Rear of the two mono modules; power amps on the left with DIN signal inputs and sprung, bare-wire speaker terminals. Power supplies are on the right.



Changing modules in the Meridian pre-amp, a five minute job.



DIN keep the pre-amp slim

Some criticism was aimed at the reproduction of low frequency information, which was not as clearly defined as some of the DC amplifiers around, but the lightness and dryness in this area that the 103 tended to exhibit, was not apparent. In fact the bass was considered powerful, but tight and well controlled. The subsonic filter thus does not seem to restrict the extension of the bass at all, or affect its power as does the A&R A60, but may have some bearing on the loss of clarity in this area.

Transients and tension

As might be expected from the incorporation of mono power amplifiers with separate power supplies, the dynamic range and transient response of the 105 is of a much higher order than the 103, and for that matter most of the other amplifiers in its price range. The size of image, and the feeling of unlimited power availability which this amplifier showed, helped a tremendous amount in creating tension in the build up to a crescendo whether in rock or in classical music. This happened whether listening at low or at high levels, so you don't have to turn the amp up loud providing, of course, that your speakers are also good at low levels.

With regard to speaker matching the power output results were justified, as the 105 was able to produce the same high quality even into Quad ELS. As expected from the plug-in module design, cartridge matching was good too, with the Decca Gold producing even better results than were described in its recent review. The Supex module worked excellently too, and this is the first pre-amp to match the 900E as well as the Naim NAC/32.

So this brings us finally to that difficult area of subjective criticism — is it a pleasure to listen to? Already mentioned are the good transient and dynamic results which give tension to the sound, but SW and I were also interested in its ability to retain excitement and the capability to rouse and get the old foot tapping. Well we concluded that the 105 would gain eight of ten in this test, which is not such a bad result when you consider that most amps we listen to would not get past five. We have to say that the Meridian was pipped at the post by the more expensive Naim 32/250 purely in the latter's ability to send tingles up the spine. Not that the Meridian could not do this — just that it does not quite have the qualities of the NAP250 which make one so aware of what is on the record and how well it is played. But to put this in perspective we did find that the NAP160 almost fell flat against the 105 and, as befits its price, the Meridian falls into a subjective gap between the two.

Armed with a Linn/Supex and a good set of speakers, the Meridian 101/105 can produce beautiful music. Due to late delivery I was not able to spend as much time with the amplifier before writing this test as I would have liked to, but even in such a short space of time I am prepared to recommend it without reservation in its price range. Not just a superb subjective performance, but it looks good too.

with an excellent 68dB measured on the moving coil input, though routing of the input leads needs to be kept well away from the close proximity of the mains output. The rated power output of the 105 was well met right across the frequency spectrum, and increased to 150 watts across a 4ohm load showing the possibility of ease of driving difficult loads. Despite the inclusion of a subsonic filter, the bass response did not start to roll off until below 30Hz and thereafter at 6dB per octave, and I was interested to see whether this would give the light and dry bass that the Radford ZD100 and A&R A60 give with a curtailment of bass starting at 40Hz.

One final change in design concerns the paintwork, which is now a darker brown, almost grey under artificial light, and is much more resistant to chipping. With the option of having the 101 alone sitting on the shelf next to a Linn, the Meridian amps are the most attractive example of new and modern design that I have seen, and the Boothroyd side of Boothroyd/Stuart deserves commendation here.

The other half of the partnership is, of course, Bob Stuart, and whether his job has been done as well depends on the subjective results. Besides listening at home, SW and I took a trip to Gulliford House Ltd to listen to the 101/105 against the Naim.

Interestingly the results we obtained on general listening tests were very different to those from the earlier 101/103 sample. The latter gave an almost bright sound, with a general lightness and

transparency as opposed to the warmth of the Naim 120. I concluded that time, that the Meridian might be preferable if one needed a brighter sound for a very warm room or set of speakers. PB in his later experiments with the 101 pre-amplifier also found that this was the major cause of the lightness of tonal balance alluded to. In this case it seems that the minor alterations made to the phono modules seem to have had an important effect, as the 101/105 combination restored the tonal balance towards neutrality. The lightness and transparency of midrange and treble were still apparent, though they could no longer be called bright, but lower midrange and bass gained a warmth that was most pleasing.

A variety of speakers were tried, and under no circumstances did this warmth tend to muddy the sound in any way, so it can be considered an attractive effect without drawbacks. The stereo imagery and depth was also more commendable than the 103, though this is more likely to be a function of the separate power amps and power supplies, as was the ability to reproduce original ambience. Even so, the image did not move completely out of the speakers in typical valve amplifier fashion, but then the 105 was able to produce a forward sound for rock where so recorded, which valve amps are often unable to do.

We listened for detail reproduction most carefully, as befits a unit in the superfi class, and could hardly fault the Meridian, especially with respect to the highly important midrange area.