

Meridian 507

Hi-tech British company is keeping CD alive

It may be leading the world in high-end DVD players, but Meridian isn't losing sight of CD buyers, says Andrew Everard

The last news we heard from Meridian was of the upgrade of its mighty 800-series optical disc player, which owes more to computer technology than accepted CD or DVD construction. It will cost you something around five figures, has highly modular construction, and in its latest Series 3 iteration has the world's first dedicated digital link able to carry multichannel DVD-Audio data to the company's matching Surround Controller.

It's all designed to be used in conjunction with the company's digital speakers to make a complete home cinema/multichannel audio system, and on the showing it gave at the recent Bristol Sound & Vision show (see report last issue) it all works very well indeed.

It even developed the lossless packing system (MLP) for high-quality multichannel sound on DVD-A, and clearly has an interest in seeing that high-resolution multichannel music format take off. Meridian is a champion of all things multichannel – well, not SACD, but you get the drift – and has been for many years.

However, don't think for a moment that the Cambridgeshire company is giving up on CDs. While so many advocates of DVD are encouraging us to throw away our CD hardware and buy an affordable DVD-V (or even DVD-A) player instead – you try buying a CD player from some of the big names of consumer electronics – Meridian has just launched its latest CD machine.

And considering the area of the audiophile stratosphere usually inhabited by the company – for example, whoever stole its demo system the night before the Bristol show netted a haul worth £180,000 – the new 507 CD player is remarkably affordable at £1195.

It's certainly a lot less than the last Meridian CD player tested in these pages: the 588 was reviewed back in September, and now costs £2100, meaning that the new player is only just a little over half the price. It draws heavily on other disc-playing products from the company, in that the jitter-reduction techniques found within are those developed for the old 508, while other aspects of the design come from the same strand of thinking as Meridian's Reference equipment.

Like all current Meridian designs this is a drawer-loading machine, and though I must admit I miss the old players, where the whole transport block came out to accept the disc, the CD-ROM-type mechanism here seems sturdy and durable. It reads CD, CD-R and CD-RW discs, and data coming from the disc is read asynchronously, then processed through a sophisticated system using triple buffers to isolate the output from what the drive is doing. Precise master oscillators are used to minimise jitter, which can cause distortion.

Digital-to-analogue processing here is in the hands of 192kHz/24-bit dual differential conversion, and this feeds into a direct-coupled Class A output stage of very high quality while, for recording, the digital output, available on both electrical and optical feeds, is relocked for accuracy. In these aspects, and on every other consideration, the

player is pure Meridian, despite the (relatively) low price: the construction is exemplary right through to the glass top panel, the controls are simple and easy to use, and the whole enterprise drips style. The usual Meridian tabletop system controller is provided, this also driving the company's processors, amps and digital speakers, and hookup is provided for the control system via the usual multipin DIN sockets to the rear of the unit.

Internal construction is just as meticulous, the player making extensive use of six-layer circuitboards, while four power supplies are employed to ensure optimal quality. This is a player built to last – it even has an RS232 connection to the rear allowing advanced control in multiroom systems.

Performance

The 507 hasn't quite the ultimate resolution and power of the 588 – which will probably come as something of a relief to Meridian and those who have bought the pricier player! – but by the standards of its price-competition, it's extremely good indeed, with a scale and control that ensures plenty of excitement without ever sounding unruly or edgy.

This is a player that rewards close attention as well as suiting background duties. It's not one of those machines that makes it impossible to do anything else while it's working, but at the same time it does give a good degree of insight into the discs being played, and draws the listener into the music. Playing a wide variety of music through the Meridian, hooked up via its analogue outputs to TAG McLaren amplification and Monitor Audio speakers, I was constantly surprised at just how good it was, and found the reviewing procedure giving way to listening for pleasure on several occasions.

The 507 is self-effacing, and imposes no obvious character of its own on the music. For that reason, advice about partnering equipment is pretty simple, given that there are no tonal anomalies for which compensation is needed: provided your amplifier and speakers are similarly revealing, and the cables you choose place no major restrictions on the sound, you won't go far wrong.

And at its best the 507 can be quite magical, as it was when playing the recent two-disc Claves set of Escudero conducted by Arturo Tamayo (5/01): this is music with which I must admit I wasn't familiar, but the Meridian and the way it conveyed the dynamics of the performance drew me in, as it did with Roel Dieltiens' recent disc of rare Vivaldi cello concertos (Harmonia Mundi, 5/01), where his glorious string tone was delivered intact and to striking effect. Voices are treated to a similarly luminous rendition, as was clear when Susan Graham's disc of French operetta arias (Erato, 5/01) was loaded, but above all the player always sounds entirely natural despite all that processing under the surface.

There's nothing mechanical or false about the way the 507 plays music, which is as much a tribute to the digital expertise of the Meridian engineers as it is to the way they implement their technology. Yes, the trickle-down effect helps – if they can manage the amazing all-digital 800 Series I suspect what's going on here is relatively simple for them to do – but by any standards this is a very good player representing excellent value for money. 



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MERIDIAN 507

Type CD player

Price £1195

Formats supported

CD, CD-R/RW

Digital to analogue

conversion 192kHz/24-bit

Analogue outputs Phono

Digital output

Electrical (phono), optical

Other connections Meridian comms system, RS232

Accessories supplied

Remote control, comms cable, mains cable

Dimensions (W x H x D)

321 x 88 x 332mm

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