

All-in-one Systems

Meridian Audio Core 200 & DSP3200

Get your hits out

This system is the most affordable route into the exclusive Meridian club. Jason Kennedy looks at the company's every-man solution



Meridian Audio is a high-end company with a difference; its products are largely dependent on being used within a complete Meridian system in order for them to be able to do everything in an extensive list of features.

The new DSP3200 is the least expensive active speaker in the range and it has been designed to be exclusively used with one of the company's control units, be that a preamp/processor, CD player or a Sooloos music server. It has the same proportions as the mid-treble part of the range-topping DSP8000, but contains completely different drivers and electronics. It's the latter that mark this out as not merely an active speaker, but a DSP-controlled design where everything is done in the digital domain. The Audio Core 200 pre/processor is the most affordable entry point to Meridian control. It's effectively a pre-amplifier, albeit one with analogue, digital and dock inputs and outputs that are dedicated to Meridian active speakers.

Room-correcting system

The DSP3200 speaker has more functionality than almost any other active design we've reviewed. It gives end users enormous flexibility when it comes to installing the speaker in the modern home, where there are always factors that undermine optimal positioning.

Other manufacturers make room correction processors that combine with passive loudspeakers, but this introduces an extra variable over the Meridian model, because the processor has to compensate for the non-linearity's in the speaker and in the room. In many ways the Audio Core 200 and DSP3200 form a room correcting system. They don't measure the response of the room and try to compensate for its irregularities, but the amount of set up variation they offer allows the user to tailor the final balance to a similar degree.

The Audio Core 200 can be used to adjust the DSP3200's balance, so that it will work either in free

space, against a wall, on a bookshelf or even in a corner where bass is naturally amplified. And if you prefer there is the option of adjusting tonal balance with a Baxendale-style tilt control, which offers considerably more subtlety than the usual bass and treble approach.

Another common problem is that you can't always sit in the optimal stereo sweet spot. The Meridian approach is to use a bit of level change with a lot of time delay, fractionally holding back the output of the nearest speaker to create the effect of both speakers being the same distance away.

The DSP3100, which preceded this speaker, took a different approach to putting Meridian technology into a relatively affordable active speaker; it was housed in a less-expensive, conventionally shaped box, albeit with aluminium side panels. But it was equipped with S/PDIF digital inputs alongside the SpeakerLink system. There was also an analogue version (M3100), with a balanced input. For the DSP3200, Meridian has stuck with its preferred cabinet design, but omitted non-key features such as an S/PDIF input, display and infra-red remote interface of the 3100. The Audio Core 200 is, therefore, essential for use with this speaker because it supplies signal via Meridian's SpeakerLink system of CAT6 cable on RJ45 plugs. The Core 200 controls the speaker's features via a simple remote control and front panel buttons that allow you to access the positioning and width control options. The inputs include two 3.5mm mini-jack sockets that accept both analogue and optical digital inputs. There is also a mini jack headphone output on the back and a mini-DIN input dedicated to the i80 iPod dock. Analogue inputs are converted to digital and whole integer up-sampled to a maximum of 96 kHz.

Optimising digital signals

The Audio Core 200 doesn't merely convert and up-sample incoming signals, it also uses Meridian's apodising filter to 'clean up' the sound (as the specs put it). Essentially, it eliminates ringing in brick wall filters, which is definitely a good thing. This unit is designed to make the most out of all digital signals be they from a CD transport, a music file on the computer or something as prosaic as a You Tube stream. It's a real world processor that aims to get as much music as it can out of any signal, whatever the quality.

The iPod dock may not offer a digital output, but it allows the Audio Core 200 to display meta data, which means that you can search and play from the listening seat with the remote, its logic takes a bit of familiarisation but is probably child's play.

It's surprisingly lightweight, this is partly because its switching power supply sits in a wall wart plug, but also because it has a relatively small, but beautifully executed moulded resin case, with a deep, piano-black finish. Build is clearly first class and design of a standard rarely encountered in this business.

The DSP3200 is also a superbly put together product, it's made of pressure laminated, birch ply panels sourced from slow growing, high altitude trees, because this variety is more stable. The white lacquer is so perfect that you'd never guess that there's any wood underneath and yet acts to make the cabinet that bit more rigid. Inside the box there are two 75-watt power amps, one for the polypropylene bass driver and one for an aluminium cone mid/treble unit. This is, therefore, a full-range unit coupled with a woofer, rather than a tweeter and mid/bass pairing usually found in two-ways – the crossover point is at 400Hz.,

Free space

The DSP3200 speaker has a matching stand which is, as is the Meridian style, carefully designed for maximum domestic acceptability, yet manages to be practical as well; in this case a single polished leg supports the top plate and hides both signal and mains cables, which connect to the speakers base and thus remain out of view.

We bolted the speakers onto these stands, hooked up with the supplied 10m lengths of CAT6 and we're virtually there. It's a simple system that can be expanded with various Meridian Sooloos components to cater for up to a dozen sources, but for the purposes of the review we used a Leema Antila CD player's digital output, an Apple iMac and an iPod Touch.

Setting up the speakers is more flexible than usual, thanks to the DSP3200 positioning options, but if you have no limitations then free space is the way to go because it allows for natural imaging without the need to use DSP. We did try out the 'width' feature, however, and it makes a distinct difference to the end result, so it's easy to see that in a compromised speaker position you would not have to put up with restricted sound stage scale. In standard set-up this is a highly revealing system that digs out detail like few others, it is extremely good at low-level resolution and manages to unearth fine sounds that more expensive amplifier and speaker combinations fail to reveal. This is the advantage of keeping the signal in the digital domain for as long as possible – right through the crossover and up to the power amplifier – and using amplifiers that have a direct connection to the drive units.

While 75 watts may not sound like a great deal, remember that this is per driver, so in practice you have 150 watts a side. It's not an obviously pacey sound, but there's no getting away from the depth of bass that's on offer and the alacrity with which it can be manipulated. It's probably why this system is so revealing of things like phase (spatial and sonic modulations which we've rarely encountered before) and bass power.

We hooked up the i80 iPod dock to test the system's skills at brushing up less than spectacular MP3 material. While there is still a big difference between high and low-res bit rates, even the lowliest are very listen-able. One interesting example is a voice and sax piece by Jack Kerouac and Zoot Sims, as the speaker's lack of a crossover in the mid-band makes for very low coloration which gives voices a depth of character that's rare.

Icing on the cake

Meridian is not your run-of-the-mill hi-fi manufacturer; it's out to bring good sound quality to people who want to enjoy music with the minimum of wires and frippery. That it can do this in a very attractive package that delivers a highly resolute sound is impressive indeed. The fact that these components cannot be mixed and matched is a major reason why it does this so successfully. It's a well thought out solution to the music lover's needs and the fact that it's a British company with considerable technological clout is the icing on the cake.

LIKE: Excellent detail, beautiful finish and surprisingly powerful

DISLIKE: iPod interface takes a bit of getting used to

WE SAY: A well thought out system that should win Meridian a lot of fans, even if it doesn't fit into the standard separates model

PRODUCT:

Meridian Audio Core

200/DSP3200

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Processor, preamp and active speakers

WEIGHT:

DSP3200 8.5kg, Audio Core 200 2.7kg

DIMENSIONS: Audio Core 200 (WxHxD) 280x91x280mm

DSP3200 (WxHxD) 244x320x246mm

FEATURES:

(Audio Core 200)

- Digital inputs: 2x coaxial, 2x mini optical,

USB,

- Analogue inputs: 2x RCA phono, 2x mini-jack, i80
- Outputs: Meridian SpeakerLink, headphone mini-jack (DSP3200)
- 2-way sealed enclosure
- Drivers: bass – 165mm, polypropylene, mid/treble – 85mm, aluminium cone

DISTRIBUTOR: Meridian Audio

TELEPHONE: 01480 445678

WEBSITE: meridian-audio.com