

ZEUS AUDIO MERIDIAN SYSTEM

Compact, easy to use, stylish and reliable — just some of the factors that made Northern Ireland's Zeus Audio plump for this Meridian system, reviewed by Malcolm Steward

Installation of the Meridian system proved entirely straightforward thanks to the comprehensive manuals supplied by the manufacturer. These helped explain a number of unfamiliar legends on the rear panels of some of these pieces of equipment.

Having only recently installed a new computer system at home, I was surprised to see terms like 'comms', 'port', 'mode' and 'network' once again, this time attached to pieces of hi-fi. The Meridian system takes the idea of integration to its logical conclusion: it allows the electronics to function intelligently by means of communications paths set up between its components.

For example, when idle the system can be switched to standby mode; if the Meridian tuner or CD player is then re-activated, it automatically fires up the rest of the system ready for immediate action. Such a system can be as simple or as sophisticated as you wish to make it: it can be confined to just one room or form the heart of an extended network of interconnected sound systems around the home.

It soon became clear that this system is intended to address the wider than normal needs of listeners seeking both high quality sound and outstanding aesthetic design. Each component conforms to a strict stylistic pattern. Meridian has got this aspect of design down to a fine art.

And usability too: despite the system's sophistication, operation of the controls soon became virtually intuitive. Thanks to its microprocessor control circuitry the system can be configured by users for preferred maximum volume level, mute level, start-up volume and source, and can even balance levels between different sources. Only once did the set-up catch me out: during an enthusiastic session with Dread Zeppelin (see later) when I managed to get the power amp's protection circuits to wake up, bringing Jah Paul Jo's vivid guitar soloing to an abrupt — albeit temporary — halt. Resetting the push-button trips restored normal service, this time at lower decibel levels.

I spent the first couple of days getting to know the system, using it exactly as sup-

Zeus Audio's component choice

'This system was chosen for a number of reasons. We have always found Meridian equipment to provide a unique blend of sound quality, value for money and reliability. It is also a very user-friendly system which can be upgraded in the future or expanded to add other inputs.'

'The 200 transport and 203 DAC offer one of the best value combinations at the price and they can only be beaten by spending quite a lot more money. The 201 preamp not only sounds excellent but has full system remote control giving the customer the best of both worlds — who says you can't have your cake and eat it? The heart of the system is of course the 205 monoblock amplifiers and they provide plenty of power and dynamic range for the excellent Argent 2 loudspeakers. The sound of these speakers is amazing.'

'This system is unique — a superbly built British system which looks and sounds great and is fully remote controlled.'

SYSTEM COMPONENTS

Meridian 200 CD transport	£795
Meridian 203 D/A converter	£495
Meridian 201 preamplifier	£695
Meridian 209 remote control	£98
Meridian 205 monoblock power amplifiers	£1000
Meridian Argent 2 speakers	£1050
Slate Audio speaker stands	£395
Total system price	£4528

plied. It was certainly easy to live with and I always walked away from it feeling suitably mellow and relaxed. I decided quickly that for the listener who wants sweet music to soothe away the tensions of the day, and to help him unwind after a stressful dose of nine-to-five, there could be few systems better suited.

However, therein lay the cause of my subsequent slight disenchantment. When I didn't want to bliss-out with the kind of music thirty-somethings are supposed to enjoy — Steely Dan's *Gaucho*, a bit of

mindless jazz-funk or Sting's latest impassioned plea for the sanctity of the rain forest (through the rosewood veneered Argents?) — the Meridian's unwillingness to sound nasty, wildly dramatic or just plain exciting when the music called for it left me feeling short-changed.

Dread Zeppelin's *Un-led-Ed* was a case in point. With the best will in the world you couldn't describe this band as accomplished musicians. Their playing is in the best garage-band tradition: enthusiastic, aggressive, determined, but not always as polished or accurate as it could be. Although this system didn't make Dread Zeppelin appear proficient, it definitely made their music fall too gracefully upon the ear. Significantly less outrageous, they sounded rather too much like the Barron Knights. Too polished, too smooth, too slick.

With the Quartetto Italiano's playing of Beethoven's string quartets, music which provided a stark contrast, the Meridian system captured not only the lyricism and flowing nature of the quartet's playing but also the important melodic and elaborate contrapuntal development of the four movements. It also presented a finely detailed picture of the recording venue's acoustic character and how the players worked to exploit it. In spite of this I was left feeling that the piece still didn't communicate as powerfully as it could on an emotional level.

Trying to isolate the contribution each component made to the overall sound reinforced the impression of the system's homogeneity. Each item exhibited broadly the same character as the next. As a consequence the whole system displayed a remarkable sense of unity, but quickly became predictable, promising little in the way of surprise or drama.

The system was nonetheless an enjoyable companion. I can see why it would fully satisfy many listeners, and I'm sure that Zeus Audio is correct in its assessment of the components' reliability and value for money. However, to tempt me it would have to learn to walk on the wilder side once in a while.

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