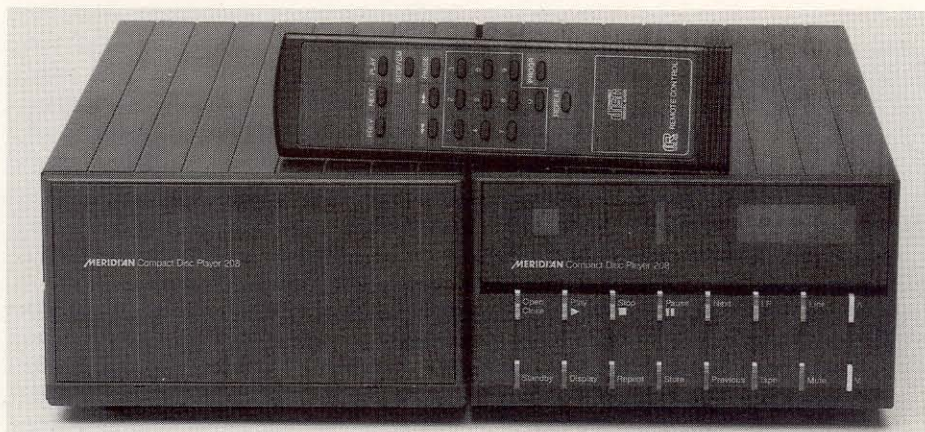


Meridian 208

Recommended

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Throughout an unusually long life by CD player standards, the 207 has steadily been refined and developed, the 16-bit variant retaining to the last its place as one of the benchmarks of CD sound quality. But all good things must come to an end, and it is now being phased out in favour of not one but two replacements. The simpler, more conventional and less expensive 206 is covered in detail on the previous page. This new £1,490 flagship 208 may look very similar indeed, but it differs radically beneath the skin.

The unique feature of the 207, carried over to 208 (but not 206) was that the package included a simple but high quality remote control preamplifier alongside the CD player. Add a pair of active (amplified) loudspeakers such as those that Meridian thoughtfully provides and you have a complete single source hi-fi system, with the capacity to add tuner, tape deck and even vinyl disc, with the further option of feeding other remote-linked loudspeakers in other rooms of the house.

Part of the £500 price increase from 207 to 208 is down to the inclusion of a £100 remote control panel, which in this case is no handset but an elegant and quite heavy coffee table adornment, covering complete system requirements including a good quality 64 x 1dB remote volume. It takes a bit of learning, but that's the price of style. The other part of the extra cost goes on an elaborate and creative exposition of the new Philips 'bitstream' PDM digital-to-analogue converter technology, which amounts to 1-bit decoding with 256X oversampling, plus quite a few other engineering goodies, including a substantial redesign of the preamplifier.

As a CD player, facilities are adequate rather than generous, and the display is rather small, but presentation is compact, stylish and luxurious, and build inspires confidence. Inside, all Meridian

boards are neatly laid out with fine attention to detail and linked by ribbon cable. The latest chip set controls a Philips CDM1 Mk2 disc drive. The digital decoding uses two DAC3/B 'bitstream' DACs in differential mode operation for improved linearity and noise. Audiophile grade components and elaborate layout, screening and power supply arrangements provide further justification for the high price. Optical and electrical digital outputs are available, alongside the full preamplifier interconnection socketry and headphone drive.

Lab Report

Output is about 1.5dB above the standard, with a regrettable channel imbalance of 0.5dB; absolute phase is correct, unlike the 206. Low level resolution is excellent, as is low level distortion – indeed all distortions for that matter. The frequency response shows slight tailoring and the dynamic range is impressive, though slight peak clipping was detected and stereo separation is a little asymmetric. Track access is fast (especially by Meridian standards), shock and vibration rejection good, and error correction fine.

Comparison with the 206 is interesting, though possibly misleading since the many detailed differences muddle any attempt to isolate the multi-bit versus 1-bit comparison.

Sound Quality

The 208 establishes a new CD sound quality benchmark for any commercially available player, redefining the state of an art which, it must be admitted, still falls somewhat short of the very best analogue vinyl on pace and drive, but which has its own compensations.

The bass demonstrates good slam and powerful, even extension; the midband is neutral, immensely detailed and very precise; the treble can only be described

as silky for the remarkable lack of grain, alongside exceptional resolution and low distortion. Images have superb scale and focus, with fine coherence.

Conclusions

Setting a new sound quality reference standard way ahead of the pack would seem to be a total vindication of the bitstream/low-bit approach to digital decoding, though it is equally a reflection of the very high price, and of the elaborate engineering involved in this application. Though expensive, the 208 must be strongly Recommended, not only as an exceptional single-box player at an (arguably) affordable price, but also for its fine convenience potential in a Meridian system context.

TEST RESULTS

Test resolution (L/R av)	16 bits		
Output level,			
source impedance	2.35/2.47V, 1.40/1.83dB	16.5 ohms	
Effective dynamic range	110dB		
Harmonic distortion	20kHz	1.0kHz	20kHz
Ref 0dB	-94dB	-91dB	-91dB
at -70dB encode + dither	-47.5dB, 0.42%		
Stereo separation	125dB	100/120dB	74/104dB
Stereo balance L/R	0.48dB	0.47dB	0.43dB
Frequency response (ref 1kHz) 20Hz to 20kHz	±0.1dB		
High frequency intermodulation	-106dB, 0.0005%		
Electrical noise (CCIR/ARM, 1kHz)	-100dB		
Mechanical noise	low		
Ultrasonic noise	98dB		
Error correction	2mm gap		
Shock/vibration resistance	good		
De-emphasis	-0.35dB to 16kHz		
Track finding speed (15, YEDS 2)	2.5 secs		
White noise overload test	slight clip		
Size (w x h x d)	32 x 10 x 35cms		
Typical price inc VAT	£1,490		

