

Are we talking hi-fi separates or hi-fi systems these days? The real hi-fi tradition is all about choosing the best possible individual components for each specific operation and then assuming that they'll combine well together as a system.

Sometimes this will work well, but just as often results will be disappointing. There are several reasons for this, the most obvious being that there is no such thing as 'best', in either the creation or reproduction of music. Every component, however expensive, has to achieve various different and often conflicting objectives, and each designer makes their own decisions on relative priorities.

The future increasingly favours the one make approach. The delights of cosmetic integration and coherence are no longer the only reward. System remote control integration is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, increasingly hard to resist, and increasingly available on 'serious' hi-fi componentry.

Meridian has certainly been a dominant force in high-end CD replay machinery since the format's first arrival in the mid-eighties, both here in the UK and the rest of the world. Having many years' lead over more recent arrivals from Quad, Naim and Linn, it's a fair bet that the majority of serious CD hi-fi enthusiasts use (or have used) one or other generation Meridian CD player or combination as their source.

However, despite the arguments advanced in the introduction, hitherto a much smaller percentage go the whole hog, equipping themselves with a

Meridian 500/5000 digital system



Complex, remote-linked systems

are thin on the ground at the high-

end. Paul Messenger looks at the

latest fully-active digital system,

from technology kings, Meridian.



The complete 500 series consists of a rather daunting roster of more than a dozen different items, but that's in order to cover an extraordinary degree of flexibility.

complete Meridian system. One reason is undoubtedly that enthusiast systems tend to evolve slowly, and the upmarket CD player is often the most recent addition to already well established tastes in amplification and speakers. Other factors include the limited range and highish prices of Meridian components, plus a somewhat irrational mistrust of active speakers with integral amplifiers.

The brand new 500 series components which make up this complete system could do much to win over such prejudices, widening the appeal of the company's products. Priced similarly to the established 200 series, they're not cheap by any means, yet look and feel every bit as good as the up-market 600 series models. And the DSP5000 series speakers are both actively and digitally driven, a combination that's still rare and one that practically offers a number of benefits.

Your flexible friend

The complete 500 series consists of a rather daunting roster of more than a dozen different components, but that's in order to cover an extraordinary degree of configuration flexibility, including active or passive, analogue or digital loudspeaker drive, several levels of CD performance, and full video and surround sound capabilities too. Not all are available yet, but for a company of Meridian's size it's quite an achievement to have brought more than half out in one go.

The £5,000-odd package tested here is a complete system consisting of just three components to provide CD and radio sources, plus a digital controller/pre-amplifier which controls the system and drives the digital speakers.

The £975 500 CD Transport supplies straight digital signals to the £625 Digital Controller, while the £595 504 FM Tuner delivers analogue signals into its line

Smart synergy. Meridian's complete 500 system, with a pair of the active 5000 loudspeakers, is controlled from a single handset.

inputs ready for digitisation. Vinyl disc cartridge signals, either high or low output varieties, are also accepted, equalised and digitised, along with numerous other line and digital inputs.

Each unit is somewhere between mini and midi in width, and a clever combination of glass and grey alloy casework gives considerable class to the presentation and solidity to the build. All the units look virtually identical, with a row of slim vertical pushbuttons and a small multi-function display. In fact, the only distinguishing features are the colour-coded legends and on/off switches — effective enough in use but a shade plasticky with it.

The *DSP5000* speakers cost a hefty £3,000, give or take the choice of real wood veneers, which seems a lot for a slim, compact floorstanding three-way. However, the price starts to look a lot more reasonable when you consider that it includes all the power amplification (three times 70W in each) and digital-to-analogue converters, as well as various special features unavailable with normal analogue speakers (see panel).

There are also two very worthwhile ergonomic bonuses. The first is that two very thin and discreet coaxial cables are all that's needed to pass the digits and the control signals up the wire to the 'master' speaker, with two more carrying the relevant instructions and information on to the second 'slave' speaker.

Secondly, but no less usefully, the 'master' speaker acts as the receiver for all the remote control commands. You can point the handset at the speaker, allowing the electronics themselves to be sited well out of the way, even concealing some units within furniture. Both speakers confirm the status on small (and slightly too simple) alphanumeric displays.

I wouldn't go so far as to call the command protocols particularly straightforward, but that's one of the prices of the exceptional versatility. Most regular operations should become second nature with a little practice, especially now the comprehensive table-top remote control is available.

The sound quality is impressively consistent between the sources, and characteristically follows in the Meridian tradition. All is smooth and unruffled — perhaps a little too much so

The *DSP5000* digital active loudspeaker

Digital signal feed and active drive may largely restrict this speaker to a Meridian system role, but they do also offer some worthwhile compensating advantages. The former allows subtle processing to be performed without degradation and with mathematical precision on the input datastream, and the latter allows close control and performance matching between amps and drive units.

The processing performs several different tasks, applying tone control tilt and bass level adjustment, providing some contour compensation for the effect of close-to-wall siting, and shifting the crossover characteristics subtly to give optimum integration across a range of vertical axes to allow for high or low seating (or standing) listening positions.

Most impressive of these is the left/right balance control, which actually combines time delay compensation alongside the usual loudness shift, to very good effect indeed. You'll still only get proper stereo along a single line, but this true stereo axis can now be really effectively swivelled laterally from the normal centre line, the end result being a whole order more precise and effective for listening off-axis.

The speaker itself is a compact floorstander, quite narrow and deep with proper spike floor coupling and a good wood veneer wrap, and a hefty 23kg total weight thanks in part to the electronics. The two 110mm plastic cone drivers operate in tandem through the bass region, with further help from a large rear reflex port;



Remote commands are confirmed on small displays on both speakers.

the upper driver alone carries the midband, crossing over to a mesh protected 25mm metal dome tweeter.

Measurements confirmed the efficacy and precision of the processing, the overall balance being impressively flat and slightly forward through the midband, if slightly down in the treble. The bass is less impressive under room measurement conditions, however, kicking up quite strongly around 50Hz and rolling off quite rapidly below 40Hz.

for some tastes. The first impression was of delightful openness and freedom from boxiness. Initially, the treble was also rather shut-in and restrained, but this was largely and easily rectified by operating the balance 'tilt' control, the subjective preference for the more open balance of a 'plus 4' setting also giving the flattest in-room measured response.

This is a system which is fundamentally easy on the ears as well as the eyes. Its superior dynamic range frequently brought refreshing new detail and insight to familiar recordings and programming. Stereo imaging and focus is stunningly good in every dimension, the soundstage and the environments around proper acoustic recordings taking on a whole new level of precision and definition.

However, there is clearly a trade-off between the very generous loudness capability and ultimate bass extension,

the bottom end managing to sound quite crisp and agile, if a bit lacking in weight and authority in the larger room. The overall sound does lack the speed, time-coherence and dynamics which many serious enthusiasts seek. Both individual components and the system as a whole tend to turn the spotlight upon presence band detail, rather at the expense of bass drive, drama and tension.

Of the two sources, the tuner is very satisfactory indeed, undoubtedly in the fine tradition established by the 604 (issue 120). I was rather less convinced by the 500 CD Transport, not because of the medium itself, but because the sound seemed rather thin and forward, emphasising detail at the expense of weight and power.

From a strict enthusiast audiophile perspective, this complete 500 series system doesn't always provide the last few degrees of involvement and excitement. But the sacrifice is modest and probably inconsequential for the majority, who will appreciate the elegant house-training, excellent ergonomics and fine future-proof flexibility. Above all, this is real hi-fi which is also easy to live with, sonically, aesthetically and operationally.

