

POLISH WITHOUT THE SPIT



Jon Marks enjoys his encounter with Meridian's shiny new 502 pre-amplifier and 557 power amplifier.

Having previously concentrated on light and compact amplifiers using switched mode power supplies, the 557 marks a bit of a departure for Meridian. My spine vividly confirmed that; when Meridian say they use a massive 1.6kVA toroidal mains transformer, they mean it. Trying to swing this beast into our

rack had me yearning for a forklift truck. If you're still unsatisfied with those 200watts on offer though, the 557 can be bridged to produce over 800watts.

Doing the delicate work upstream of the 557 for this review was the new 502 remote control pre-amplifier. Hiding away under the unassuming

gloss black glass top is a fully balanced, dual mono design constructed with high grade components. These include Nichicon electrolytics and audio grade polypropylene capacitors with a low-flux toroidal transformer. And with its chunky desk-top remote, the 502 can be used to control an entire Meridian system.

The 502/557 immediately made a positive impression with their rendition of Jimi Hendrix's 'Are You Experienced?' from Kiss The Sky. There was a naturalness to the presentation that caught my attention. The Meridians were an open window into the emotion in the music, not producing their own coloured version of events, but accurately relaying the feeling in the music. I could tell that this was going to be one of those rare combinations that help keep my faith in hi-fi alive.

'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' and its astonishing guitar riff was a real 'blow my mind' affair, guitar somersaulting around the soundstage while percussion stood out clearly in the mix next to Hendrix's phasey vocals. Image clarity and detail were both first rate, playing their part in building a wide, transparent soundstage hanging free of the 'speaker cabinets, in this case Heybrook's Sextets. But it was the Meridians' easy-going presentation that really impressed me, music never sounding the least bit artificial or processed.

The rhythm set up by the bass guitar on 'Stepping Stone' was infectious. 'Castles Made Of Sand' was another opportunity for bass ability to show, the 557 stopping and starting the Heybrooks' cones without straining or curtailing harmonics and decay.

Wondering how the 502/557 would react to a bass heavy, highly complex mix, I popped Carnival Jump Up (Steelbands Of Trinidad And Tobago) into the Audiolab 8000CDM. The steel drums on this CD are capable of producing lightning fast transients, and these came loud and clear through the Meridians, putting a bass-happy smile on my face. There was tonal colour in abundance too, capturing the innately warm sound of drums and neatly separating gently struck cymbals from the dominant bass section of the orchestra.

The Meridian combo continued to pull out the stops with Buddy Guy's 'Slippin' In' through the Sextets. Drawing on the 557's smooth power, the tortured vocals were really getting their message across. Cymbals through that revealing Tonigen ribbon tweeter perfectly complemented the lament of Buddy's guitar playing, each

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pluck of the strings carrying weight and impact. The solidity and precision of the imaging allowed the piano to stay firmly out at stage right while drums kicked along at centre rear.

The Meridian/Sextet pairing also thrived on a diet of Moloko. I'd had a sneaking suspicion that 'Butterfly 747' would be able to blast out to its heart's content, and I was happy to be proved right. The thunderous opening synthesiser grew under the rest of the instruments, only to disappear with lightning speed as the drum'n'bass kicked in. Being a bit of a generous soul, I thought the neighbours should be let in on this one, so I duly flicked up the volume on the 502's remote to more seismic levels. The Meridian pair, and the performance as a whole, remained unruffled as my internal organs started bouncing to the beat, the Heybrooks' bass drivers coming perilously close to their end-stops.

The tonal smorgasbord that is Bach's Mass in B minor possessed colour and stature. The various musical strands that go into making up this piece retained their individuality, each adding its weight to the whole instead of folding together in an amorphous mass. I had no difficulty at all telling Catherine Dubosc's voice from that of Catherine Denley as they duetted on 'Christe Eleison', the images of the two being set firmly side by side at the front of the soundstage. The same went for the choral rendition of

'Kyrie Eleison' that followed, the purity and power of voices lending the performance substance. David Woodcock's solo violin was also sweet and smooth as he played the 'Air', enjoying fine tonal colour.

Timpani rolled and thundered and cymbals crashed as I embarked on Carl Orff's Carmina Burana. Strings and voices rose together in the crescendo of 'O Fortuna', building to a truly explosive peak. 'Reie', by contrast, showed

off the 502/557's delicacy to good effect, soft strings and muted brass flowing gently along with accompanying background coughs and shuffles.

With their mix of abilities - relaxed, natural rhythmic flow, firm control, broad soundstaging and wide tonal palette - the Meridian 502 pre-amplifier and 557 power amplifier make for a well balanced combination. They'll have supplies of midnight oil plunging ●

502 Pre-amplifier	£1295
557 Power amplifier	£1400

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WORLD VERDICT

502 Pre-amp
Transparent, detailed sound with good tonal range and very natural presentation.

557 Power amp
Great control and dynamics allied to seductive smoothness. A rare combination of power and delicacy.

**Measured Performance
see p103**

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

AMPLIFIERS

MERIDIAN 502/557

The 557 power amplifier was impressive in the way it doubled power as load was halved. Few amps do this, Naims being the best example. It demonstrates superb power supply regulation which usually means the amplifier will deliver sledge hammer bass. The 557's output rose from an impressive 200watts into 8 Ω to a massive 380watts into 4 Ω , enough for large rooms and power hungry loudspeakers.

Bandwidth was a wide 5Hz-33kHz, the upper limit being just high enough to give flat response to 20kHz and the lower limit matches that of CD. With big 'speakers this sort of downward extension can be heard.

Sensitivity was very high, again like that of Naims, measuring 60mV. This is high enough to match a tuner like a Leak

Troughline.

Distortion was incredibly low, even when delivering full output power at high frequencies (10kHz), a gruelling test.

The 502+557 combination measured superbly in all areas. NK

Power	200watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	5Hz-33kHz
Separation	81dB
Noise	-93dB
Distortion	0.007%
Sensitivity	60mV
dc offset	1mV

Distortion

