

July 1998

Details, Details The Meridian 508.24



Description: single disc CD player

Dimensions (w x h x d): 12.64" x 3.46" x 13.07"

Weight: 14 lbs

Price (US retail): \$3,500.00

Manufacturer Info:

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THE Meridian 508/24 is that company's better of two CD players. Meridian also sells a separate digital to analog converter and transport. The 508/24 has the traditional Meridian look; a deviation from the standard 17" or so in width. Most apparent about this look is that it's small--12 ½" wide, 3 ½" high, and 13" deep--and sleek. The top is shiny black glass, which sort of matches my McIntosh C38—sort of. (Actually, nothing in my system matches. Isn't that the mark of a true audiophile?) The disc drawer, a solid and quiet mechanism, is in the front. As a matter of fact, the entire unit has a feeling of solidity, and weighs in at a respectable 14lbs.

The basic functions of the 508/24 can be accessed on the front panel, including power on, standby, open and close, play, stop, pause, next and previous tracks, and display. Display allows you to view only the track number, total elapsed time and track number, track elapsed time and track number, time remaining for the whole disc and track number, or a blank display. When this latter option is chosen the 508/24 emits no light at all. Using the remote one can duplicate all of the front panel functions, as well as scan, access specific track and index points, program the player to play specific tracks, and repeat tracks.

Meridian supplies their system remote with the 508/24. It's inconvenient. Two hands are needed to point and activate it. It's designed to sit on a table. For me though, I like to move around with my CD and pre-amp remotes so that I can have remote control of track and volume. I need to be able to easily point these remotes at my equipment. On the other hand, Meridian has done a terrific job on button layout and labeling. Being a system remote, many buttons are of no interest to someone who doesn't have a whole Meridian system, yet these other buttons are not in the way. I have no problem locating the buttons I want.

The back panel provides coaxial and optical digital outputs, to bypass the internal digital to analog converter, balanced outputs, standard RCA outputs, a three pronged power input, a user replaceable fuse, and a spare fuse. The back is where the power on and off switch is as well. The power button on the front puts the unit in stand-by mode, or switches it on. Leaving the unit in stand-by mode ensures that the operating temperature, and therefore the sound, will be optimum shortly after turn-on. The electricity consumed in stand-by mode is eensy weensy, according to Meridian.

Relationships

The CD player with which I have been most intimate--in the platonic sense, of course--is the California Audio Labs Icon HDCD CD payer. It's been my reference. How does a well regarded \$1,500 machine compare with an equally well regarded \$3,500 machine? Is there a significant difference? I mean, I'm sure many of you out there are looking for that CD player or other component for under \$2,000 grand that's not much different sounding than higher priced units. The CAL Icon HDCD player has had such a claim made of it. Unfortunately, compared with the Meridian 508/24, it ain't so. Of course, in a sensible world a \$1,500 machine *shouldn't* sound as good as a \$3,500 one. Yet, having encountered enough nonsensical things thus far in life, I wouldn't be *that* surprised. But, in this case, the CAL's midrange is grainy by comparison, and it's overall sound thin. It's whooped on transparency and bass as well. It's not in the same league. On to more worthy competition.

Meridian's 508/20 is a champ for it's astounding detail and imaging, and many feel it's not to be beat for the money. I've compared it with the Audio Research CD1 and Sony's top of the line CA7ES, all three costing \$3,000, and the 508/20 was at least as good. Still, of course, it has its shortcomings. Immediately upon placing one before a Melos 110B tube pre-amp, a McCormack DNA-1, and a pair of Mirage MS3i's I felt that detail had been achieved at the expense of soul. There was a dry, lifeless sound. I thought this is what must be meant by hitting the digital wall of resolution. To these ears, the detail was interesting—for about a minute--but the music was no fun. Something was definitely wrong. The bass disturbed me a bit, too. While always tight and behaved, I was never sure if it was all there. Was I missing distortion or was the Meridian missing content?

Interestingly, on certain other systems things sounded a lot better with the 508/20. In the system mentioned above, for instance, with a McIntosh C38 as pre-amp, the 508/20 was far more musical, natural, and passionate. Here was a perfect example of the importance of system matching. Still, the problems I heard when used in the Melos system, though varying in degree with other systems, do outline a sonic profile of the 508/20. These traits were always present, if even to a forgivable degree, with any associated equipment I used. Of course, the rest of the 508/20's profile could be in the Sports Illustrated swim suit issue—but that's not my point. My point is to nit-pick, since we're all looking for the best for our money. The 508/20 leaned a bit towards the dry, analytical, and bass shy. Now, lest you start making generalizations about the English sound, lets move on to the 508/24.

The Best CD Player?

In my experience with this newer machine, system matching takes a rumble seat. Yes, of course it's still important. I even have a romantic matchmaking story to share with you regarding the 508/24—but later. Upon first listen to the 508/24, I was immediately impressed with a relaxed, easy, and at the same time extremely detailed sound. While no particular area of reproduction (e.g. bass, midrange, treble, imaging, depth) sticks out as improved from the 508/20, the overall sound is more realistic than I've ever heard before. I found that I didn't have to listen as hard to this CD player as I do with others. One doesn't have to be so willing to suspend disbelief. It's not necessary. The music overall, the individual instruments, the resonance of those instruments, every little sound, just presents itself to you. You don't have to find it. And the really stunning part is how this information is presented to you. Again, I'm coming back to the naturalness of this machine. A player with all this detail could come off sounding too analytical. But, the most important thing I can tell you about this machine is that its interpretation of the music is naturally obvious.

The gentle decay of a guitar string, the recording venue's sonic signature—my friend Nicky was hearing the walls in a singing booth—the breathy sounds in a vocal, and other of life's details are part of what let's us know the sound is real or reproduced. With the 508/24 these details are presented to you, rather than you having to sort through a mixture of sounds to find them. No doubt, this is attributable to Meridian's extremely quiet background. This is what the "24" is all about. Processing the signal with 24 bits is how Meridian gets the noise floor down low so that more detail can come through. Meridian also claims extraordinarily low jitter for this player. To these ears, the 508/24 brings palpability and the related areas of 3 dimensionality to an all time high for reproduced music. I'm also no longer wondering whether I'm getting all the bass. It sounds terrifically well proportioned and doesn't gain ten pounds during the broadcast. As for the high frequencies, here is that love story I promised you.

That's Amore

Imagine the following system: PS Audio Lambda II CD transport > Apogee Wide Eyed AES/EBU digital interconnect > Meridian 518 for jitter reduction and resolution enhancement (i.e. 16bit to 20 bit) > PS Audio Reference Link DAC > Goertz Balanced Sapphire interconnect > Sonic Frontiers Line 3 tube pre-amp > Goertz Balanced Sapphire interconnect > Krell FPB 600à Genesis II speakers with built in-amplifiers for their bass towers. Chinh Chu & Clement Perry (Planethifi contributors), and I listened to this system. Then, we used the Meridian 508/24, via Tara Labs Reference Generation II single ended interconnect, directly into the pre-amp. The opinion was unanimous that the overall sound of the Meridian was superior. The only area in which the group felt the Meridian came up short was in high frequency energy. The Meridian sounded a bit too rolled off on cymbals, for instance. For its part, the PS Audio/Meridian 518 front end had high frequency energy to spare, sounding hashy to these ears. We plunked in the Goertz Balanced Sapphire where the Tara had been and the treble was juuuuussssst right! This collection of metal, carbon, and current was united. We gave it three cheeks up! And there, by the way, is your pleasantly nonsensical value; the Meridian 508/24 costs \$3,500 while the PS Audio/Meridian/PS Audio combo is around \$7,000.

I Am Not Fiscally Irresponsible!

You may notice from another review in this issue that I recently purchased a pre-amp. Well, I purchased the 508/24 also. (That about sums up my impression of it, don't you think?) And I'd do it again. Music makes me happy and now I'm hearing more music. Besides, I'm getting married soon and the word on the street is that I should get these toys while I can. So, I also picked up a used Linn Sondek turntable because I was really curious what all this analog fuss is about. Very interesting...

DENNIS' SYSTEM:

California Audio Labs Icon MkII HDCD >> Tara Labs RSC Reference Gen2 single ended interconnect >> McIntosh C38 solid state pre-amp >> same Tara >> McCormack DNA-1 solid state amplifier >> bi-wired run of entry level KimberKable (black & gray) speaker cable>> Mirage M-3si