

World's Ultimate CD Players

MERIDIAN 602/606



First up on our alphabetical array of digital delights a two-box CD player using Philips' BitStream conversion technology. But Alvin Gold agrees with Meridian that the DAC technology is not the main determinant of sound quality. It ain't what you use...

To date there have been very few really worthwhile BitStream players. Apart from the Philips CD850, a very acceptable middle market player marred by a disastrously misconceived user interface, only the various Meridian players (whose much simpler control systems are also not beyond reproach) have proved genuinely satisfactory.

I originally made the acquaintance of the 602/606 a month or so back when I reviewed it for *Audiophile's* April issue. I used the 602 as a stand-alone player to partner a number of high grade systems. More recently I had dramatic confirmation of Meridian's expertise in the digital audio area when I reviewed the D6000 digital speaker (see page 28) — a landmark product if ever there was one. In the course of that test I was able to use the same CD player (actually another sample of the same model), along with a Wadia 64.4/2000, an Audio Research DAC and a Micromega Solo. One way and another I've had the Meridian running for quite a long time, and in the company of a number of — to put it mildly — fine players from other sources.

The 602 transport is simply an elaboration of the earlier Philips-derived CD platform which offers singularly good tracking and powerful immunity from the effects of feedback and other external disturbance. It consistently and flawlessly played discs that skipped or groove-locked on the Wadia 2000 transport, yet it plainly didn't sound quite as good as the Wadia, which had significantly better resolution and stability. The significance of this is that, Wadia aside, the Meridian is about as good a transport as I have heard. What the Meridian lacks is the Wadia's AT&T glassfibre interconnect. The differences between transports were at their most profound when the respective optical links were used, and I understand from Meridian that a change to the superior connector may not be long delayed, though no hostages to fortune in the form of even vague promises were given.

The 606 DAC uses a crystal-locked input to minimise jitter and employs the 7350 BitStream differential mode DAC, but in a unique configuration said to apply dither correctly (which according to Meridian is a weakness with other implementations). Be that as it may, the results speak for themselves: a standard of music reproduction which in my experience is unmatched at this

price level, and which goes further than any other to marrying the positive features of BitStream (resolution, lack of mechanical edge) with multibit (dynamics and architecture). More correctly, this version of BitStream goes further than others in transcending the charge that it is best at papering over the cracks in other DAC technologies, or poorly implemented versions of other technologies. The real conclusion should be that the technology in use is ultimately less important than the way it is used.

In short, this Meridian combination blows while others suck. Properly run in and warmed up it has a rare combination of virtues. It is for one thing extremely fine-grained and holds up well to a close examin-

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ation. As the music ebbs and swells, the feeling of presence remains. Concentrating on specific details in the soundstage, an instrument or a voice say, is like looking down a well with a powerful torch: the more you look, the more you perceive. The awful insidious smudging of detail and reining-in of dynamics found in many low-bit players is largely absent here, and so is the cactus-like, sharply presented, soft-centred quality of many multibit players. Best of all, the Meridian avoids a common trap in that it doesn't sound as though it is being reproduced through a cheap transistor radio.

I began to understand why Meridian has had such success with CD after reading a paper written by designer Bob Stuart (*High*

Quality Digital Audio) which sets out to quantify, in some detail, the error spectrum of digital jitter, whose audibility is described as being similar to that of modulation noise. There is also an examination of the importance of dither (an added random signal that 'smooths over' the wide ladder-like quantisation steps at the bottom end of the dynamic range, allowing signals to be resolved deep into noise), and of the importance of handling low level signals properly. Finally, it makes an attempt to match the phenomena discussed to the way the human ear and brain actually responds.

This is not the place to discuss the arguments raised, but the mere fact that the problems are properly acknowledged and rigorously analysed at least suggests that in Meridian we might be dealing with a company that has a real contribution to make to the business of raising CD performance standards. There are, after all, still those who insist that significant differences in sound quality between CD players have nothing to do with any of the DSP processes involved, or even that differences don't exist. Digital is perfect, QED. Mmn.

If I were to ask a more searching question, namely am I completely satisfied with the Meridian, the answer would have to be no. There are too many occasions when it slips into second place behind front-ranking turntables like the Roksan Xerxes or the Rock, both coincidentally turntables that go further than most to match the areas of strength of CD that are not disputed.

More to the point, there were worryingly numerous occasions when I found my attention flagging. The Meridian doesn't hold the intention as well as it might, and it doesn't offer quite the level of insight and resolution expected of (or at least claimed on behalf of) this latest and sexiest of BitStream converters. I accept that part of this lack of drama is related to the Meridian's unusual truthfulness and transparency, but instinct and experience tell me that perhaps this is not the whole story.

Still, the 606 remains the only BitStream player I know with which I could relish the prospect of a long term relationship.

■ **Right of Reply:** see page 83

Meridian 602 (£1630) and 606 (£1220). Reviewed in our April issue alongside their sister 603 DAC/preamp, this Meridian pair uses PDM BitStream to its full advantage