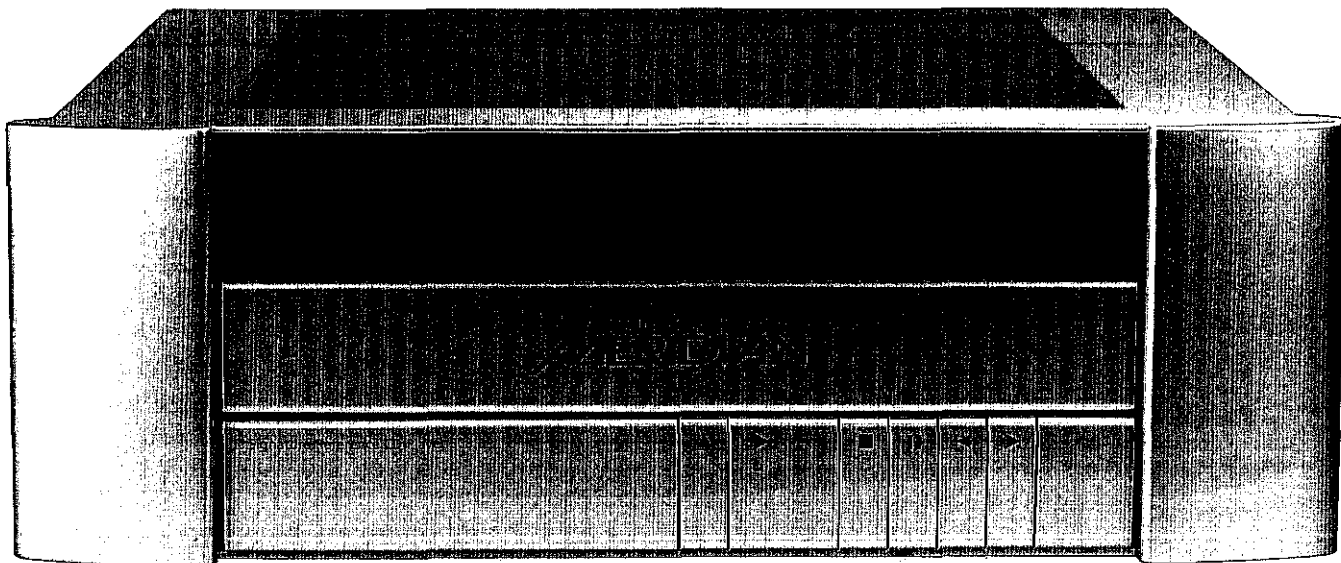


Meridian 808 Signature Reference CD Player



by Phillip Gold

While we were busy debating the relative merits of SACD and DVD Audio, Joe Public turned his back on both of them. A plague on both their houses! Vinyl outsold both high resolution digital formats last year. So what's a good audiophile to do? Some have chosen to make analog their prime source, and there are probably more fine turntables, arms and cartridges available today than most people would imagine. You can even pay stratospheric prices if you like—*Stereophile's* January 2006 edition featured a \$90,000 Australian combo! Fortunately there are some serious bargains too. Some will claim that even a \$1,000 analog stage will beat the best digital sources around today.

I don't subscribe to that opinion, nor would you if you'd been lucky enough

to sample the state-of-the-art in CD sources; let alone SACD players from the likes of Esoteric and Accuphase.

Fortunately a number of highly reputable manufacturers have set out to give us their statement redbook CD players and more are on their way. Pride of place for the science fiction lover is the Shanling CD-T300 from China at US \$6,995 straight out of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The Combak Reimyo CDP-777 at US \$17,000 and the two box Zanden Audio Model 2000T/Model 5000 Signature at US \$43,440 are Japanese attempts at state-of-the-art. And the list goes on.

Across the pond, in Huntingdon, not far from the University of Cambridge, sits a company with more experience in audiophile CD players than any other.

Source:
Aralex
Acoustics Ltd.

Price:
\$12,995.00 US

Rating: ♪♪♪

Meridian Audio pioneered the concept with the 1984 MCD player and has released over two dozen CD players since then, culminating in the 808 Signature Reference CD player reviewed here, which marks 20 years of development. A grand title indeed. Signature? Each limited edition player is signed by Meridian's founders, Messrs. Boothroyd and Stuart. Reference? Well, let's talk about that.

Technology:

If you read the specifications, or the online brochures, it is hard to distinguish the 808 from the Meridian G08, which comes in at a third the cost. Both machines use a DVD ROM drive linked to paired Burr Brown DACs through a three-stage buffer, and both employ 4 times upsampling to 176.4 kHz. The 808 offers fixed or variable outputs, while the G08 offers fixed outputs only. In some ways the G08 is more advanced. If you press 5 on the remote with the tray still open, the G08 will play track 5, while the 808 will wait for you to press play. The G08 has three modes for displaying time to the 808's one. In a neat touch both offer a phase switch on the remote and digital out at 88.2kHz in addition to standard balanced and unbalanced digital outs.

So where does the extra money go? The 808 takes the basic design of the G08 to new heights by further isolating each section of the electronics and providing each with its own carefully regulated and heavily specified power supply. Mechanically, the 808 is three times the size and provides better physical damping and isolation of the mechanical elements. The digital circuitry is more highly optimised, most specifically in the algorithms used to implement the oversampling. The analog output section uses a different topology, more costly to implement, and is further isolated from the digital section physically, electrically and in terms of power supply.

The key design element, common to both units, is the DVD-ROM data drive. Bob Stuart has chosen this device

because it has the ability to read every last bite on the disc reliably for its chief task of computer storage. If it fails to read it the first time, it can reread repeatedly until it does so successfully. It can do this without falling behind the music because it is a high-speed disc drive, spinning at many times the standard speed. Meridian claims that error correction exceeds that of standard CD drives one hundred fold. The ability to play music is almost incidental, and low jitter is not its forte. So, if you want to use a DVD-ROM drive, you have to take extraordinary measures to eliminate jitter, but you don't have to worry about data integrity. The bits are all there, in the right order, but you need to re-clock them. Meridian employs 3 buffers, two of them FIFO designs, to reduce the jitter and claims the lowest level of jitter in any CD player they have measured, a mere 90 picoseconds.

As the 808 employs a DVD-ROM drive, reading the table of contents takes a few seconds longer than usual. You might suppose the 808 can play DVD Audio discs. This is not the case, although there are other models in the 800 Series that can do just that, and perhaps better than any other player on the market. After all, Meridian pioneered MLP (Meridian Lossless Packing), the compression technology used as the basis of DVD Audio and the new Dolby TrueHD standard.

The Sound:

Now I have some good news for you, unless you are a competing manufacturer. This machine delivers the goods. It is indeed all it's cracked up to be. By that I don't mean that it is dramatic or explosive in any way. It is simply musical. On every disc it outclasses its formidable little brother, the G08. The sound is more involving, more three dimensional, more extended on top, more solid in the bass and the resolution is higher. Music sounds more like a live performance with the 808 than with any CD player I have auditioned to date. Is it perfect? No. There is better high frequency performance available from

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Audio Aero and more explosive dynamics from Esoteric. What the 808 does so well is to get out of the way and let the recording speak for itself. It does not editorialise or lend emphasis to any aspect of the performance. In other words, Meridian has strived for, and achieved, a wonderful balance, that does justice to music of all stripes. When reproduction is done right, you know it, even if you can't put it into words. You stop paying attention to the various aspects of the sound and just sit back and enjoy the music. To get to this level you need to have a wide and even frequency response, realistic dynamics, precise location of individual instruments, accurate tonal colour, high resolution, quick reflexes and a complete absence of extraneous noises and phase distortion. The 808 meets all these requirements and, as a result, the music breathes easier. So much easier in fact that you can listen for many hours without fatigue, even using the highly revealing AKG K1000 headphones, which will expose the slightest hint of harshness in the treble.

Does it always sound this good? I found a way to degrade the performance. You can change the fixed outputs to variable outputs through a software setting. This enables you to by-pass the preamplifier altogether. Much of the magic disappears when feeding the variable output directly to the power amplifier section of the Perreaux Radiance R200i (reviewed in Vol. 16 #2). The Meridian Product Development Manager Duncan Smith, advised me why this happened. The Perreaux has a relatively high gain in the power amplification stage, which requires a relatively low volume level on the Meridian. I would have more success with an amplifier with a lower gain, or we could introduce a high quality resistor on each channel between the Meridian and the Perreaux. The Meridian volume control, which operates partly in the digital domain, will perform best at higher settings. I also have a slight preference for the balanced outputs of the 808, but the unbalanced outputs come remarkably close in performance.

It often helps to have two identical CDs available for testing CD players. In this case I used *The Blue Coast Collection*. This is an exceptional recording of acoustic music produced by Cookie Marengo and Jean Claude Reynard using Blue Coast's exclusive patent-pending recording technique—Extended Sound Environment. This recording serves not just to distinguish between the two Meridian players, but also to reveal just how good the 808 can sound with acoustic music. I simply couldn't stop playing this disc, especially "Liliana" by **Jose Manuel Blanco** and **Jason McGuire**, "Darcy Farrow" by **Rob Ickes** and **Tony Furtado** and "The Dog Song" by **Garrett Brennan**. Through the 808, the music just floats intimately in the space in front of the listener, the speakers disappearing. There is plenty of attack and a fabulous guitar sound. Every vocal nuance is captured without a trace of sibilance. This disc is also marvellous with the G08 but without quite the full attack or the blackness of background of the 808. The voices in particular, although cleaner, are not as coherent or detailed. Garrett Brennan's slide string guitar presents a more solid image on the more expensive player and the dynamic contrasts are greater throughout. The G08 is all that we can ask of a CD player—detailed, balanced, coherent, colourful, dynamic and rhythmically secure. However, the 808 goes beyond that with an sense of effortless power, stronger focus and a richer and more beautiful tonal palette.

When a CD player is as transparent as this, you may expect each disc to reveal its own distinct ambiance and acoustic. This is exactly what emerges. You can hear deeper into the mix with the big Meridian, so you get more of a sense of the sound quality of the recording space. For example, Brendel's performance of **BEETHOVEN'S Piano Sonata Opus 79** [Philips 442 787-2] does not particularly impress on the G08. The recording is too close and lacks air. Despite a strong attack, the pace seems slack. The 808 offers more perceived pace and a light-

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ness of touch that improves the rhythmic tautness. The piano sounds a bit richer, with more weight to the bass and quicker reflexes. The comparison exposes a slight mid-bass thickness with the G08, that prevents it from fully realising the very fine sound actually encoded on the disc.

BACH'S Cello Suites, played by Pierre Fournier [Archiv 449 711-2], would be enough to convince me of the merits of the 808. This is a big-boned, powerful but nuanced performance, with a rich nasal string tone, a wonderful grunt from the lowest register and a clear singing tone in the high notes. The 808 captures the full intensity of these superb performances. The G08 doesn't quite explore the full force of the playing, somewhat tempering the grunt and losing some of the rich string texture.

HAYDN'S String Quartets [Astree E8786] are forward, dark and gutty on the G08, while the 808 is richer and less aggressive. The biggest improvement is in the location of instruments, since considerable depth is added to the already wide sound-stage. There is also more detail in the altogether magnificent reproduction of this original instrument group.

So by now the picture is emerging clearly. The 808 is superior to the reference digital source and can compete head-on with similarly priced analog sources—at least on the small-scale music I have auditioned so far. How will these two heavyweights stand up to the stresses of **BRUCKNER'S 6th Symphony** [EMI CDM 7633512], in the renowned and magisterial Klemperer performance? The G08 is excellent here, with rich colourful intonation, a strong sense of space and sweet, sweet woodwinds. The 808, on the other hand, is simply magnificent. The attack is tremendous. The full orchestra may blast at full tilt, horns ablaze, yet you can hear each section of the orchestra clear in the mix, with no sign of strain and the color of each instrument fully maintained.

Switching to jazz, "Straight No Chaser" from **Art Pepper's New York Album** [Analogue Productions APR 3012] sounds like a hi-fi demonstration track on the G08, with lots of energy up top, aggressive, tending towards tiring. The 808 is warmer, with improved definition, especially in the deep bass. The 808 resolves this difficult acoustic, cleans up the top, provides improved depth and is altogether easier to listen to. **CLAUDE BOLLING'S Suite for Two Pianos** [CBS MK 45646] also sounds better on the 808. Each piano is more precisely located, there is much improved definition in the low bass, more color throughout, with the result that it is easier to untangle the musical threads and easier to listen to all round.

Synopsis & Commentary:

I could go on, and in fact I did. **Diana Krall, Leonard Cohen, Jennifer Warnes, Patricia Barber, Bonnie Raitt, Peter Gabriel, Ray Brown**—you name it—I probably played it. On every track the 808 pulls the very best sound I have heard to date off the CDs.

Both Meridian players give a very balanced and analog-sounding performance, never tiring and unfailingly musical. Normally when comparing components X and Y there will be some areas favouring X and others favouring Y. X may be more dynamic, while Y has the greater bandwidth extension. But the 808 simply extends each of the fine qualities of the G08 a little further. There is no trade off, except, of course, for the extra cost of admission. This is almost unparalleled in my experience, and also remarkable, considering just how good the G08 reference is to start with.

Can it get any better? Absolutely. I'd like to see Meridian go further in the realm of killer bass power and massive dynamics, and I'd also like a faster load time, a more comprehensive display and a lower price. Meanwhile this is state-of-the-art and as close to the very best vinyl reproduction I have experienced. ¶

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