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BOOTHROYD STUART
MERIDIAN



CD: the last word?

Meridian has been redefining digital expectations for many years – but what's left to do with CD?

PRODUCT Meridian 808i Signature

TYPE CD player/DAC/preamp

PRICE £8,250

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 48x17.5x41.1cm

● Weight: 14kg ● Preamp facility plus DAC/ADC for external sources ● Outputs: analogue balanced and unbalanced, digital x2 ● Inputs: analogue x6, digital x3 (electrical x3, optical x2) Output level (fixed mode): 2.35V

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Since the late 1970s, Meridian has been associated with smart, high-technology products. In the early years, the company limited itself to amplifiers and active speakers, but in 1984, Meridian produced the first 'audiophile' CD players. The MCD and MCD-Pro were heavily modified Philips players which stood as a benchmark for quite some time. The company's subsequent history has been suffused with digital landmarks, remarkable for features, originality and, of course, sound.

Fast-forward to the tail end of 2004 – to celebrate 20 years of Meridian-flavoured CD replay, the company has launched the £8,250 808i Signature. It may raise an eyebrow or two that Meridian – whose product range has included DVD-Audio for quite some time – has made this a CD-only machine, but with sales of DVD-Audio software at their present level, the company can hardly be said to be cutting its own throat. But the 808i is not about huge sales volumes – this is a statement. A statement, indeed, that says 'we know as much about this CD thing as anyone on the planet'. Given Meridian's impressive list of Audio Engineering Society papers and other industry-standard references, it might be rash to argue.

So, expectations high, we opened the gigantic box in which this came. It's a big beast, for sure, but it's smart, too. In fact, it's gorgeous. Like many other companies that take design seriously, Meridian maintains links with its heritage while keeping looks right up to the minute. The front panel is neat and efficient, with extra controls hidden behind a drop-down panel, the display is large and legible, and those tasteful curves do a lot to diminish the impact of the size.

And then there's the remote control. This is not a flimsy plastic thing like most of them, and it makes no attempt to be one-handed. It's an unapologetic component in its own right, which can sit proudly on the smartest coffee tables in the land and is (in our experience) uniquely well laid out and easy to read and use. It operates a complete Meridian system and a

vast range of other kit, and if that's not enough, it can 'learn' control sequences from other remote controls. It's gently backlit and comes with alternative keycaps to suit your naming preferences. Despite its size, it sits nicely in the hand and all in all it's a top bit of kit.

Now, that remote also gives a clue to some of the 808i's added features. Significantly, there is a row of buttons labelled Radio, DVD and so on. Yes, this CD player is also a preamp. Oh, and a DAC and, an ADC for good measure, meaning analogue inputs are first converted to digital. The selector is digital, the volume and balance controls are digital, outputs are both digital and analogue. These days, D-to-A and A-to-D conversion are pretty transparent processes and although it's hard to deny that anything in the signal path is a potential cause of contamination, experience suggests that there will be less of it than one might at first expect. And then there's the rather important point that many users will be connecting to Meridian's digital loudspeakers.

The overall feature count runs to CD replay plus six analogue and five digital inputs, balanced and unbalanced analogue outputs and two digital outputs, plus Meridian communications and RS232 connections. Volume is adjustable in 1dB steps, balance and absolute phase are controllable too and inputs can be adjusted for sensitivity. And in a fine sublime-to-ridiculous touch, the 808i can also play MP3 tracks stored on CD-R discs, although we wonder who would use such an option – it's rather like delivering pizza on a Harley.

Meridian's construction is nifty. The top and sides of the player form a removable 'skin', covering a decidedly industrial case made from flat metal panels. Remove the top cover of that and the internal construction is like a personal computer, with input and output electronics on cards which plug into a backplane. A-D and D-A modules are screened with soldered-on cans, so we're none the wiser as to what goes on inside, not that a couple of part numbers tell one very much anyway. To the right of the transport a small switch-mode power supply converts AC to DC.

SOUND QUALITY

It's hard to fault the assembly, and external fit and finish are superb. But does the sound come up to expectations? It does. In style. Now, don't anyone even mention the law of diminishing returns. At this level, that's taken as read. It applies just the same in any field of human endeavour, from jewellery to computers to athletics. The best is always rare and, where cost is an issue, dearer than the merely good. So, by value for money alone, maybe this isn't 'the best' CD player in the world. But, if you rate performance over value, the 808i deserves to be hailed as one of the best players ever made.

You'll not be surprised to read that it has an even tonal balance. You would naturally expect to hear that it has a silent background. You'll yawn at the news that its lab performance is quite beyond reproach, with exceptionally low noise and unusually well judged digital filtering. All that is just the starting point, ▶

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Q & A

Bob Stuart, Meridian's chairman and chief designer, tells us what went into developing a new CD player after 20 years of leading edge digits



HFC: Meridian was one of the original backers of high-resolution digital. Why, in 2004, launch a CD-only player as a flagship?

BS: We have been surprised and pleased by the increasing interest in our CD players. Some users believe that modern DVD or 'universal' players cannot get the best from CD because of the additional circuitry and compromises involved and, to a large extent, this is true. Before the 808i, our finest CD player was the Reference 800 (a DVD machine). It is still absolutely superb at CD, but the 808i has no video circuits and that allows us to take one more step. The 808i, which includes the system preamp function, very accurately matches this need.

How does Meridian's original research on digital audio relate to the design of CD players?

It allowed us to build up a very deep understanding of this area. In designing CD players, we consider everything – the accurate recovery of data on the disc, good error-handling strategies, smoothing the data flow for clearer, cleaner sound and employing DSP to improve the resolution attainable from the DACs.

You mention triple measures against jitter – can you be more specific?

There are three separate buffers. The data from the disc passes through three separate re-timing operations. In addition, the output oscillators are exceptionally low in jitter and are immediately adjacent to the converters.

For the D-to-A and A-to-D conversion, have you found existing integrated circuits satisfactory or do you prefer to roll your own?

The conversion system is a synthesis of off-the-shelf components with analogue and DSP operations that complement their properties. We believe that the conversion in the 808i is state of the art.

Where do you see the bottleneck in the sound chain over the next few years?

The weakest link is the loudspeaker, which we are addressing via DSP. Even low-quality loudspeakers can reveal differences in the source, though. The extent to which the consumer is persuaded that 'Download equals CD quality' is very disappointing. We must educate and oppose mediocrity.



Detail

Plug-in cards carrying analogue and digital inputs and outputs

Digital audio motherboard (beneath crossbar)

CD/DVD-ROM type transport mechanism

Top quality components in the audio path

Screening cans protect sensitive analogue stages from noise

Additional power supply regulation

Switch-mode power supply – small, efficient, low noise and self adjusting for different input voltages



though. What's truly ear-catching is the way it draws you into the music and the degree of involvement it brings.

We wouldn't want to suggest that anything is being added here, because there's no evidence that that is the case; but something sets this machine apart from other players. In effect, it shows up just how much is being *subtracted* from the musical experience by far too many other CD players. Perhaps surprisingly, this is obvious from the outset. There's an immediate sense of calm and relaxed authority about the sound which puts the listener in the right frame of mind to be receptive. Then, as each disc progresses, there's a continuing openness and honesty that, coupled with the complete absence of any aggressive artefacts, soothes the ear even while opening it to new levels of musical detail.

The specifics of the sound, taken together, make for an interesting insight into the whole business of 'good sound'. One might summarise by saying that Meridian's strength is in understatement, for at first the bass and general detail seem distinctly ordinary. We've heard bass that appeared more prominent, detail that gave a greater immediate impression of analysis and certainly treble that appeared to extend further. This player's performance is not

about superficial impressions, though. The bass is there all right, simply not over-emphasised and the treble is as extended as may be but never excessively bright. As for detail, it's so well integrated that it succeeds, as it were, much more by stealth than by direct attack.

Let's take a couple of examples. One disc that has given great pleasure recently is of orchestral music by Pizzetti, on Hyperion. This is simply gorgeous stuff, richly scored, from the early 20th century. It's familiar in every detail through repeated listening and studying the scores, and yet playing it via the 808i revealed – at the emotional level – new musical colours in the recording. All the while, at the analytical level, the 808i reveals in little details of orchestration that before had been missed or assumed unimportant. This is assisted by the player's quite extraordinary imaging, which is precise without making a big deal of it.

The Penguin Café Orchestra is a million miles from Pizzetti. It's eccentric, lightly scored and rhythmic music, but similarly familiar. Once again, the 808i simply made more of it clear to the listener. It unveiled everything from subtle variations in the minimalist repetitions to little offstage shuffling noises as musicians shift in their seats. But can such an eminently civilised



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player rock? It certainly can, although if you expect it to add pizzazz to dull discs you'd better think again. All the same, with material from Michael Jackson to Little Feat to Right Said Fred (*Are you serious?* – Ed) it showed a complete willingness to join in the spirit of things and deliver some serious acoustic whacks to the listening environment.

How does performance compare to other top-flight players? The multi-box dCS offering (at an even more eye-watering price) is not vastly removed in character, and Naim's CDS3 is arguably more highly characterised with a performance that majors on rhythm and drive. But, we'd stick our neck out and say that Meridian has the edge in suave assurance. Chord's DAC64 was on hand for comparison and, while superb, was still outclassed in almost every area – quite an astonishing feat!

As a DAC and a preamp the same holds true. The best analogue preamps are near transparent, and so is this one. Its presence is just detectable as a hint of veiling, if one listens really carefully against a bypass, but

that's not something to worry about. Indeed, if you are using Meridian's (or other) digital speakers, you can rest assured that this unit is as fine an ADC as any you'll come by.

There is one tiny fly in the ointment, and it affects almost every CD player we've heard recently – mechanical noise. Although this noise is lower than on many other players, it's not always inaudible; a little hiss in the background that, were it to come out of the speakers, no CD player or amp manufacturer would regard as acceptable. Late at night, when all's quiet and listening levels are perhaps subdued, you may just notice it. If all disc-player manufacturers were to take this a touch more seriously, we'd be happy. If it really bugs you, it's easily dealt with by careful player positioning (in a cupboard, for example!).

That apart, we're happy to confirm what we said above: this is one of the finest CD players in the world. It's also one of the best DACs, likewise ADCs, and a great preamp too. Only a lottery win comes between us and a purchase! **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT

SOUND >> 96%



FEATURES >> 94%



BUILD >> 96%



VALUE >> 88%



CONCLUSION

It may be possible to improve on this – if so, Meridian will probably be the people to figure how. For the time being, we're happy enough to regard this as pretty much the acme of CD replay. A fine DAC and preamp too!

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE

>> 94%

PRO
Fabulously musical and involving sound, with frequency extremes and detail so well integrated you might never even notice how supremely good they are.

CON
Tiny amount of mechanical noise. Price. Doesn't make tea in the mornings.