



Meridian Audio **808i Signature** Reference

Meridian 808i Signature

PRICE £7195/£8250

It wasn't too long after Compact Disc first surfaced in the early 1980s that the inventors' promises of perfect sound were rightly being dismissed as corporate hubris. And it was recognition of this less-than-ideal performance that inspired several specialist audio companies to make the best they could of the format, by re-working both the players and the components available to them.

Meridian is recognised as the first brand to build an audiophile CD player in those early days, with its MCD player that appeared in 1984, and

which was positively reviewed in this magazine in 1986 in Pro-MCD form. Now, some 20 years after starting the ball rolling for highly-specified players of the compact disc, Meridian has marked

pre-amp, with six stereo analogue inputs and a total of five digital inputs. With this £8250 808i model, only a power amp and loudspeakers are required to build a system, or alternatively a pair

Two versions are offered, a straightforward music player and a player incorporating a pre-amp

the anniversary with a new flagship product, the 808 Signature Reference CD player. Two versions are offered: a straightforward music CD player, and a player incorporating an analogue/digital

of active self-powered speakers can be installed, as Meridian itself advocates.

In the upper echelons of low-compromise single-box players (I'm loath to use the



Is this CD player a swan song for CD, or new hope for an evergreen music format?

advertising copywriters' mendacious slogan 'no compromise') there are several machines that have garnered plenty of well-deserved respect over the years, including such long-running classics as the Wadia 860, Naim CDS, and Linn CD12. But what is noteworthy is not that Meridian has now leveraged its hard-won digital expertise into building a statement CD spinner, but that it should do so after the format was scheduled to be filed in the drawer marked 'obsolete', in the wake of the promise of a brave new *multi-channel* world filled with high-resolution DVD-A music.

Could this product subtly signpost a turning point for digital audio formats? A not-so-tacit admission that the latest audio disc formats – DVD-A and, implicitly, also SACD – are not really wanted (or even needed?) by most people, and in particular hardened audiophiles and music lovers? Even Meridian readily admits that 'a well-recorded, well-mastered Compact Disc is capable of extraordinarily high quality results'.

And sad to say for the brotherhood of the Acoustic Renaissance for Audio – the 1990s think-tank that sought a high-fidelity application

for the DVD video disc, and with which Meridian was closely involved – DVD-Audio has not formed the vanguard of high-resolution multi-channel audio for the 21st century. Most people that love music neither want nor need more than two channels of stereo, and the efforts of the record and consumer electronics industries have failed to kid people otherwise. So that leaves us with a tasty expanse of material on Red Book CD – and machines like this to get the best from them.

In essence, this is an upsampling CD player, sturdily built, with no small amount of careful

Buffers and bits

At the heart of the 808 Reference is a multi-speed DVD-ROM drive mechanism that ordinarily runs at CD's standard 1x speed but which can make multiple passes at higher speed when required to ensure the correct data are recovered from less-than-perfect discs. This extraction technique is said to improve error-correction a hundredfold.

Digits from the disc are buffered more than usual, which gives an unusual effect: when listening to music we are hearing fractionally into the past, and this is evident when certain disc navigation operations are made by the user – after skipping tracks, for example – where the result is a perceptible time lag of around a second before the music resumes. Meridian's Bob Stuart explains in more detail, 'the data-rate smoothing process is a cascade of three operations. Strictly, there are four

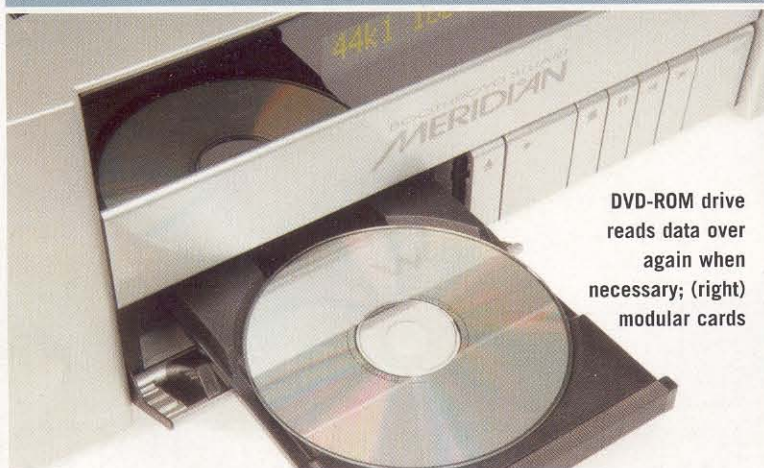
buffers (including drive), but three are used for smoothing: data-flow, CD decoder buffer, and upsampling FIFO (first-in, first-out).'

The datastream is passed to a 150MIPs DSP, operating at 48-bit internal precision, where the 16/44.1 stream is upsampled to 24-bit/176.4kHz in a fashion 'unlike anything else available in the marketplace', according to the marketing blurb.

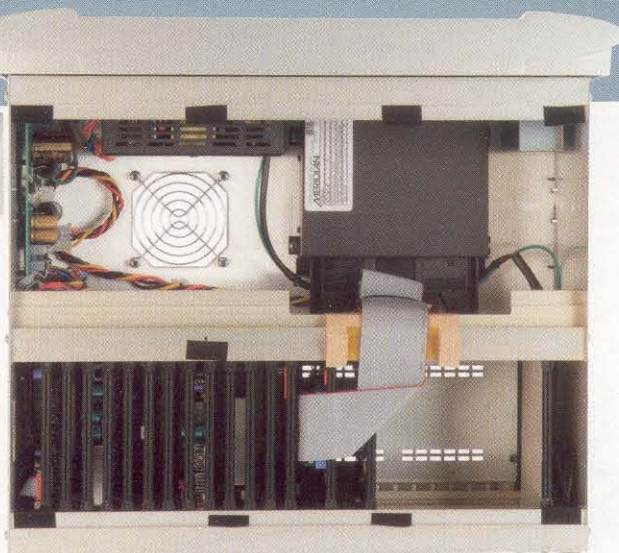
Stuart expands: 'Our resolution enhancement takes place in the upsampling process and uses optimal dithering to provide an 88.2kHz/24-bit result. A lot of the fine tuning has been done in Meridian by auditory modelling, by listening (the final arbiter) and with feedback from the music industry starting with the 618 processor and moving on to tools we provide

for high resolution production today.' The 24/176.4 signal is then decoded by an Analog Devices AD1852 multi-bit/delta-sigma chip. 'This part is chosen,' says Stuart, 'because the modulator has 4 bits, which is sufficient to ensure perfect dithering and therefore no quantisation artefacts in the filtering and conversion process.'

The signal path is all-digital, including for analogue inputs, as Meridian believes this gives a better result, 'and certainly a better result than the severe compromises inherent in analogue bypass. Meridian is highly skilled at analogue design and, as such, we know how little should be used!'



DVD-ROM drive reads data over again when necessary; (right) modular cards



The 808 can decode DTS on CD, which is a most unusual facility to be found on a CD player

digital engineering inside [see 'Buffers and bits', above]. It's a large box, measuring 480 x 175 x 411mm (whd), with the main controls prominently visible on the front, and many other useful functions available from additional buttons hidden away behind a full-width hinged flap. This cover also bears the personal signatures of Meridian's founders, Robert Stuart and Allen Boothroyd – hence the Signature appellation in the product's name.

At the back of the 808i version tested are a pair each of RCA and XLR analogue audio outputs, six pairs of RCA sockets for external analogue sources, and three coaxial digital inputs, plus two TosLink optical. Two digital outputs are included on RCA phono sockets, one 'straight' and the other taking a tap from the upsampled 88.2kHz sample frequency datastream. Also found here are several less familiar connections: Meridian's comms ports on 5-pin DIN sockets, three 12V triggers for the home-automation boys, and two RS232 D-sockets – one for connecting to

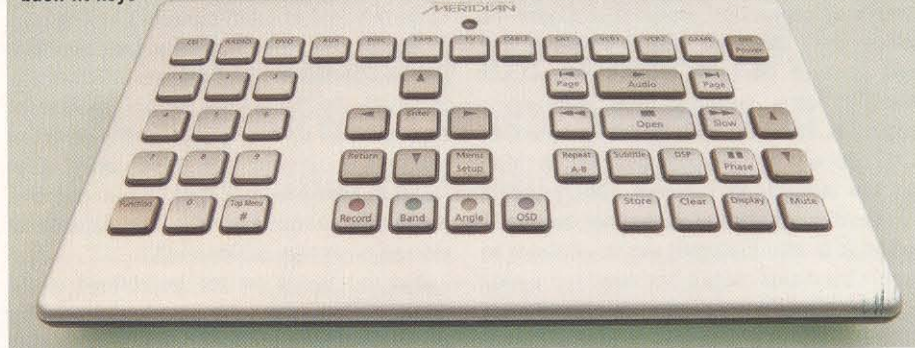
a PC (Microsoft Windows only) and the other simply labelled Maintenance. Construction of the 808 is in a similar fashion to Meridian's other top-of-the-range 800 Series components, with a modular layout comprising the main motherboard plus vertically-arranged cards catering for different processes within the product. As well as

playing normal CD-DA, the 808 can decode some compressed audio formats: MP3 – not too unusual now from even budget DVD players; and DTS on CD, which is a most unusual facility to be found on a CD player.

As it happened, I couldn't get any DTS CDs to play (although a firmware update promises to fix this), but MP3 playback proved more useful than I first imagined. A collection of early Pink Floyd live recordings of indeterminate origin, as MP3s on CD-Rs, clearly benefited from the 808's digital audio manipulation, sounding relatively lucid and with less conspicuous compression artefacts.

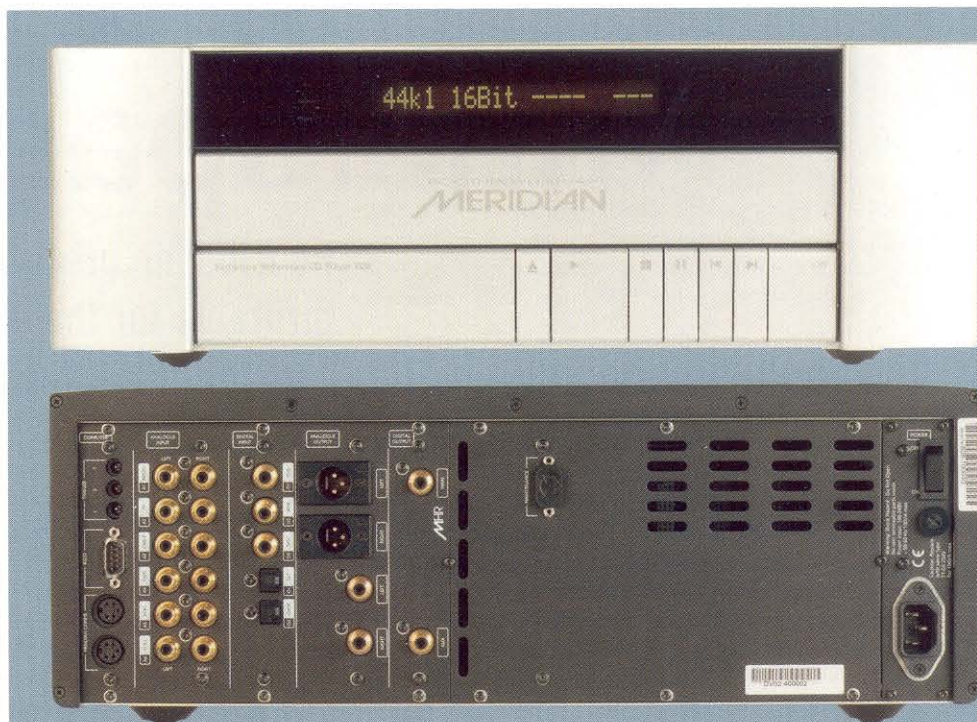
As a simple CD player, the 808i stood up very well against comparative sources. I tried it first in

New Meridian System Remote has back-lit keys



fixed-gain mode, using the MF Audio passive pre-amp to control volume, before a Chord SPM 1200C amp and B&W N802 loudspeakers. All signal and speaker wiring was Valhalla from Nordost. In essential flavour – sense of timing, soundstaging, tonal colouring – the 808 was in the familiar territory inhabited by a reference dCS front-end. There was a similar well-filled soundstage, giving excellent depth and good width perspectives, bringing music to life in the room, with the Meridian 808 having a marginally richer sound, giving a greater sense of resonance, for example, to the low pedal notes in a double-bass arrangement of Albinoni's Adagio [Gary Karr, Cisco GCD 8003].

There was a slightly smoother sound overall from the Meridian, with tracks like 'Unfinished Sympathy' [Massive Attack, *Blue Lines*, Virgin WBRC 1] losing some of the rough edges evinced by the dCS front-end. It's worth noting that the Purcell and Delius here are not current production examples, being some five years old, and it's not known if they accurately represent up-to-date samples. But the character of the differences on further listening showed the Meridian often to be a kinder player, throwing up less imperfections from the recording, where the dCS gave a quixotic warts 'n' all treatment. This approach gave a preferred rendering of low-key



Rear panel reflects modular construction; (below right) flap conceals extra buttons... and autographs!



A direct connection is often preferred when that CD player includes a volume control function

atmospheric cues and a greater sense of freedom to the sound, it being more dynamic and strident, nimble and vivacious. But the Meridian's presentation was in some ways more 'refined' – it could perhaps be described as tamer, less liable to upset the horses.

Pace and timing of the 808i were found to be excellent, keeping basslines bouncing along in rock material, and maintaining an easy *élan* in swinging jazz. For anyone used to the sound of the popular 506 and 508 CD players, this is in similar territory – but with more finesse, a sweeter HF extension, and more weight in the low end.

A direct connection is often the preferred manner of introducing signal from a CD player to power amplifier, when that CD player includes a volume control function. This is not always convenient if, like me, you have regular analogue sources you need to hear through the same system. However, the 808, in its 'i'-suffixed version, is also a well-featured pre-amp, offering digital and analogue inputs and outputs, with full control of volume on a nominal 0 to 99 scale, available for any input.

I tried the 808i connected direct to power amp, with excellent results. Although the MF Audio unit remains the most transparent pre-amp I've ever used, bypassing it brought worthwhile benefits in both clarity and expression – an even

cleaner sound with better articulation during congested music sections.

The ultimate test for many attentive music lovers is the playback of natural analogue music, typically from a good turntable set-up. This can be compromised to an unwelcome degree by any introduction of digital hardware, even before concerns about conspicuous loss of resolution and bandwidth, as was certainly the case in older 16/44.1 digital signal paths.

In the case of the 808i, the handling of analogue components was reasonably transparent, when judged in terms of the essential warmth, richness and natural 'body' that analogue offers over washed-out digital. There was a hint of clinical tidying up to the sound and a mildly stronger mono concentration instead of wall-to-wall stereo, and also a hint of sheen that, while not especially troubling to the ear, did perhaps betray the quantisation that the purely analogue signal had undergone.

What it cannot do for the die-hard vinylhead is replace the pre-amplifier in a record-playing system, as for me at least, the subtle loss of slam, organic flow, air and extension was enough to leave me wanting. It really is only a marginal loss here, but for class-leading audio replay the emotion is embedded in the musical small print. Nevertheless, in every way this is a first-class

product that should tick many of the check boxes of any well-heeled music lover. It has superb intrinsic CD sound, a useful array of analogue and digital inputs, and the facility of serving as a pre-amp for direct connection to power amps and active powered speakers. The technophile user may miss some added bells, such as balanced digital in- and outputs, or user-tweakable DSP functions; but then again, this helps make the 808 a much more straightforward to use product.

Seek out this player if you want to hear how good CD replay can be before you hit the giddy post-£10,000 bracket! ■

Andrew Harrison

Supplier

Meridian Audio
01480 445678
www.meridian-audio.com

Hi-FiNews verdict

Smooth and refined, the 808i builds on the success of the 506 and 508 players with greater sweetness, dynamics and rhythm. Built-in pre-amp clear and clean, if not the ultimate for vinyl-fronted set-ups.