



Meridian 808i Signature

Meridian applies two decades of hi-tech know-how to possibly the finest one-box CD player yet

PRICE: £8,250 CONTACT: Meridian Audio, Latham Road, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE29 6YE ☎ 01480 445678 🌐 www.meridian-audio.com

Meridian was first off the block with an audiophile CD player, the MCD, back in 1984. The company has kept its technological edge and these days offers highly advanced DVD solutions and digital loudspeakers among its products, so we were slightly surprised to see a brand new CD-only player. But as Meridian's chairman and chief designer Bob Stuart explained to us in *HFC 263*, the 808i's exclusion of the video and associated circuitry required in a CD/DVD player allows performance to be taken just that shade further, recognising at the same time that the questing music lover will find relatively little material on any hi-res format.

So here we have one of the world's top integrated CD players. A little odd, though, to find so many sockets on the back, and many of them are *inputs*. Yes, this gorgeous and aspirational device is also a digital preamplifier, with analogue and digital inputs and outputs, volume control, source selection – and, of course, a high-grade analogue-to-digital converter to digitise analogue inputs prior to digital processing.

Construction is first-rate, the substantial case including several circuit boards which carry the various input, output and processing modules, plus a computer-type DVD-ROM drive which gives excellent data recovery from marginal discs and seems to load discs faster than many of its breed. Importantly for a machine of this class, it's really nice to use too, especially the remote control which is a million miles from the little 'use-and-lose' things supplied with far too much high-end audio... this one has 'Pride Of Ownership' practically oozing out of its buttons.

SOUND QUALITY

You would expect that the basics are well taken care of at this level, and they are. But it's in the little details that sheep are sorted from goats; or at any rate, that's undeniably true from a technical point of view. Subjectively, though, this player makes its greatest impression as an integrated whole. It just doesn't sound like an 'ordinary' CD player. Completely vindicating its manufacturer's faith in high technology, it produces a sound whose overriding characteristic is musicality.

Most hi-fi terminology has its baggage, and 'musicality' is no exception, so we'll explain. Crucially, it sometimes carries implications of added euphonic colorations or distortions. That's in no way the

case here – the sound is pure, unsullied and crystal-clear (both to the ear and pretty much to the resolution of our testing instruments). Probably for that very reason, the listener is drawn into the musical sound-world in a most convincing way. It seems extraordinary that a 'mere' CD player can make such a difference, especially when players

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at a tenth the price come mighty close on the technical front, but aside from a handful of significantly more expensive and notably exotic multi-box CD players, we've not heard a more natural and inviting presentation from the original silver disc.

We took particular delight in the 808i's tendency to understatement, at least compared with other players: it never forces the sound at you, never exaggerates minor climaxes within the music. By contrast, when the going gets really tough it blossoms, delivering rock-steady images, unhindered dynamics and unfailingly natural instrumental timbres. It has no trouble at all with one of the greatest bugbears, quiet basslines, maintaining consistent tune, timing and level where others flounder or become woolly. It retrieves details you never dreamed existed from familiar recordings, and does all this with such calm assurance that it never draws attention to itself, merely flattering the music. If you like, it is to music as Jeeves was to Bertie Wooster: just as something is about to be demanded, one finds it has already been done.

It's pretty hard to criticise this player. Even its value for money seems perfectly reasonable when one considers the magnitude of its improvement in all areas – bass, treble, detail, imaging, tonal purity – over the run of the mill. And then there's its second (but hardly secondary) function as preamplifier, a task it fulfils no less admirably. Its size is imposing but not unmanageable. It is, in short, a prime example of hi-fi to aspire to. **HFC**

Richard Black

See HFC 263 (February 2005) for our original review of this product