

Cut Loos

Meridian's Sooloos system has earned great respect throughout the industry, offering an intelligent and well-considered yet unique proposition. Rafael Todes tries the latest incarnation in the shape of the Control 15/Media Source 600...

It was an inspired move by Meridian when they bought Sooloos in 2008; Sooloos were leaders in the programming side of networking, and Meridian had been early adopters in the digital (and latterly hi res digital) revolution, and had the necessary know-how to make digits sing. Here was a textbook example of symbiosis, if ever there was one!

This new combo is the latest incarnation of the device David Price tested back in the November 2009 issue of *Hi-Fi World*. The new Control 15 now has the ability to play 96kHz/24bit files which is a step increase on the Control 10 which could only play 48kHz/24bit; this is Meridian's first real foray into HDD-based hi res music playback networking and all the benefits that it brings.

Meridian build individual components for entire systems, and the Control 15 was supplied with a Meridian DAC, fed from the Control 15 by a CAT5 cable. Meridian recommend their DSP range of loudspeakers, which are fed digitally, with D to A convertors in the speakers themselves. This, it is claimed, not only reduces jitter, but also enables crossovers to be digital, and it is indeed possible to change the crossover frequencies. For the purposes of this review, I used a Weiss DAC202 as a reference, fed directly from the Control 15 using a Chord digital cable.

The swish Control 15 comprises a touchscreen monitor, and is surely the very best hi-fi interface around? You're greeted with colour images

of your CD collection. This makes choosing music from a computer far more tangible than the ubiquitous iTunes affair. It's far easier to connect emotionally with a CD cover reproduced than a list! You can search by artist, date of ripping, audio quality, etc., or even mood. (Usefully, you can also exclude categories from your search).



Meridian have struck a deal with five different database providers, and the Control 15 cross-matches information from the different databases to provide the most useful and hopefully correct information. It works very well in practice, I found, although of course isn't one hundred percent flawless.

The supplied review unit came with around five hundred CDs preloaded on it, and I felt a bit like

a kid in a sweet shop with all the choice. This is not a standard feature of the Sooloos I hasten to add! But it did show me very quickly how inviting it is to use. Indeed, within minutes of its arrival, I was fighting off my kids who wanted to have a go; it's interesting to see that they would never go and put on a CD from the cupboard, but touching an image on the screen is a different proposition! I also observed that this method of

playing music is more wife-friendly – the unit has a positive wife acceptance factor like few pieces of hi-fi I've ever seen.

However, since editor DP wrote his original review of the Sooloos 2.0 package, the Apple iPad has raised the bar in terms of what we now expect from a good interface. Reading a magazine on an iPad is a pleasure, not only because of the screen quality, but also the ability to flick to the next page/screen. Sadly the Meridian lacks this functionality when scrolling through pictures of CDs, so it's not quite state of the art anymore. In hi-fi terms though, it remains on another level to rival products.

Meridian also provide an iPhone/iPad app which enables the user to choose music from an armchair. The functionality isn't as full as the touchscreen Control 15 unit, there are no pictures available before choosing your CD, only once the selection has been made. It also lacks the speed of the larger unit, but is nevertheless useful. As with most networking systems, you can 'create zones' in the house, and stream music wirelessly. However, Meridian advise against wireless connection as it is always subject to factors beyond your control. I found generally that streaming music from the server to my computer worked well.

The Control 15 can store up to 500GB of music, enough for 1,000 CDs. If you require more than this, the system is not particularly scalable, and you'll have to start again with another server. I suppose 1,000 CDs would represent the upper limit of most people's collections, but this figure shrinks when you start to load high-res material which takes up much more space. I'd like to see more built-in storage coming soon, please!

Adding your CDs to the Control 15 is simplicity itself. There is a slot which accepts the CD, and around eight minutes later, the CD is returned, ripped and categorised.

It takes such a long

time because

Meridian say their ripping algorithm is designed for sonics not speed. Higher resolution material is slightly more complicated

to install. It has to be downloaded to a PC or Mac, and then imported into the Control 15 wirelessly. The Linn Records hi res catalogue was only partially



registered with the various databases, and required a few bits of meta data to be inserted - surprising as its superb recordings showcase the talents of the Sooloos.

SOUND QUALITY

First up was Schubert's 'Trout Quintet', Andras Schiff and the Hagen Quartet on Decca. It is not a recording I know, but what a delight at the flick of a screen to summon up this musical presence in the room with such ease. Schubert wrote this music to be played at home, and it includes the rather odd addition of a double bass. The Meridian captured the ambience of the hall beautifully, and it was a real joy to stare at the CD cover on the screen and not start a pile up of broken jewellery-case CD boxes!

Whilst the Sooloos is all about convenience, it is nevertheless a Meridian and so has serious sonic pretensions. With this in mind I compared elements of the system closely with top quality separates equivalents, to give a sense of perspective in terms of its musical performance. I used a Cyrus CD XT SE Transport connected with a Chord Indigo Plus cable and the Weiss DAC202 as a reference. Price for price, the total cost of this Meridian Sooloos system is £6,500; the Weiss DAC202 costs £4,600 which together with the £1,550 Cyrus Transport is £6,150; so that's what you'd be buying if you were spending the same amount on separates...

I first listened to Mahler's 5th Symphony, conducted by Leonard Bernstein, 3rd movement. The Cyrus/Weiss combination produced a really clear, sparkly sound, instruments clearly defined in space, beautifully separated in their different sections. It's some of the best Red-Book CD that I've encountered. The Meridian server, feeding the Weiss DAC and Indigo Plus cable delivered an ever so slightly less detailed but smoother sound. A touch of the sparkle had disappeared, but the resultant mixture was far from unpleasant to listen to, just slightly less incisive. Where the bass quality of the Cyrus was taut and punchy, the Meridian lost a touch of that grip, yet sounded fuller in some respects. In particular, double bass pizzicati seemed a touch too powerful yet looser. As a digital transport then, the Meridian does a very fine job but doesn't rival the very best optical designs.

Still, most people are going to run the Meridian as a whole system, and so I added the £1,700 Meridian DAC. This provided a richness that wasn't present with the Weiss, making for

a creamier and smoother sound. Understandably, compared to the £4,600 Weiss, the Meridian DAC lacked a little of its lightning transient attack and the violin section of the Vienna Philharmonic lost just a bit of subtle detailing.

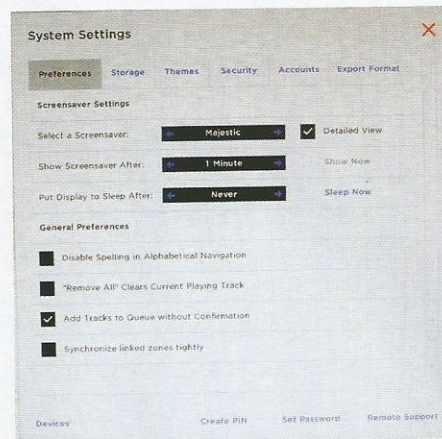
Next, I turned to some high resolution digital material on the Meridian, which is its *raison-d'être* over the previous Control 10. There is an excellent recording of the Dvorak 'New World Symphony', conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Here the Meridian really shone. As a reference, I used my Acer laptop running Windows XP, with a FireWire output via an Oyaide cable to the Weiss DAC. The Meridian made the soundstage more expansive and three dimensional, and achieved a better separation of orchestral forces, rather like the earlier comparison. The differences were not huge though.

A more profound contrast emerged listening to Linn Records' 'Mozart 41st Symphony', where the laptop seemed to add a touch of grain and brass to the sound which isn't organic or desirable; not a huge amount but it's there. The Meridian's smoothness here was appreciated, plus it gave a slightly bigger soundstage. The way the trailing edge of the violin section sounded particularly different, there seemed to be an infinitesimal smudge at the end of notes in the violin melodies, which the Meridian avoided. Interestingly I listened to the same recording played on CD through the Cyrus transport, it didn't have the same soundstage, but it seemed to cope with textures more convincingly. It is a bizarre paradox that a better transport on lower resolution can hold a candle to a streamer at a higher resolution, but there you go!

CONCLUSION

This is an extremely interesting product which raises some fascinating issues. As an interface, it is revelatory in the ease with which you can select music. It is sheer joy to use, and invites people of any age or sex to use it. There are a couple of things that would be on my wish-list in terms of functionality, such as a slightly more sensitive and colourful screen, and an iPadesque wipe, but this aside, it is not far off the state of the art.

On the musical side, the Meridian has an unmistakable house sound that is smooth, mellow,



Despite being so easy to use, the Sooloos is highly configurable...



A relatively simple set of connectons to the outside world make this a user-installable product, although Meridian dealers will be happy to oblige...

and puts mellifluousness above detail. It makes everything it plays an enjoyable and refined experience, which is not always a given with digital. If there's a criticism to be made, then if anything it's that it's a little over-smooth, lacking in incision compared to the finest separates combinations. But there you go; the finest separates combinations are pains to set up and fiddly to use in the extreme compared to this sexy, ultra slick package. Inveterate twiddlers and/or sonic sticklers may still go for specialist separates then, but if you want a premium priced, fine sounding digital music centre with what's surely the swishest user interface, here it is!

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Weiss DAC202 digital convertor
Chord Indigo Plus cable
Cyrus CD XT SE CD transport
VAC Auricle Musicbloccs power amplifiers
Chord Epic Twin speaker cables
B&W 802D loudspeakers

VERDICT

State-of-the-art user interface, fine sonics and true hi res functionality make this a unique product in the marketplace.

MERIDIAN SOOLOOS

CONTROL 15 £4,750
MERIDIAN SOOLOOS
MEDIA SOURCE 600 £1,750
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FOR

- exceptional user interface
- svelte, musical sound
- design, style, finish

AGAINST

- limited storage