



DVD hits the spot

Meridian's G Series breaks new ground with this DVD player/controller/tuner

PRODUCT Meridian G91

TYPE DVD-Audio/Video player/controller/tuner

PRICE £3,895

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 44x9x3.5cm

• Weight: 9kg • Plays DVD-Audio, DVD-Video, CD
• Built-in RDS AM/FM radio tuner • Preamp/processor
facility for external sources • Fixed or variable stereo out

CONTACT ☎ 01480 445678

www.meridian-audio.com

Meridian can lay part-claim to DVD-Audio; the company didn't invent the format, but the process used to compress the data down to size is wholly a Meridian thing (the name – Meridian Lossless Packing – should be a clue). But in a world where £150 buys you an entry-level DVD-Audio player, and Meridian's shiny

new G91 costs a rather fierce £3,895, why should you bother?

Well for a start, the G91 is no ordinary DVD-Audio player. It's classed as a player/controller/tuner, as it includes a built-in Meridian digital processor and AM/FM tuner of a very high quality. The result is a DVD-Audio/Video player that doesn't just play discs – it'll also provide a radio source and operate as a digital preamp/processor for other external sources too.

Whether this is the DVD component for you depends on your planned system configuration. There's no multichannel analogue audio output, for example, so don't expect to hook this player up to AV amps or processors from other brands and play multichannel DVD-Audio. Instead, you get various digital outputs including standard

S/PDIF coaxial and Meridian's proprietary MHR SmartLink, which carries all forms of audio data in digital form, including DVD-A. There's also a stereo analogue output (fixed or variable), so you can hook straight to a stereo power amp for two-channel replay.

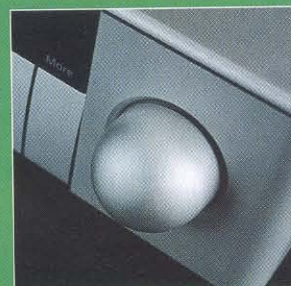
So, what can you do with it? If you're strictly a stereo fan, you can go down that last route and use the G91 as a high-quality two-channel CD, DVD and radio source component, plus a preamp/DAC for other sources (three analogue and four digital inputs are provided). In this context, 'surround sound' DVD-Audio and Video replay is downmixed (in a very sophisticated manner) to stereo. Alternatively, forget the power amp and feed the G91 directly to a pair of Meridian's DSP active speakers for a compact, all-Meridian stereo system.

THE G SERIES

The G Series is a potentially bewildering range, with a variety of similarly sized and shaped components, many of which do not do precisely what you've been taught to expect from hi-fi components. So, instead of a CD player, preamp and power amp in separate boxes, you might find the CD and preamp sharing the same case, connecting to a separate power amp or branching into the digital loudspeaker systems found elsewhere in the Meridian catalogue.

At its most basic, a G Series system comprises a G07 CD player coupled with a G51 100-watts-per-channel stereo receiver. This is designed to be used with third-party passive analogue loudspeakers, despite the G51 featuring amplifier blocks from the company's DSP8000 digital active speakers. From here, you can upgrade the CD player to a G08 upsampling CD player or a G98 DVD Audio/Video player without changing the amplifier. Moving on, it's pre/power all the way, with two levels of preamp (the G01 preamp/tuner and the balanced über G02) and one of two stereo power amp designs. Or one can do without the stereo power amp and use Meridian's analogue active loudspeaker systems.

So far, so almost conventional. The G91 tested here is essentially a two-channel, DVD-playing nerve centre – partner it with a power amp and conventional speakers or plug it directly into Meridian DSP active speakers to form an exceptionally neat stereo CD/DVD/radio system. Ah... but you want multichannel. Now it gets twisty. The G91 may still work for you, particularly if you want to build an all-Meridian system with, for example, the G68 multichannel processor. However, in such a case you might prefer the G98DH, which is a pure DVD-Audio/Video transport with digital-only outputs. Or, if you want to use an AV amp or processor from another brand, the G98AH might suit you best, complete with multichannel analogue outputs like any standard DVD-Audio/Video player. This may seem confusing, but in essence, products like the G91 tested here are designed for people to start with two-channel stereo and gradually migrate to five channels or more of digital active surround sound, without taking serious steps backwards in trade-ins or loss of performance in the process.



If you want to expand beyond stereo into multichannel, you could hook the G91 to a processor or AV amp from another brand. The trouble with this is you're limited to stereo analogue or S/PDIF digital connections, and S/PDIF won't carry multichannel DVD-Audio – you'll be limited to stereo DVD-A/CD/radio plus Dolby Digital/DTS data streams off DVD. Much more gratifying for those who want full-blown multichannel would be to add Meridian's G68 'surround controller' (or multichannel processor, if you prefer). Thus, using the MHR link, multichannel DVD-Audio and the rest can be piped through, processed and delivered to your choice of multichannel power amps and speakers. Alternatively, hook straight to a clutch of Meridian DSP speakers for basic multichannel sound...

In essence, then, the G91 has been designed as a high-quality stereo source component that can also be expanded to top-notch multichannel, Meridian-style. If you want a 'normal' DVD-Audio/Video player, with multichannel analogue outputs to link with other brands, Meridian does that too in the shape of the G98AH, based on the same architecture. But in many ways the G91's on-board tuner and preamp/processor facilities make it a highly flexible product.

The player itself is a sophisticated leveller of technologies, both audio and video. There's a healthy amount of digital upscaling, resolving at 48-bit precision, which means upsampling CD to 88.2kHz or 176.4kHz – or delivering 96kHz

"The G91 is a beautifully made product, its look and feel exuding the confident air of hi-tech hi-fi engineering at its best."

or 192kHz sampling rates for DVD-Audio – at 24-bit resolution is a doddle. Likewise, the player has a proper video scaler, which can convert humble composite, S-Video or interlaced component video into high-definition multimedia interface (HDMI) digital pictures, dealing with all current and legacy formats. It also delivers analogue progressive scan pictures for PAL and NTSC formats.

There's no Scart socket, an unforgivable error in low-end equipment but entirely understandable when the product is as expensive as this one. It will be used in systems where Scart is just too low-brow for connection. Put simply, the G91 is packed with broadcast quality electronics (such as the Meridian and Faroudja video processing) and delivers broadcast quality pictures... if your monitor is up to it. With so complex a product, it's hardly surprising that Meridian has made the set-up routine sophisticated and infinitely flexible, so much so that it's best left to the expert who installs the player. There's a series of user controls that can be accessed, and these are clearly marked in the comprehensive manual, but fine-tuning the G91 to the monitor used is best left in the hands of the professionals. This leaves you with the MSR+ handset and the front panel to play with. Ergonomically, the new interfaces are streets ahead of the 500 range that the G Series

replaces – bigger, illuminated buttons and displays that no longer speak in code abound. Once installed, this becomes an easy interface to learn, on a par with Linn's Where, What, Do interface of the Knekt multiroom system.

The on-screen and front panel display are decidedly complex, but then they need to be, because of the configurability of the player. This means there is a degree of overkill on the front (do you really need to know the sampling rate of a disc when playing?) but it also comes with a human-friendly volume knob. It's a beautifully made product all-in-all, its look and feel exuding the confident air of hi-tech hi-fi engineering at its best.

SOUND QUALITY

With something this well made, from a high-end brand with the longest heritage in digital audio, it's no real surprise that the sound is refined and extended, regardless of source.

In some respects, the DVD-Audio performance is restricted by the two-channel approach (unless your system already speaks Meridian), but if you think of it as a gateway product for stereo people to make the transition into multichannel you forgive the essentially stereo-only replay (with non-Meridian kit) and bask in the quality of DVD-Audio sound. And oh boy, what a sound... or rather, what an absence of sound. This player adds very ▀



Q & A

We spoke to Andrew Samalionis, head of sales support at Meridian Audio, about the G91



HFC: Meridian invented MLP – how much of an advantage does that give in designing DVD-Audio players?

AS: In terms of dealing with the technology, it gives us the ability to know the format inside out in terms of understanding and navigating DVD-Audio discs and how we write our navigation software. That gives us a huge advantage.

How important is navigation software in a modern player?

We were one of the first to design our own servo circuit and software. Even today we write our own navigation software which gives us the chance to update in-house. This has direct benefits in terms of improvements in ease of use, sound and video quality and speed of access.

How important is Meridian's DVD-ROM chassis concept?

The ROM Drive system is central to our ability to extract as much data as possible from the disc and still keep quality. The ROM reads data at higher than normal speeds, with a multiple buffer system to eliminate the jitter inherent to high-speed data reading. This works on CD as well as DVD.

How much trickle down is there from the 800 Series?

There's movement in the technology in both directions. The energy used to develop the 800 series went directly into the G Series. But the engineering development that went into creating the G has had a direct effect in the software of 800 Series too.

The G Series sets about locking someone into Meridian's digital aspect. Why?

It's entirely a process of developing the design. The original design of the digital outputs was for customers to upgrade to multichannel. As the product went through the development process, we had enough space to use those outputs for DSP speakers. It's almost rudimentary in comparison to adding a surround sound processor.

Will people upgrade from stereo to multichannel?

We've had a number of customers who have high-end two-channel systems who are looking for a player that can give fantastic CD performance and DVD in two channels. The option to add channels – albeit Meridian channels – allows the user to upgrade as their conditions change.



FORMAT COMPATIBILITY

DVD-AUDIO	✓	DVD+R	✓
DVD-VIDEO	✓	DVD-RAM	✗
SACD	✗	MP3 AUDIO	✓
CD	✓	WMA AUDIO	✗
HDCD	✗	AAC AUDIO	✗
CD-R/ RW	✓	VIDEO CD	✓
DVD-R/ RW	✓	JPEG PICTURES	✗

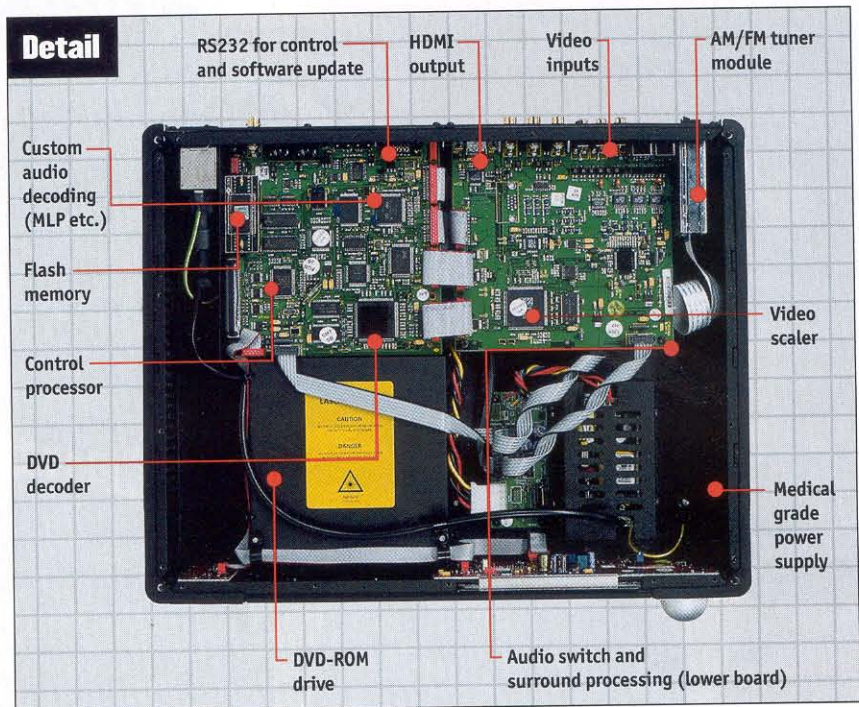
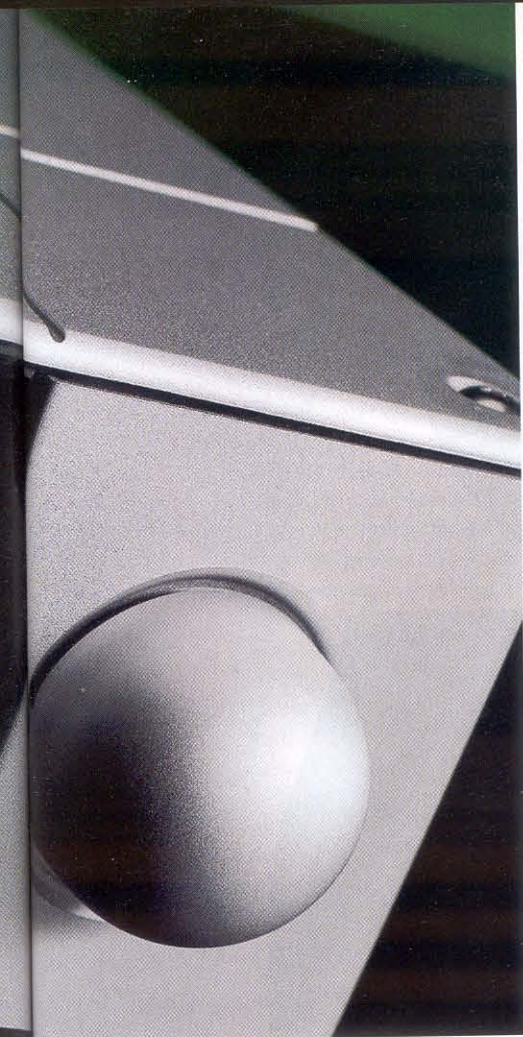
little to the intrinsic sound of DVD-Audio, and what it subtracts is so mild that the rest of the process is more likely to damage the audio signal than the G91. This isn't immediately apparent, until you go back to a conventionally 'good' DVD-A player and realise you have lost the studio-like sound and your living room just turns back into a living room.

Normally, one of two events happens in the life of a DVD-Audio player. The person listens to DVD-Audio and is slightly impressed by the improvement it brings, but hardly enough to force a lifestyle change. Alternatively, the sound

of CD is so poor through the player that it forces the hi-fi enthusiast to return to an older CD player, sidelining DVD-A in the process. This player is an exception. CD sounds great – good enough to question the need for a separate CD player in all but the most discerning of systems. But DVD-Audio is so impressive that you long for a parallel universe where every recording can be had in DVD-A form alongside the CD version.

So, what's so damn good about this player? Its sound has the kind of authority that a good high-end CD player delivers, but few DVD-Audio players thus far can muster. Factor in stereo





“Few players we’ve seen so effortlessly highlight why audiophiles should be getting that warm, fuzzy feeling about DVD-Audio.”

performance that is beautifully focused, with the sort of deep, wide soundstage that cries out for the best speakers and the sort of detail that allows you to hear into the recording, and you get some idea of what the player is doing right. It's not as grippingly bold as a Naim, or as charmingly unforced, dynamic and coherent as a Wadia, but it has an intrinsic sense of balance that draws the listener into the music. In essence, DVD-Audio 'simply' extends that balance, adding extension, detail... and, if you go the multichannel route, three and a bit more channels. That 'simply' is, in fact, crushingly difficult to achieve and no player we've encountered this side of five grand so seamlessly integrates CD and DVD-Audio, yet also so effortlessly highlights why, if you are an audiophile, you should be getting that warm, fuzzy feeling about DVD-A.

No passage in particular highlights what the G91 does well, because it's uniformly good with all genres and all formats it can cope with. The obligatory Damien Rice on CD sounded so real (and so close miked) that you could almost reach out and hand the man some Prozac. And on DVD-Audio, the moody *Riders On The Storm* (in stereo) sounded so broody and malevolent, you would think you were in a flood... come to think of it, a common mistake this 'summer'.

VIDEO PERFORMANCE

In picture terms, there's lots to praise, too. This is one of those rare players that raises the performance bar so high that its performance on S-Video is better than many cheaper players

playing RGB. It has exceptional colour depth and focus, with the sort of detail that makes each disc look more like film than polycarbonate. Then, move to one of the more upmarket output formats like HDMI and the picture simply comes to life. Denon's DVD-3910 (see review, p50) performs a similar epiphany in the sub-£1,000 market and between them, the companies pretty much stitch up the 'high-fidelity video' DVD realm. There are a few players that match these two in performance terms but none eclipse them, save those with the sort of price tag that will buy you a small former-Soviet armoured division for a weekend's annexing.

Photography buffs have a curious Japanese term for the quality of out of focus images... 'bokeh'. Good bokeh means the background highlights the sharpness of the foreground subjects in focus, like a Turner watercolour. By contrast, bad bokeh looks like a Surat pointillist painting gone wrong. Few DVD players have good bokeh, but the G91 gives great bokeh.

Painters everywhere will be ecstatic. With video sources, there is directness to sound as well as picture that's often lacking in DVD systems. It's pin-sharp precise from the deepest bass to the highest treble, with the sort of musically-tight focus that makes the soundtrack to *Kill Bill Volume 1* come alive. This air of superiority is noticeable even when streaming a Dolby or DTS soundtrack through the S/PDIF electrical digital link – there's none of the trebly forwardness and almost jittery sound common to DVD digital. Instead the sound is authoritative and solid from channel to channel.

The G91 may seem a curious product, and indeed its distinctiveness makes it tough to rate. For some, its lack of multichannel analogue outputs will put it out of the running, and of course there's no SACD replay... But what this machine does, it does exceptionally well. It's a very good CD player in its own right, and great for a DVD player. It's a class-leading DVD-Audio player too, whether in stereo or (with the help of other Meridian gear) in multichannel, and with DVD-Video it's outstanding. Add the tuner and processor and it's plainly a special bit of kit. **HFC**

Alan Sircom



VERDICT

SOUND >> 90%

>> SUB RATINGS
CD 87% DVD-A 93%

VISION >> 96%

FEATURES >> 89%

VALUE >> 85%

CONCLUSION

Hardly your average DVD-Audio/Video player, the G91 delivers class-leading sound and pictures. It may not be the ideal option for a mix 'n' match multichannel system, but in a stereo context or an all-Meridian surround set-up it's superb.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE >> **90%**