



MERIDIAN G91 DVD-AUDIO/VIDEO PLAYER/TUNER/PREAMPLIFIER
MERIDIAN G56 POWER AMPLIFIER | SPENDOR S8E LOUDSPEAKERS | £7,285

Get a lifestyle

This intriguing multiformat stereo system from Meridian and Spendor will make your life more beautiful. And it sounds as good as it looks

Let's begin, this month, with a squint through the keyhole, Loyd Grossman stylee. Hmmm, nice pad – spacious, spare, achingly tasteful, beautifully understated. It's the distillation of every cool, modern, sleek interior ever imagined by an art director charged with the task of floating the word 'lifestyle' on a sea of white space.

What's this? An Apple Powerbook, all shiny titanium and softly-glowing apple logo, purring quietly to itself on the corner of the 2002 Giovanni Tommaso Garattoni coffee table.

Oops, accidentally touched the mouse pad and now there's text set against the backdrop image of a spacious, spare, achingly tasteful, beautifully understated room. Could be a clue here. "Since its launch in 1984, we have become accustomed to the Compact Disc – including its early problems and the more recent solutions. Today, a CD is capable of extraordinarily high quality – far better than the best the exponents of vinyl could ever have imagined, and far closer to the original sound in the studio than would ever have been possible with traditional disc technologies that had hardly changed in a century."

Interesting, let's recap: an impossibly stylish apartment, completely devoid of clutter; an interest in the recorded arts; and downloaded text stating that digital audio technology has left its faltering beginnings behind to represent the cutting edge of high-end sound quality. Who could possibly live in a utopia like this? "So, who lives here?", we ask in our best Mid-Atlantic drawl.

Well, how about the notional owner of this month's *Beautiful System*. Probably good looking, probably dressed head to foot in Hugo Boss or Armani, probably annoyingly successful but, above all, a serious appreciator of fine music. When

it comes to choosing hi-fi that's the polar opposite of 'hair shirt', no one does it better than Meridian. Instead, Meridian makes hi-fi that reflects your chilled appreciation of quality: hi-fi that integrates as seamlessly with your lifestyle as it does your home; hi-fi that's ahead of the curve; indeed, hi-fi that lets you live the digital dream.

NUTHIN' BUT A G THANG

And so we have it. Two sublimely elegant units from the oh-so cool and reasonably 'affordable' G Series range that look very simple on the outside, but are packed with state-of-the-art digital electronics on the inside. It's hi-fi that, should you wish, can form part of a multichannel home theatre system (nothing too unusual there) and play music in stereo to a very high standard. That's much, much harder.

At its heart is arguably Meridian's most appealing single component ever, the G91. It combines a DVD-Audio/Video disc player, stereo digital preamplifier and AM/FM, RDS/RDSB radio tuner in a single unit. The G91 can function as a Meridian-oriented multichannel home theatre centrepiece but here, teamed with Meridian's G56 stereo power amp and a pair of Spendor S8e floorstanding speakers, the spotlight is on its purist two-channel capabilities.

The G Series look is distinctive yet understated and the feel (equally important to Meridian – it talks about handcrafted watches and fine automobiles in its brochure) is solid and smooth, with the company's signature contrasting textures of metal and glass. Build and finish are both exemplary.

Inside, the Meridian G Series is new from the ground up. Technologies originally devised for the company's flagship 800 series products have



Meridian G91
DVD player/
tuner/preamp
£3,895

A shining example of what Meridian does best: cool industrial design, high-tech digital electronics, brilliant user interface, huge desirability... and it sounds wonderful.



Meridian G56
power amplifier
£1,495

Meridian made its bones with CD players, but this power amp still does the business. A strong yet sensitive type with bags of power but even more finesse.



Spendor S8e
loudspeaker
£1,895 per pair

Spendor doesn't know how to make bad speakers, but the S8e is something special even by its own high standards. Lovely midrange and deep bass combine to make a sound that's big and sweet.

"The G Series look is distinctive yet understated and the feel is solid and smooth, with Meridian's signature contrasting metal and glass textures."



■ been trickled down to the G Series. The G91 employs a DVD-ROM drive, with a FIFO (first in first out) RAM buffer system. This means the DVD drive spins at higher than normal speed and loads the digital data – whether from a CD or any flavour of DVD – meaning jitter is stamped on by powerful re-clocking in the buffering stage. Naturally, this means a wealth of Meridian-written control, navigation and error-correction software for speed and reliable disc-handling. Although falling short of full universality (Meridian is no lover of SACD), the G91 handles all relevant mass-produced and recordable variants of CD and DVD/DVD-Audio formats, including CD-R and hybrids. Upsampling of standard CD PCM data is to 24-bit, 176.4/192kHz.

FLASH: SAVIOUR OF THE FUTURE

Future-proofing is also a Meridian speciality. The G91 is equipped with Flash ROM. This contains the system software for the unit – its operating system, so to speak – and it can be updated when the need arises by downloading new software from the Meridian web site and transferring it to the unit from the computer, via the RS232 serial port.

The G91 is supplied with Meridian's latest multifunction programmable/learning remote control, the Meridian System Remote Plus. An auto-back-lit

remote with interchangeable source keys (alternative and blank keycaps are provided), it can control all Meridian products – along with virtually any other device you might wish to interface with your G Series system. You can even add commands to an existing database set.

The unit is equally simple to operate from the front panel, which is built around the latest Vacuum Fluorescent Display technology, with a particularly clear dot-matrix format that displays graphics as well as characters. The front panel switches have a positive, precise feel and the row of seven keys to the right of the panel under the display respond to a light touch. But only two of the seven front panel keys have permanent names – 'Home', which always takes you back to the top level of the interface; and 'More' which accesses additional features and functions.

All the other keys are 'soft'; the display labels them according to the context in which they appear. This means that a key is always clearly labelled with its current function. You don't have to remember all the possible operations a button can offer – because it tells you. 'Wizards' can lead you through different levels of configuration and even the most obscure settings can be made accessible from the front panel. Almost too clever for words... and makes the player almost 'fly by wire' in the manner of an Airbus.

Small, round buttons on the left of the unit open and close the disc drawer and power the G91 up or down. A soft blue glow indicates that the unit is in standby; when operating, the front-panel keys are similarly gently back-illuminated to make them easy to find in low light conditions. Another button allows you to change the player's display mode – you can dim its intensity or lose it altogether.

One of the more curious aspects of the G91 is its interaction with multichannel systems. You can hook it directly to a set of Meridian's digital active speakers, or a G68 processor and suitable power amps, but there are no multichannel analogue outputs and the only hi-res digital audio link is the Meridian-only MHR. That means options are limited if you want to use the unit with a processor or AV amp from another brand – but here we're harnessing the G91's player and preamp functions as part of a two-channel hi-fi system, and for that Meridian's G56 stereo power amp will do just fine.

The preamp section of the G91 includes fully dual-mono construction for maximum channel separation, while the dual-mono G56 derives much of its technology from Meridian's DSP8000 digital loudspeakers. The design topology has biasing for pseudo Class A operation, for which Meridian claims an amazingly low output impedance – virtually zero. Coupled with low feedback, the 100-watt



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per channel G56 is said to maintain audio quality and stability when driving almost any load. It can be bridged to mono for higher single-channel output.

As a Brit class act to follow a Brit class act, we could hardly do any better than the Spondor S8e, a modern, elegant two-way floorstander from one of the most famous names in speakerdom. The S8e aims for ‘broadcast reference’ performance – much like its legendary forbear, the BC1 – but brings the ambition bang up to date. Like the BC1, it also has an 210mm polymer-coned bass/mid driver with a high damping synthetic rubber surround, which boasts an exceptionally smooth extended response. The large cone area and freedom from resonance and break-up are said to maintain the BC1 tradition, aided by ‘3D linear flow’ reflex loading for greater bass depth and authority.

BEST OF BRITISH

The performance of this Meridian/Spondor combo is so anchored and assured, you’d trust it with your ISA account. Its presentation is very much of

the flesh and blood rather than etched and edgy school. It sounds both unforced and well-balanced. And bass fans are in for something of a treat, the lower registers marrying satisfying weight with fine smoothness, speed and integration. It doesn’t really matter if your fix is Marcus Miller or Hank Marvin, the power and expression of the playing is delivered with all of its attack, drive and note shaping intact. The effect is somehow luxurious and reassuring. Treble is also a class act, with well resolved tonal colours and harmonics.

The G56 power amp is a good match for the poised, transparent Spondors, offering impressive drive and impetus. Partly this is due to the strong bass and is best appreciated with something loud and energetic – say Steve Vai’s brand of super-virtuosic heavy metal guitar on CD. You get to hear it all; the production tricks, Vai’s own technical prowess, the kick and the slam. It’s ‘in yer face’ without being all over it like a rash.

Heart-tugging strings are handled just as deftly, whether from Radio 3 or John Williams’ main theme from the

Schindler’s List soundtrack on DVD-Audio. Here the system’s exceptional midrange clarity shines, easily keeping the emotional core of the music intact. This is a classy sound; even-handed, uncoloured, musically truthful, easy to listen to and, ultimately, fulfilling.

You just want to keep listening – a good sign. Here’s a system that seems to have it all. It may not be in the Naim class when it comes to tempo, dynamic inflection and rhythmic vitality but it sounds natural, spacious and relaxed. The system as a whole responds to the subtlest nuance and its bass is warm and weighty without going soft, even on the very deepest notes. The presentation is all of a piece, yet with fabulous inner detail. All this and fantastic looks, too.

Indeed, the way this system marries elegant style and clever ergonomics with a high-resolution sound that’s comfortable, relaxing and easy to listen to is a little miracle. There’s always a balance to be struck with hi-fi, but *Beautiful Systems* has seldom heard one quite so spot on. **HFC**

David Vivian

