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masterpiece
< theater

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and the walls
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See page 88

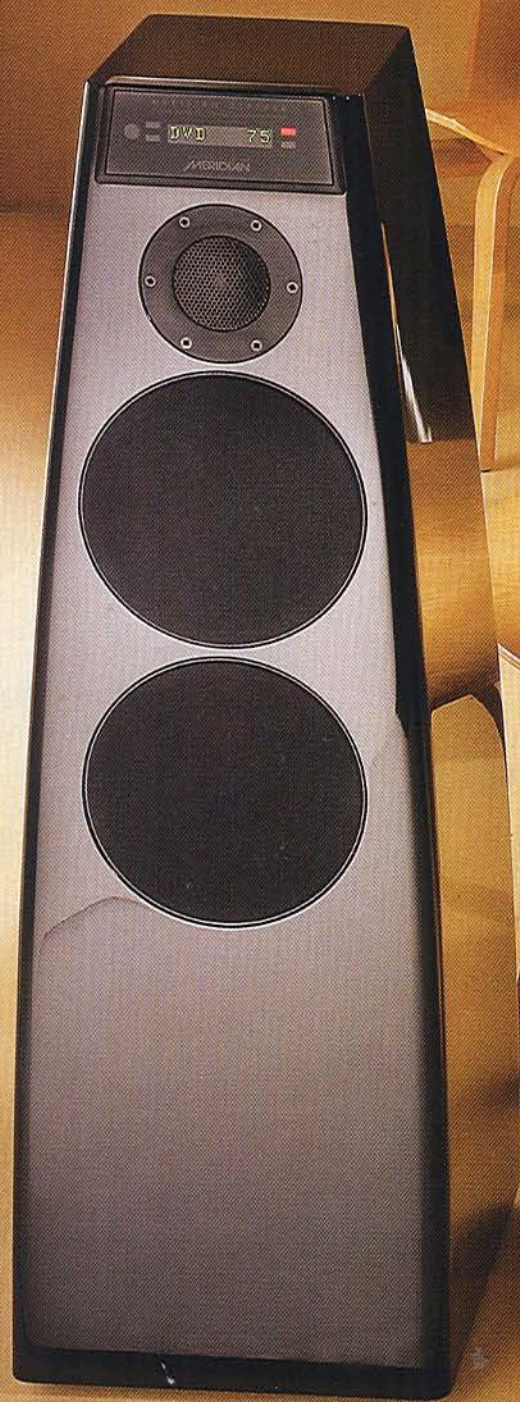


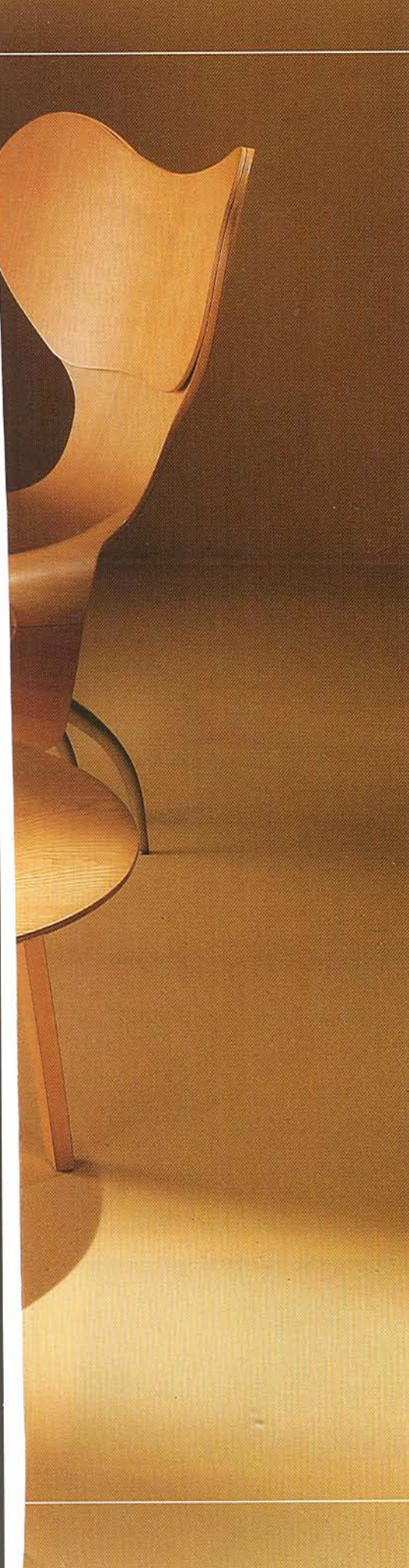
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Meridian's Ultimate Home-Theater-In-A-Box
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NO ARGUMENT

Meridian's G91A surround processor/DVD player and digital speakers show why this company's systems are as advanced as any in the world.

Marketers often make fantastical claims. Why they do this I cannot say. I know that I turn off when I encounter an ad or a press release in which a manufacturer proclaims its product as "the best," "the finest," or "the ultimate." One exception to this rule is Meridian Audio. Although the statements the company makes in its promotional materials are refreshingly conservative, it is one of the few audio companies for whom the abovementioned superlatives are no exaggeration.

Meridian systems offer what I consider to be the ultimate in audio technology. In most home theater systems, digital audio signals from DVDs, CDs, and

digital broadcasts are converted to analog in the surround-sound processor. They then make a harrowing journey through an amplifier, through long speaker cables, and then through crossover networks in the speakers that separate the sound into bass for the woofers, treble for the tweeters, and so on. Each step in this path degrades the audio signal a little.

Meridian avoids degradation by keeping the signals in digital form until just before they hit the speaker drivers. The surround-sound processor emits digital audio signals, which travel straight to the speakers through proprietary cables. Inside the speaker, the digital signal meets a digital processor, which performs the same function as the crossover network in a conventional speaker. The digital bass, midrange, and treble signals are

Meridian's DSP5200 digital speakers (left) shown with the Meridian system remote control.

BY BRENT BUTTERWORTH • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CORDERO STUDIOS



Each tweeter (above) and woofer in a Meridian digital system gets its own amplifier, fed by a digital signal processor that performs crossover and EQ functions.

converted to analog, then travel to a separate amplifier for each driver.

The advantages of the Meridian way are many. Besides preventing the signal degradation that occurs in analog cables, Meridian can dispense with the power-slurping capacitors, inductors, and resistors that make up the crossover in most speakers, so the amplifiers in its speakers operate far more efficiently. By using digital crossovers, Meridian can tailor the sound more precisely for each speaker driver. And by supplying all components of the audio system, Meridian ensures each one will be compatible with the rest.

Meridian's latest creations could be compared with a home-theater-in-a-box system. The differences are that Meridian's system comes in seven boxes, costs exponentially more, and sounds exponentially better.

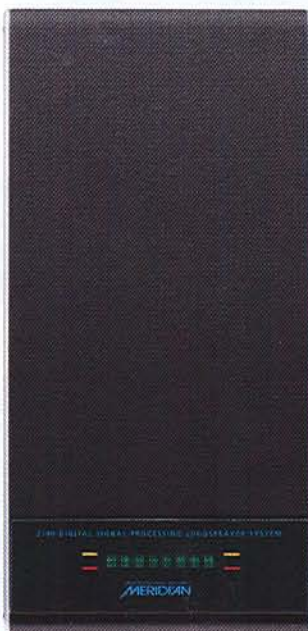
The heart of the system is the new G91A Integrated

System. The G91A plays DVD-Videos, DVD-Audios, and CDs, and also tunes FM and AM radio. It incorporates a Dolby Digital/DTS surround-sound processor and a video processor that converts any incoming analog video signal to high-resolution HDMI digital video. Connect a satellite receiver or cable box, a video game system, and perhaps a TiVo, a music server, or an iPod to the G91A, and you have a complete entertainment system. All you need are speakers and a television set or video projector.

Meridian offers 15 different digital speakers that are compatible with the G91A. (The unit can also connect to conventional amps and speakers.) The company chose for me a medium-size system comprising DSP5200 main left/right minispeakers for surround channels, a DSP5200HC center speaker, and an SW5500 subwoofer. Except for the subwoofer, each of the speakers has an alphanumeric readout that tells you which source is selected on the G91A and what the volume level is.

Thanks to the subtle, un-

Take two or more of Meridian's digital speakers (right), a G91A surround processor/DVD player, and the Meridian system remote (upper right) and you have a complete system. Volume control occurs in the speakers themselves; a display (the "65" at right) shows the level. The display also shows which source is selected on the G91A.



Despite its relatively tiny chassis, the DSP3100 bookshelf speaker (above) has all of the features of other Meridian digital speakers, including a front-panel display that indicates volume level and selected source, a built-in digital signal processor, and a separate internal amplifier for each speaker driver.

usual curve of the DSP5200's side panels, it dominates its bandmates like Justin Timberlake eclipsed his now-forgotten colleagues in *NSync. The sensuous shape may earn the DSP5200 a hearty welcome in places where a traditional box speaker would be rejected. Surprisingly for its size and its modest complement of two 6.3-inch woofers, the DSP5200 delves deep into the bass; it's like hearing Barry White's voice emerge from Justin Timberlake's mouth. Even the deepest notes of electro-pop recordings sound clear, as if they were coming from a huge subwoofer instead of a relatively slender speaker. Unless you want to play your system at deafening levels, the DSP5200 needs no help from a subwoofer.

Bass is not the DSP5200's sole strength, though. The





Meridian intends the DSP3100 (left) for a variety of uses: as a rear speaker or main speaker in a surround system (a horizontally oriented center-channel version is also available), as a bookshelf speaker for small stereo systems, or as an extension speaker for multiroom systems.

Only 15 inches high, the DSP3100 is the baby of the bunch, but from a technological standpoint it is the DSP5200's equal—it is, in essence, a DSP5200 without one woofer, in a much smaller cabinet. The cabinet's sides are made from aluminum, its top and bottom from medium-density fiberboard (MDF). Meridian says pairing these disparate materials helps

to eliminate resonance and vibration in the cabinet. A matching center speaker, the DSP3100HC, is available. The DSP3100 sounds much like the DSP5200, with the same excellent imaging and crystal-clear character. But the DSP5200 will sound good in practically any room with no fussing; the DSP3100, because it produces much less bass, requires more care. If mated with a subwoofer, it sounds great as-is. Without a subwoofer, it sounds rather thin for my taste, but turning the treble down by 1 decibel brings balance to the sound. (All Meridian digital speakers have built-in digital treble, bass, and phase controls.)

I would confine the DSP3100 sans sub to environments where listening levels are modest, such as a bedroom or sitting room; it also makes a perfect surround speaker for the DSP5200.

Next to its elegant brothers, the SW5500 stands out like a 300-pound man in a boy band. The SW5500 occupies 2.2 square feet of floor space, more than double the footprint of a typical minisub. Its 30-inch width makes it difficult to place—it does not fit in the “sweet spot” where I usually prefer to place subs. (Fortunately, Meridian also offers the SW1600, which is half the size of the SW5500.) Nevertheless, the SW5500 sounds great, exhibiting awesome precision and punch with electric bass lines and kick drums. When I play the brutal *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* DVD, I feel the bass from the SW5500 pounding against

average guy on the street might describe this speaker's sound as “crisp.” It is extraordinarily detailed; the DSP5200 routinely uncovers little delicacies that most other speakers would conceal. I notice guitar picks scraping against strings, the

breath of saxophone players, and even a better-defined pulse from congas and snare drums. Many speakers achieve such clarity by enhancing the treble, but not the DSP5200: Its treble sounds mellow and relaxed. The imaging is astounding—percussion instruments, in particular, ring out as if the real instruments were actually being played in my listening room. The DSP5200HC sounds quite similar, which comes as no surprise because it uses the same driver complement and is almost as large.

The G91A (below) resembles other G-series components, but does much more than its brothers. It combines a surround-sound processor and a DVD player in one box. It even upconverts incoming analog video from other sources and converts it to HDMI digital video.



The G91A's jack panel (above) is nowhere near as extensive as what you might find on a typical surround-sound processor, but it offers enough hookup options for simple systems.





The DSP5200 (left) has a rather small cabinet considering what is inside: two 6.3-inch woofers, a tweeter, three 75-watt amplifiers, a digital-to-analog converter, and a digital signal processor—plus, of course, the display that shows the volume and selected source.

room correction equalizer, but its simplicity is appealing and its performance is impressive. I set the output for 720-line progressive video—the best choice for my Sony LCD projector—and gaze in wonder as the DVD player and the video upconversion circuitry sail through the most demanding tests. The G91A produces practically no visible errors or artifacts regardless of the material I play; few DVD players or video displays we have tested perform as well.

High-end brands in every industry often trade on image, heritage, or an intriguing backstory. Meridian Audio has those, but the company also has something more valuable: real technological advances that deliver true state-of-the-art performance. These are, simply put, lovely products, in performance, operation, and appearance. **[HE]**

my chest. I find, though, that in my 2,900-cubic-foot listening room, I can push it past its limits. With the system cranked up, I sometimes hear distortion during de-

manding passages, such as when the giant pachyderms attack during the siege of Gondor. I recommend using two SW5500s for larger rooms—provided you can find a place to put them.

Despite the G91A's unique nature, it sets up and operates much like the DVD receivers included in most HTiB systems. It lacks some features of Meridian's top surround processors, such as the advanced

The DSP5200HC (below) carries the same assortment of speaker drivers as the floor-standing DSP5200 does. Typically, it serves as the "master" speaker and receives infrared command codes from the remote and relays them to the G91A.



DESCRIPTION

Home theater audio system. Comprises G91A surround-sound processor/DVD player/tuner, DSP5200 main speakers, DSP5200HC center speaker, DSP3100 main/surround speakers, and SW5500 subwoofer. Proprietary Meridian cables required

COMPONENTS

DSP5200: two 6.3-inch polypropylene cone woofers, 1-inch aluminum dome tweeter, three 75-watt amplifiers

DSP5200HC: same as above

DSP3100: 6.3-inch polypropylene cone woofer, 1-inch aluminum dome tweeter, two 75-watt amplifiers

SW5500: two 12-inch woven fiber cone woofers, 300-watt amplifier

CONNECTIONS

G91A: three stereo RCA analog audio inputs, two coaxial digital audio inputs, two Toslink optical digital audio inputs, two composite video inputs, three S-video inputs, component video input, coaxial FM antenna connector and spring clips for AM antenna; six-channel analog audio output (for connection to external amplifiers), three coaxial digital audio outputs (for connection to Meridian digital speakers), auxiliary coaxial digital audio output, DB-15 connector for MHR SmartLink digital audio output, HDMI digital video/audio output, BNC connectors for component video output, S-video output, component video output; 5-pin DIN and BNC connectors for communications, DB-9 connector for RS-232 control, 3.5mm jack for 12-volt trigger output

DSP5200: two coaxial digital audio inputs, coaxial digital audio output, 5-pin DIN connectors and BNC connectors for communications input and output, DB-9 RS-232 connector for external control and configuration via computer

DSP5200HC: same as DSP5200

DSP3100: same as DSP5200

SW5500: same as DSP5200 minus one digital audio input, and plus XLR and RCA connectors for left, right, and mono analog audio inputs

DIMENSIONS

G91A: 3.5 x 17.3 x 13.8 inches (hwd)

DSP5200: 35.8 x 12 x 14.1 inches (hwd)

DSP5200HC: 7.9 x 28.9 x 10.5 inches (hwd)

DSP3100: 15.2 x 7.7 x 10 inches (hwd)

SW5500: 16.5 x 30.5 x 10.5 inches (hwd)

PRICE/CONTACT

PRICE: G91A \$7,695, DSP5200 \$10,995, DSP5200HC \$5,695, DSP3100 \$4,795, SW5500 \$4,995

CONTACT: meridian-audio.com, 404.344.7111