

MERIDIAN 204 FM TUNER/TIMER



JOHN BORWICK discussed the original version of the 204 in July 1988, where it was reviewed as a component part of the then new 200 Series range. Since then Meridian have superseded the 207 CD player with the Bitstream-based 206 player and 208 player-preamplifier (reviewed in July 1990) and have brought out several other new models including a new "Argent" range of three passive loudspeakers (one of these, the Argent 2 was reviewed in October), the D6000 flagship digital loudspeaker and several new electronics components in a new top-end 600 Series.

With all this high-level activity it is remarkable that Meridian's Technical Director, Bob Stuart, found time to have a second look at the 204 (but perhaps no wonder because of it that most reviewers have passed it by in favour of writing about the more dramatically new items), yet there were several aspects of the original design that he felt could be improved. In effect the update to the 204 comprises an entire re-think, albeit one which is functionally almost identical to the original; only the metal case and model number actually remain the same. The current 204 has different

SPECIFICATION

FM tuning range: 88–108MHz
Frequency response: 20–15,000Hz ± 1 dB
Sensitivity: mono 30/50dB quieting 1.5/4.0 μ V; stereo 23 μ V
Ultimate quieting: >75dB
Distortion: mono <0.2%; stereo <0.4%
Selectivity: 56dB
Capture ratio: 1.5dB
IF rejection: 100dB
AM suppression: >55dB
Output level: 0dB 775mV
Dimensions (H $\times$ W $\times$ D): 100 $\times$ 159 $\times$ 310mm
Weight: 3kg
Manufacturer: Meridian Audio Ltd., 13 Clifton Road, Huntingdon, Cambs PE18 7EJ
UK retail price: £660.00

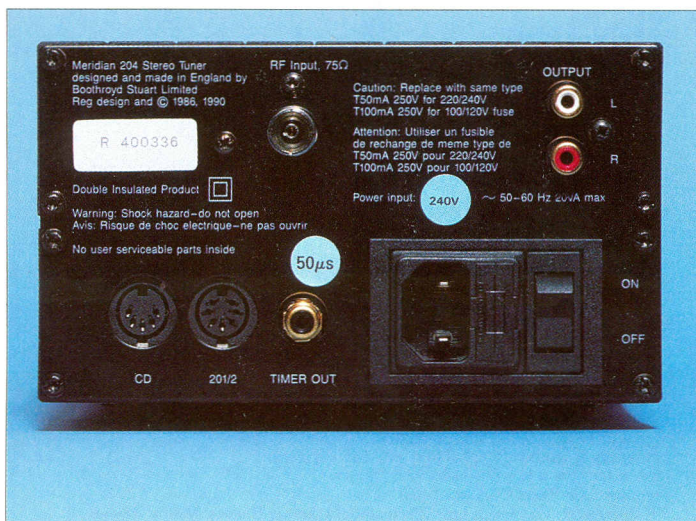
front-end and stereo decoder circuits and now uses the four-layer printed circuit board technology adopted for the Bitstream D/A units. This layout effectively gives two ground planes, which significantly enhances the noise performance in a number of respects. The on-board microprocessor which does all the electronic 'house-keeping'—the programming, channel selection, timer and display information, and so on—is now in a separately screened box within the overall case, which again has resulted in a purer audio signal path.

Finally the optional timer output, which can be used to control suitable equipment from other manufacturers and which used to be available on two pins of the rear-panel DIN 'bus' socket, is now more conveniently brought out on a single phono socket. (Incidentally, a 'bus' in this context is a set of interconnections, electrical or optical, which carries information from one circuit to another, or from one unit to another.)

The 204 is a high quality FM-only tuner with presets for 18 stations. All

functions except mains on/off (for which a rocker switch is located at the rear) are controlled via pushbuttons on the front panel. In addition, the unit incorporates a clock/timer, the fascia's simple four-digit seven-segment LED (light-emitting diode) display showing frequency, preset number or time as required. Being part of the 200 Series, the 204 is presented in the regulation black livery and is contained in a single one of the extremely elegant building-block 'modules' which are common to the range (some units occupy a pair, bolted together—for example the 208 has its CD transport in one and the electronics in the other).

The front panel is split horizontally as usual, with a glass window for the main display at the top and a series of 16 plastics pushbuttons in two rows at the bottom. All but three of these buttons have LEDs behind them which register the current state of the logic circuits. These are coloured according to their function or primary function: station setting is accomplished in an orange domain, timer



options in green while mono override and the more complex, multi-function Mode/Store button are in red.

If this description implies something of a riot of colour the effect in practice is anything but that, these small points of light relieving the otherwise austere black of the fascia. Six buttons are devoted to the preset stations, each having control of three channels according to the state of two further 'shift' keys which are also used for selecting hours or minutes when setting the clock or timer. Two opaque green-coloured buttons are used to increment frequency up or down when tuning, or similarly for hours and minutes. The labelling and grouping of these buttons is entirely logical, although I found a need to refer to the instruction leaflet now and again for some of the less frequently used functions. The rear panel carries a fused IEC mains input socket (three-core lead with moulded plugs supplied), a female 75 ohms aerial socket, two DIN sockets for the various 200 Series 'bus' options and gold-plated phono sockets for the audio and Timer outputs.

Although it can function perfectly well as a stand-alone unit in conjunction with other manufacturers' equipment the 204 would normally form part of a 200 Series system, in which case the further luxury of remote control in station selection and manual or timed switching from or into Standby mode becomes available (the CD track selection buttons on the 209 Remote Control now double as preset station selectors). Used alone the 204 can be put back into Standby mode only by setting the timer's off-time, as there is no dedicated Standby button (as there is on, say, the 208), not that that represents a significant problem since the unit consumes a negligible amount of power. Resetting via the mains switch achieves the same result. The main display has three normal states—preset number, frequency or time—the latter constantly available, even in the Standby state, if preferred.

Tuning can be either manual, using the up/down buttons to set the required frequency, or automatic in which case a nudge of either button

sets the circuit off in search of the next station of suitable strength; the tuning threshold can be set to one of eight levels to suit local conditions. Centre tuning indication is available and received signal strength can also be readily assessed, the display in this case switched to show a numerical range between 1 (weakest) and 7 (strongest). Although it complicates the user-procedure a little, I personally like the manner in which these rarely used functions are normally hidden from use and indeed view, leaving everyday use as simple and straightforward as can be. All settings are retained in the microprocessor's memory, an internal rechargeable battery covering those periods when the unit is actually disconnected from the mains, which is only necessary when long periods of absence are envisaged—the entire 200 Series is designed to be left powered-up.

When used as part of a Meridian system a bus link (lead supplied) transfers control signals between the various units. Bringing any one of these out of Standby will activate all of the rest so that, for example, pressing Line on the 208 or Radio on the 201 Preamplifier will select that input and also start up the 204 and 205 Power Amplifier—true "music at the touch of a button" operation. Similarly, pressing just the required preset radio station button on the 204 will achieve the desired result. By setting the 204's timer the system can be brought to life automatically, which could be useful when one is at home and wanting to listen to, say, a concert but busy enough about the house to risk missing the start. At present there is no recording device (i.e. tape machine) in the Meridian range to permit completely unattended recording, although their DCC machine, due for release next year, will of course have this facility. We also award with interest the Meridian CD-R recorder previewed at Penta. The Timer Out socket on the rear panel can, however, be used to control some appropriately appointed cassette decks (some models in the Nakamichi range are suitable, for example) but the manual insists that a dealer be contacted before attempting to do this

in case the 204 is damaged. In fact the socket carries a 5 volts DC control signal which drops to ground potential (0V) when activated. A MosFet device is used at the output which can 'sink' about ½ amp so it would not be a difficult matter for the DIY type to make up a small unit with a relay-switched mains outlet to which one of the many mains-activated cassette decks could be connected.

How it performed

I have been a keen user of the 208 CD player/preamplifier since purchasing one following my review in July 1990, so the opportunity to experiment with the 204 was eagerly taken. Clearly the pair make a most attractive 'front end' with the remote control aspect a nice bonus, though it is rather less useful with radio, I feel, than it is for CD. In fact the one remote control function I find really invaluable is volume. Setting up the 204 is an easy matter once one has read the 10-page A4 manual, after which the concise "Quick Operating Guide" résumé at the end is sufficient to keep to hand as a reference when setting the timer, a good idea, this summary—more manufacturers should adopt it. Really the only difficulty is in remembering some of the more esoteric functions of the Mode/Store button, which is used in conjunction with other keys to toggle between Step and Search tuning, for adjusting the tuning threshold, storing the timer details and so on (the display can even be made to reveal the operating software version number). The problem is that the requisite key sequences are not overtly logical.

Obviously this kind of set will not find a place in the systems of radio 'hams' who like to pore over the air-waves looking for all manner of stations—they will want not only to have the other AM wavebands as well but also to have all the user functions available on the usual plethora of separate buttons rather than hidden like this, and will certainly prefer a rotary tuning knob to a pair of push-buttons. Rather, the 204 is designed to be installed and then taken for granted, a role it manages supremely well in my view.

In terms of its audio output I could find nothing really to fault; it conveyed a natural quality of the spoken word on Radio 4 news programmes with no tendency to emphasize close-miked sibilants and no chestiness; it presented a detailed stereo stage on first-rate symphony concert and opera broadcasts; there were no problems with adjacent channel breakthrough ('birdies') and the background noise was exceptionally low.

As always with FM tuners a good, preferably outside, aerial is pretty well mandatory in order to obtain the best results but given a good signal the tuner side of the Meridian 204 really can be set-up once and taken for granted. For existing Meridian users it is the obvious choice but for others who will appreciate its excellent performance and can make use of the timer function it is well worth considering, despite its decidedly, and to my mind refreshingly, non-standard physical size and shape.

IVOR HUMPHREYS.