

Meridian 588

New made-for-CD player puts the music first

Andrew Everard finds much to like in this upmarket British CD machine, which is designed to perform – and does!

You'd be forgiven for thinking that the whole world has gone DVD crazy: read most of the world's mainstream hi-fi magazines and the talk is all of DVD-Audio and Super Audio CD, with each trickle of new software grabbing headlines. What's more, some of the more video-oriented titles are suggesting their readers should abandon their CD players and invest in a high-end combination unit, so good do the DVD-V/DVD-A/CD machines sound.

I tend to take a more sanguine view, to date not having heard a video-playing machine in any way comparable with dedicated CD hardware of the same price. Indeed, in my experience, the players capable of high-quality CD reproduction can be counted on not much more than the fingers of one hand – at various levels the Marantz DV4100OSE, Rotel RDV-995 and TAG McLaren Audio DVD32R would be included, along with the very high end Meridian 800 series player. Beyond those, however, the compromises tend to be too great.

It's heartening, therefore, to find a manufacturer with a substantial investment in DVD technology – it did, after all develop the lossless packing system that's at the heart of multi-channel DVD-Audio – introducing a purpose-built CD player, and not just a DVD machine with a side order of music playback. Meridian's 588 is the machine, and though it's not exactly free with a box of cornflakes – it costs £1950 – it is a lot less expensive than the company's heavyweight (physically and in price) 800 Series unit. For all that it does draw on the company's wide experience in the digital field, with all that expertise being deployed to optimise its musical performance. Yes, it will play CD-R discs and home-recorded CDs packed with music using MP3 encoding, but the main aim here is CD, and nothing else.

Unlike past 500-series Meridian CD players, the 588 doesn't use the company's hefty loader system, in which the whole motor and optical assembly slid out to

accept the disc. Here there's a DVD-ROM transport to read the discs, chosen for its ability to give optimal data retrieval in computer applications: that may seem like a very obvious requirement, but not every CD player's drive system makes this a priority, relying instead on error correction further down the digital chain to cover its tracks. That works, but the use of extensive error correction can impact on the quality of the sound being produced, making such a strategy less than desirable in high-end machines.

Things happen differently in the 588, which is derived from both the 800 player and Meridian's previous CD flagship, the 508.24: rather than reading data and feeding it out to the 192kHz/24-bit digital-to-analogue conversion system in real time, it plays music conventionally, but does the digital stuff in its own way. The high-speed transport and optical mechanism reads ahead of what's being delivered at the output sockets, often rereading a section of the disc several times to ensure that it has captured the data correctly. It's under the control of in-house software, drawing on experience gained in designing the big 800 series player to give enhanced disc navigation and playability, all of this being in the cause of getting the right data out of the transport.

Downstream of the disc-reading section things are unusual, too, the player using extensive checking and no fewer than three large FIFO (first in, first out) memory buffers to smooth the data flow and reduce jitter – those timing errors between transport and

digital-to-analogue conversion that can cause distortions. As I've already said, the conversion system is the same high-resolution type found in the company's DVD-Video players, and the whole thing is under the control of a master oscillator located in the final output stage. Even the digital output, as usual provided for connection to a recorder or offboard converter – though why you should need one given the quality on offer here – is reclocked for the greatest possible accuracy.

That's what the digital section of the Meridian is all about: the greatest possible data integrity and minimal jitter, all designed to give the DACs the best possible raw material to get their number-crunching teeth into. As Meridian points out, it's virtually unheard of for a computer to fail to load a program from a CD-ROM due to disc-reading failures, and it's that accuracy of data retrieval that's at the heart of the 588.

To that end the player also uses separate power-supply regulation for each section, and even the circuitboards are of Meridian's own design, having six layers and the latest surface mount technology: not much sign of bought-in solutions in this player!

Of course you also get the usual Meridian attributes of solidity of build – even if the drawer-loading CD transport doesn't have the weighty feel of the old-style Meridian loader – a high quality finish right through to the glass top-plate (for style and damping) and the usual long thin control buttons. Even the remote control unit is a cut above – I avoid using the term 'handset' because the

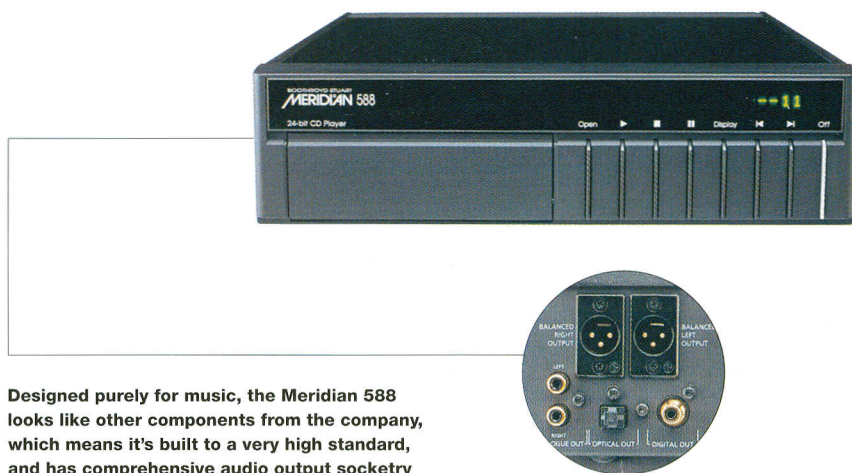
Meridian device is designed more for table-top than handheld use. Wider than it's long, it's powered by a 9V battery and subtly curved to present the controls for the player – and indeed a complete Meridian system – to the user.

That's another major plus of Meridian equipment: thanks to a well-considered remote control system, the hi-fi can be hidden away and a single unit designated as the master control/display device. It would be logical to make the CD player that unit, as it needs to be accessible for disc-loading, but one could just as easily let the company's big digital speakers fulfil this function.

To that end the player has the usual Meridian DIN sockets for communications, adding an RS232 computer connection for further control options and any future software upgrades, which should be downloadable from Meridian's website. The rear panel also carries both phono and balanced XLR connections for analogue output, and of course that electrical digital feed.

Performance

Factory-fresh, the 588 was left playing a disc on repeat for a day or two before serious listening was contemplated, but a few 'dip in, dip out' moments suggested nothing much changed about the sound after it had been in use for a few hours. Once connected to the mains it has a standby mode for use between listening sessions, and indeed an all-Meridian system can be left dormant in this way, springing into life and ready to go at the touch of a button.



Designed purely for music, the Meridian 588 looks like other components from the company, which means it's built to a very high standard, and has comprehensive audio output socketry

For this test it was used with one of my usual reference systems, feeding Musical Fidelity's X-P100 pre-amp and a brace of X-AS100 power amplifiers driving Monitor Audio Studio 20SE speakers. My intention was to keep things totally purist and two-channel, so for this test the TAG McLaren Audio AV32R/100X5R combination I also usually have to hand was sidelined. Cabling was by Nordost throughout.

The complete system, even with the current discount pricing on the Monitor Audio speakers, was thus in excess of £5000, and so high-quality reproduction should have been expected. What I wasn't quite prepared for, however, was just how good the Meridian would prove in this system: while it lacked the visceral impact of my usual player, the much more expensive Marantz CD-7, it has a scale and generosity of presentation that ensures even large scale works sound full-blooded and unfettered, while at the same time impressing with the sweet clarity of its mid-band and treble.

It may seem strange to speak of a player at this kind of price that distinguishes itself with its anonymity – after all, you might expect to be able to hear its contribution to the sound of the system – but the beauty of the Meridian is that it gets out of the way of the music, never seeming to be adding or subtracting anything from what's being performed. That's as true with chamber scale music such as Europa Galante's Boccherini String Quintets (on Virgin Veritas, 6/01) as it is with larger orchestral/choral works such as the celebrated 'original' Decca recording of Britten's *Peter Grimes* (10/59R): the Meridian's combination of warmth, sweetness and clarity serves the music well, delivering scale when it's needed, and having sufficient finesse when that's appropriate.

As I suggested, there is a slight blunting of really large-scale orchestral dynamics, notable in the 'Storm' interlude of the Britten, but the Meridian compensates with a more easygoing approach to less-than-ideal recorded quality. Now this may seem at odds with the 'maximum accuracy' approach of the digital section of the player, but this generous balance will ensure the greatest possible enjoyment of the greatest number of discs. And that, after all, is what the ownership of high-quality

audio equipment as a means to an end, rather than purely for the sake of hi-fi in itself, is all about.

It's an immensely enjoyable player, the Meridian, and found itself being used well beyond the usual review period simply because its presentation is so easy to enjoy. For all that I enjoyed getting back to my usual player and relishing its greater dynamic ability and rhythmic drive – by comparison the 588 can seem a shade slow, not quite tracking fast strings or brass as precisely – but on any terms this is a mightily impressive machine. More to the point, it's a lot more enjoyable a listen than any DVD-Audio player I've so far encountered, and given the nature of most of the 'new generation audio' classical recordings out there, the lack of multi-channel playback is really no significant hardship.

For all the blandishments of the proponents of DVD-Audio (and indeed multi-channel SACD), the future of CDs, and of stereo, is assured. The introduction of players like the 588 can do nothing but strengthen that situation. **G**

Meridian 588

Type

CD player

Price £1950

Formats supported

CD, CD-R, MP3 on CD-ROM

Digital to analogue conversion

192kHz/24-bit

Analogue outputs

Phono, balanced XLR

Digital outputs

Electrical phono

Other connections

Meridian comms system, RS232

Accessories supplied

Remote control, comms cable, mains cable

Dimensions (W x D x H)

321 x 332 x 88mm

Made by

Meridian Audio Ltd,
Stonehill, Stukeley Meadows,
Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire
PE29 6EX

Tel 01480 52144

Fax 01480 459934

web www.meridian.co.uk