

## Meridian DSP5500 active stereo loudspeakers, \$10,750/pair

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March 27, 1998 -- Active loudspeakers are a growing category. Once limited to the good-sounding but not terribly high-end Advent Powered Partners, the genre has been ennobled over the last several years with active speakers from Cello, Mirage, Paradigm, various other makers of stereo and multimedia speakers -- and Meridian. I had an opportunity to play with the Meridian DSP5500 active loudspeakers (\$10,750) last year. And they were memorable.

Though hardly huge by tower-speaker standards, the DSP5500s can fill any room short of an auditorium with up to 112 decibels of scrupulously tailored digital sound (my little sound meter and I got to 104 dB for a few seconds before my ears asked us to stop). Meridian has gone to extraordinary lengths to control resonance, both in the materials used and in *the way* they're used. Inside a sandwiched enclosure of steel and fiberboard, built-in amplifiers feed 75 watts per driver to a one-inch aluminium dome tweeter, separately enclosed 6-2/5-inch midrange, and dual eight-inch custom woofers. The tweeter is horn-loaded and backed with a silver voice coil, while the midrange has a phase plug to control its dispersion.

In addition to buying an enclosure and drivers -- not to mention those internal amps -- you get what amounts to a slew of powerful built-in computers. Digital guts include two Motorola DSP56001 32 MHz chips and four 18-bit Bitstream "digital to analogue" converters (have I mentioned Meridian is British?) running with 64 times oversampling. All that digital signal processing (hence the "DSP" in the model number) not only provides smooth, fine-grained sound. It can also compensate for

room acoustics via the curiously named "tilt" control -- I found the default settings a little bright, but adjustments can be made.

Traditional audiophile virtues were present in abundance. They include an even spectral balance, broad dynamics, near-total absence of noise, pristine high frequencies, forward but well-measured midrange, lean and deep bass, a wealth of inner detail, pinpoint-precise imaging, and a soundstage that's both wide and deep. You won't be surprised to hear that CDs flew off the shelves and piled up next to my CD gear.

What I'll remember best about the Meridian system, years from now, when the aural details of soundstaging and such have faded from memory, is the staccato unpredictability of its revelations. A flat but well-produced disc suddenly mustered finer nuance in a beloved voice than I'd heard before. Another disc I'd always thought was beautifully recorded revealed a bit of midbass congestion in the same familiar voice -- yet when I tried other recordings that I knew have a bit of congestion, the system didn't add to the problem. It was scrupulously, not ruthlessly, revealing. I now know all my test tracks just a little bit better.

The system accepts only digital input (from, say, a CD, DVD, or DAT machine). I had no trouble running it with a midpriced Marantz carousel. But upgrading to an all-Meridian system with the Meridian 500 CD transport (\$2195) confers certain advantages -- cachet, yes, but also a remote control that is both unified and delightfully wedge-shaped, like a little instrument panel, though far less threatening. The unbulky Meridian transport provided a slightly softer sound than the Marantz.

To add analog sources, you'll need the Meridian 562 digital controller (\$1395), which includes analog inputs and an analog-to-digital converter. A phono stage to process turntable input costs \$250 extra. Other potential options might include the larger D6000 system (\$16,995) -- though the model reviewed here is plenty powerful -- or the smaller DSP5000 (\$5795). Hey, big spender, Meridian also offers full surround

systems based on combinations of the models above, and other ancillary components, for \$10,000-40,000.

Rating: E E E E E

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