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The Meridian 508.20 CD Player ***The CD Buck Stops Here***

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The sad to behold state of DVD/Super-Disc audio affairs has left Meridian Audio, and all the other CD system vendors, scurrying around, trying to figure out new ways to put ten pounds of audio stuff into an old five pound CD Redbook bag. In Meridian's case, it found a means to cleverly squeeze 20 bits of resolution out of sixteen. The result being its new 508.20, a single box CD player, costing \$2,995.

The 508.20 is an upgraded system. The original 508 used two 18-bit Crystal DACS. Working in differential mode, the two DACS cross checked their respective positive/negative half of the signal. If the same error should show up in both halves, it got bounced out the DAC door. The result was a resolution of greater than 19 bits.

But the new 508.20 uses the hot off the press, Crystal 4329 20 bit chip set. And it now has four, not two, DACS working differentially; thereby yielding, says Meridian, a full 20 bit resolution. Hence, the 508 gets the .20 added to its product moniker. (For you owners of the original 508: 20 bit upgrades are available from Meridian, and include a replacement of the D to A boards, and also the analogue audio section. The cost is \$695.)

This CD player keeps a keen eye on the RF signal spilling off the laser. Via feedback, timing errors are blocked out before the un-decoded bits hit the digital side of the business, so jitter reducers need not apply. Meridian states that new noise shaping algorithms are also employed. They shift and equalize messy left-over digital artifacts out of audible range. (Too bad Rush Limbaugh doesn't come with this nifty feature.) The net result of all these changes is very low digital noise for a multi-bit player (Meridian claims up to 24dB less than many of its multi-bit competitors).

Its newly designed software also adapts to the parameters of each CD you put in the tray; peanut butter & jelly smears excluded. And on top of all this is a new, self-adjusting, linear three beam laser pickup. Finally, its improved power supplies keep everything in clean working unison.

The unit's rear end sports a pair of balanced XLR analogue outputs, as well as your usual RCA single ended jobs. The 508.20 can readily be used as a quiet, jitter-reduced transport. The unit has a coax S/PDIF (Sony/Philips Data Interface), and a why-hasn't-this-stupid-thing-gone-away-yet TosLink optical connection. In addition, a pair of digital outputs are provided, with their signals re-clocked to whack out jitter one last time before exiting the player.

Cosmetically, the 508.20 is a nicely Euro-modern looking piece of gear; all black and compact, with a colour matching piece of plexi on its roof. Originally, its sparse remote control looked like an escapee from a cereal box giveaway. But now, you get with the 508.20 as standard equipment what used to cost an extra \$99, the MSR System Remote. Thanks to this highly sensible, no cost upgrade, you get a much more functional remote control, plus a polarity inversion (absolute phase) switch -- very useful, as there is no such switch on the player itself.

Remote musical chairs aside, the 508.20 is one superb CD player. This Meridian just doesn't grate. You can sit and listen all night and your cochlea won't bitch at you in the

morning. "Harshness" is simply not in the 508.20's digital word vocabulary. Moreover, the spaces between the final decay of notes are truly black. You ease into this sonic darkness with all the comfort of crawling under the blankets at the end of a hard day. This kind of mental relaxation lets the music flow at its own special pace, rather than being force marched to the frantic beat of a ditzzy digital clock. The notes emerge when they are supposed to, and Cheshire Smile disappear when they are supposed to.

The 508.20 also boogies. For example, take BONNIE RAITT'S 1989, four Grammy award winning, Nick of Time, which just came out on a new DCC Gold release [GZS1099]. The minute the Meridian's three beam laser hits the pits, your feet start tapping. The title cut is plain infectious. And when Bonnie sings that she wants "Real Man" you instinctively raise your hand, yelling, Me! Me! (A dangerous cut, as Gordana almost punched out Francis .) This it-gets-you-squirming-in-your-seat-Hey-let's get-up-and move-around quality is a hallmark of the 508.20's superb rhythm-keeping ability.

But can it can counter-punch? Check out the "Bring it on" cut by BOBBY SEAL [Seal, ZTT/Sire/Warner Bros. 9-45415-2]. The opening vocals and bass guitar crunch are explosive. Seal gets in your face, and dares you to bring it on until you break the lease. But does the Meridian's bass offer the ultimate bone fracturing explosiveness? There are some CD systems that might get a smidgen closer to breaking your tibia. But, hey, by then you would be so audibly black and blue from trying to get that ultimate crunch, you wouldn't notice.

Regardless, pistol crack percussion is still one of the 508.20's strong points. JOHN CAGE, that bad boy of "if it makes a sound, let's try it" classical school, has a percussive field day in his composition, Third Construction [Pulse, THE NEW MUSIC CONSORT, NWCD 319, Classic Compact Disc]. Cage pioneered the radical 20th century concept that no sound is more important or beautiful than any other. Third Construction, like most of Cage's other work, is essentially a deconstruction of western classical music. The Meridian is not in the least afraid to get into the cage with Cage, providing him a wonderful, gleeful, wrecking crew.

If the Meridian's performance can be faulted anywhere, it might be when the music starts to go busily pyrotechnic. The 508.20, like a good English school marm, tries a little too hard to get the unruly notes back in civilized order. If you want to get your system really busy, check out the Mexican-born composer SILVESTRE REVUELTAS (1899-1940) and the CD of his music, Night of the Mayas, Day of the Dead [Catalyst 09026-62672-2]. His music, and its often outrageous extremes, is compelling in an almost moth to the flame way. A child prodigy, he later on drifted in out of mental hospitals, and was dead from alcoholism at 41. During the course of his long downward spiral, he wrote some excruciatingly intense work. His inner demons were probably Prozac-proof. When playing the almost dangerous Revueltas, the Meridian was at times too apprehensive. But sometimes, the energetic boogers just have to break out of the musical psyche, as this driven to the brink composer almost certainly intended.

Speaking of being bedeviled; Gordana and Francis would occasionally catch some hellish heat from the audio cognoscenti about their using a Rat Shack 3400, along with an EAD DAC, as a reference. But the thing that made that combo work (as well as for so many others), was that the 3400 didn't buzz the digital notes in your analog ears. The 508.20 also has that special quality, but refined to the Nth degree. Which begs the question: does it sound worth more than twice the price of the EAD/3400 combo? Unequivocally, yes.

However, should you feel compelled to spend your trust money for adding on external DACs, jitter box reducers, jitter-inducing interconnects, etc., your trustee/guardians should immediately revoke your privileges on the grounds of mental incompetence. You would have to be nuts to spend more money in the expectation of getting better sound

than that made by a solo 508.20.

In fact, this single box, \$3,000 unit is so good, you have to seriously ask yourself if it's worth popping for a nine or ten grand player, or some equally costly transport/DAC system. There always comes a point of diminishing sonic returns, and the 508.20 seems to mark the sweet spot with regards digital disc playback--Or at least until the ARA/ADA/Academy/Entertainment Moguls/Computer Industry get their audio-only DVD act together. Until then, expect the Meridian 508.20 CD player to be around in one form or another until the DVD Super-Disc goods finally (hopefully) arrive.

Thank god, it won't be a painful wait.

Associated Gear:

Speakers: Analysis Omegas, full range ribbon loud speaker

Amplifiers: Sunfire Cinema Grand, Graaf GM 200, 200 watt, OTL tube amplifier

Preamps: Cary SLP-90L tube linestage, Graaf GM13.5B line stage (tube), Reference Line Audio Preeminence Two Line Interface (passive controller)

Tuner: Rotel RH10 'Michi'

Analog: All Wilson Benesch, including turntable, ACT Two carbon fiber arm, Carbon cartridge, and Stage One Phono Preamp

Cables and interconnects: Nordost SPM Reference interconnects and SPM speaker wire; Nordost Red Dawn speaker wire and Red Dawn interconnects

Equipment stand: Standesign

Tweaks: Black Diamond Racing: The Shelf, The Source, Cones Mk 3 & 4, and Those Things; Shakti Stones

Manufacturer's Information: Meridian 508.20 CD Player: \$2995

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