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PRODUCT FOCUS

Meridian Sooloos

music server

It's nice when everyone agrees on something. With the Sooloos music server, everyone agrees that they want one. Prices start in five figures, so not everyone will buy one. But it surely points the way.

New York to Huntingdon

The extraordinary Sooloos system was created in the United States, but UK company Meridian liked it so much that they bought the company, and now runs Meridian Sooloos out of its original New York office. Meridian is, of course, a technological leader and innovator, manufacturer of some of the best digital music systems the world has to offer. What so impressed them?

"Our two companies have been following one another's success for some time," says Bob Stuart, Meridian's Chairman and Chief Techhead. "We share very similar philosophies and passions for music and total design excellence. There's also a powerful synergy between the skills and experience of our respective teams, which will enable us to build together outstanding and definitive high-end digital entertainment systems."

Meridian makes highly-regarded CD players, but even hardened audiophiles are coming to the realisation that etching tiny holes in silver and then trying to read them accurately with a laser may not, in fact, be a particularly purist way to get a digital music file to your amp and speakers. Today's music is recorded on a computer. You might as well play it back from one.

As Meridian says, CDs gave us digital clarity. Computers are bringing massive music libraries. What about vinyl? Well, one often-mourned aspect of LPs (for those who have abandoned the black art) is their cover art. Sooloos aims to bring that back too.

FLAC rips

Sooloos does two main things. First it firmly encourages high-quality music, with none of your compressed formats. It rips CDs as long indexed FLAC files — FLAC is a lossless format, so your music is replayed at its original quality.

It has a stringent ripping system that will reanalyse data and reimport until it is happy it has eliminated any data errors. So a scratched

disc may take some time to import, but it will make every effort to get a perfect copy. It also analyses tracks as it imports, not only popping off to the All-Music Group (AMG, of which more below) to get artist and track information, but also identifying exactly where tracks start and stop, identifying blank stretches at the ends of songs, so that when you're running that party shuffle, there'll be no embarrassing pauses when guests stare at each other over a vol-au-vent. It also checks the average volume of every song so you can (if you wish) invoke Volume Levelling to avoid the common ups and downs of compilations spanning early CDs and crazily-pumped modern releases.

Meanwhile it makes an entirely separate set of files in MP3 format, which can be easily transferred onto iPod etc. — handy for getting more on your pod, and indeed essential since iTunes remains allergic to FLAC files.

So high marks for attention to quality.

Information is power

The Sooloos' other key merit is that it brings fun back to your music browsing. Other systems, iTunes among them, are getting ever better at this, with intelligent shuffling and the like. Genius, they call it. But it pales into a state of infancy beside the possibilities the Sooloos offers.

Key to this is a deal with the aforementioned AMG for complete access to its music databases. So when you rip a CD and the Sooloos heads off to gather information, you get the usual artist, album, track and artwork, but also pretty much every item of information publicly available on that disc. The backing musicians, the producers, the songwriters, the artist that designed the sleeve, detailed genre classification (which you can,

thankfully, amend), it's all there. *And it's all cross-referenced.* So if you're playing *Led Zeppelin II*, say, and tap 'Credits', you might find Eddie Kramer as engineer. Tap Eddie, and you can see what else from your collection he appears on — we were intrigued to find he played vibraphone on *Magical Mystery Tour*. How unexpected. Let's listen to that.

The result is that you're led quickly away from the technology to a focus on the music. Applause. That's what hi-fi is all about.

What about any files you already have on your computer, rather than CD. Can the Sooloos play those? Yes it can — it's easy to transfer files across, and any embedded metadata should be picked up and readable via the Sooloos. What you won't get is the detailed AMG information, and you'll need to manually add each album cover, otherwise the Sooloos will allocate a genre-related filler image for display on its glorious touchscreen.

Touch for action

And we haven't even mentioned that glorious touchscreen — which is what immediately impresses most people as the Sooloos' particular 'killer app'. The 17-inch high-resolution touchscreen Control 10 (pictured right) allows display of album art at an enjoyable size (if not quite a 12-inch vinyl sleeve), along with instant touch selection, and easy navigation via the usual artists, genres etc, but also via 'Moods' (amiable, brash, etc). Through these you can create a 'Focus' on any given selection or collection. A 'Swim' mode is the Sooloos' equivalent to iTunes Genius, creating an intelligent playlist from selected or connected music.

There's even an iPhone App for the Sooloos, so you can control the system from an iPhone or iPod touch.





The Meridian connection

Meridian has been using digital connections and active speakers about as long as anyone, so the company's goal for the Sooloos before incorporating it within its range was to integrate its SpeakerLink digital connections, as well as legacy-standard Meridian Comms. That means the Control 10 can seamlessly integrate with Meridian's famed Digital Loudspeakers, preamp/controllers, and music systems, having both digital and analogue outputs for multiroom use.

You can also use the Sooloos touchscreen to access internet radio and various streaming music services, which — together with complete RS232 control — makes Sooloos ideal for integration within an automated home. Ethernet connectivity, mainly required for getting CD information for AMG when ripping CDs, also allows easy monitoring and control from a PC, and even allows automatic fault reporting and offsite technical support from Meridian Sooloos and Australian distributor Amber Technology.

Welcome to Australia

It's taken a year for the Sooloos to reach Australia, which gives us the benefit of the new improved operating system (any future improvements will be delivered by firmware update automatically; photo functionality is first on the upgrade list, with a video-serving Sooloos planned eventually) and the useful knowledge that if you find the Control 10 a little on the imposing side, you won't have long to wait for the incoming slimline Control 20; the new model also bundles a simplified wireless infrared remote handset and programmable volume knob to make creating a fully functional, remarkably convenient local zone as simple as just adding speakers. Both these connect with the separate media server units, which can be chained together for increased capacity and/or redundancy back-up. There's also a standalone non-expandable version called the Ensemble.

During its journey around the world en route to Oz, the Meridian Sooloos has gathered a nice collection of accolades and awards. Product of the Year from *Stereophile*, an Innovations award from CES, Editor's Choice Award from *Sound & Vision* magazine.

See what we mean? — everybody wants one. **BE**



MERIDIAN SOOLOOS MUSIC SERVER

Price: from \$8999

Warranty: Two years

Contact: Amber Technology
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www.ambertech.com.au