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Meridian's Ground-breaking 808.2 *Re-invents* CD Playback



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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Meridian 808.2/808i.2 Signature Reference

CD PLAYER/PREAMPLIFIER

JOHN ATKINSON

DESCRIPTION Upsampling CD player with wireless IR remote control, volume control, and 24-bit DACs operating at 176.4kHz. Plays CD, CD-R, CD-RW media. Digital outputs: S/PDIF via RCA, AES/EBU via RJ45 for connection to other Meridian equipment. Analog outputs: 1 pair balanced (XLR), 1 pair single-ended (RCA). Digital inputs (808i.2 preamplifier version only): 3 S/PDIF via RCA, 2 S/PDIF via TosLink. Analog inputs (808i.2 preamplifier version only): 6 single-ended pairs via RCA. Comms: RS-232 port via 9-pin D-subminiature connector, 2 five-pin DIN jacks for Meridian protocol comms, 3 programmable 12V trigger outputs. THD+noise: below -96dBFS. No other specifications provided. Power consumption: 25W.

DIMENSIONS 18.9" (480mm) W by 6.9" (175mm) H by 16.2" (411mm) D. Weight: 25 lbs (14kg).

FINISHES Black lacquer or satin silver, in metal and glass.

SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED 808-200 533.

PRICES \$15,995 (808.2 CD player), \$16,995 (808i.2 CD player/preamplifier). Approximate number of dealers: 120. Warranty: 5 years.

MANUFACTURER Meridian Audio Ltd., Latham Road, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE29 6YE, UK. Tel: (44) (0)1480-445678. Fax: (44) (0)1480-445686. Web: www.meridian.co.uk. US distributor: Meridian America Inc., 8055 Troon Circle, Suite C, Austell, GA 30168-7849. Tel: (404) 344-7111. Fax: (404) 346-7111. Web: www.meridian-audio.com.

It's been a while since I auditioned a Meridian CD player in my system. I had enthusiastically reviewed the English company's groundbreaking Pro-MCD player in early 1986, and over the years had kept up with the progress they were making in digital playback, either through my own reviews or by performing the measurements to accompany reviews by other *Stereophile* writers. The 508-24 player, reviewed by Wes Phillips in May 1998 (www.stereophile.com/cdplayers/590), was one of the finest digital products of the 1990s, I thought. But when Meridian began promoting surround sound and DVD-Audio at the turn of the century, their goals became somewhat incompatible with my own. Yes, I can appreciate what surround playback can do, but my own musical life is still solidly rooted in Two-Channel Land.

Then, in 2004, Meridian introduced its 808 Signature Reference player. An unabashedly two-channel product, the 808 represented everything Meridian's Technical Director, Bob Stuart, and his design team knew about CD playback. Why *Stereophile* didn't review the original 808, I have no idea. But then, at the January 2008 Consumer Electronics Show, Meridian introduced the Signature Reference 808.2. "We've changed its drive, drive navigation software, power supply, DSP, and clocking and buffering," Stuart told Wes. "I'd like to say that the only thing we've retained is the case, but we've improved that, too."

The 808.2 and 808i.2

Housed in a large, handsome chassis, the 808.2 is based on a card-frame topology, to which subsystems can be added as desired. Thus the basic 808.2 player (\$15,995) can be upgraded to 808i.2 player/processor-preamplifier status (\$16,995) by adding cards for analog inputs (six pairs, on RCAs) and digital inputs (two TosLink optical, three S/PDIF on RCAs). Another card carries a single S/PDIF digital output on an RCA, as well as Meridian's SpeakerLink balanced digital output on an RJ45 jack, which sends encrypted AES/EBU-formatted data upsampled to 24 bits/88.2kHz on a single CAT5 cable to a pair of Meridian's active speakers.

The 808i.2's front panel is dominated by the large LCD display, which was easily legible from across the room. Below it to the left is the drawer for the transport, which is based on a DVD-ROM drive. This was chosen because it allows a disc to be reread if necessary to ensure optimal data retrieval from the disc, as well as full buffering of those data to minimize jitter. The transport controls lie along the bottom right of the front panel, while a hinged door in the center folds down to allow access to ancillary controls such as Volume Up and Down, Mute, Display, etc. Behind the door are the signatures of Bob Stuart and his longtime industrial-designer partner, Meridian's Design Director, Allen Boothroyd.

The real beauty of the 808i.2 lies inside, however. The CD data are upsampled to a 176.4kHz sample rate and 24-bit depth by Meridian's proprietary Resolution Enhancement algorithm before being sent to high-quality but unidentified delta-sigma DAC chips. But along the way, the data are subjected to a new kind of reconstruction filter that Meridian calls an "apodizing" device.





Meridian 808i.2 Signature Reference CD player/preamplifier

ERIC SWANSON



"Apodizing"

A pair of technical papers in the March 2004 issue of the *Journal of the Audio Engineering Society* (Vol.52 No.3) indicated the direction Meridian would be taking with the 808.2.¹ In "Coding for High-Resolution Audio Systems," Bob Stuart examined what was required to get the highest audio quality from a digital system, while in "Antialias Filters and System Transient Response at High Sample Rates," Peter Craven examined the nature of the ubiquitous anti-aliasing filter (in A/D conversion) and reconstruction filter (in D/A conversion).²

Keith Howard had explored this sec-

ond subject for *Stereophile* in January 2006 (www.stereophile.com/reference/106ringing). While the linear-phase Finite Impulse Response filters routinely used in digital audio can offer superb performance in the frequency domain, in the time domain they introduce prerespponses that occur prior to the main peak of the impulse response, something that never occurs in nature and thus will not be masked by the music. The brevity of these prerespponses that occurs with high sample rates has led some commentators to decide that this is why high sample rates produce better sound quality, and not the octave extension in bandwidth itself. On the face of it, however, this improvement seems paradoxical: the prerespponse comprises ringing at half the sample rate (called the Nyquist Frequency), which, even with CD, is above the limit of human hearing. But the pre-

response does appear to have an audible effect, perhaps because the human ear/brain system acts as a wavefront detector rather than as a spectrum analyzer.

What Peter Craven explored in his paper was the idea that you could process the audio data with a minimum-phase low-pass filter whose first null is at the original Nyquist frequency. This will therefore kill all the ringing from the original A/D converter, replacing the prerespponse ringing with postrespponse ringing from the new filter. As this new ringing would a) be natural in that it occurs after the event, and b) takes place entirely within the human auditory system's masking interval, the data would be audibly cleaned up. The tradeoff, however, is that the new minimum-phase "apodizing," or windowing, filter has to begin rolling off *below* the origi-

1 Both papers are available as pdfs from www.aes.org.

2 Bob Stuart gives an overview of these papers in an interview with Keith Howard, downloadable as an MP3 file from www.aes.org/sections/uk/meetings/a0812.html.

MEASUREMENTS

I examined the measured behavior of the Meridian 808i.2 Signature Reference using the Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see www.ap.com and "As We See It" in the January 2008 issue, www.stereophile.com/asweseet/108awsi), as well as, for some tests, our Audio

Precision System One and the Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer. For this review, I looked only at the Meridian's performance as a CD player/digital processor. Its measurements as a preamplifier will be included in the Follow-Up discussed in the main body of the review.

With the Meridian set to operate as a player with a fixed output, its maximum output level at 1kHz was 4.7V from its balanced XLR jacks, 2.36V from its single-ended RCA jacks, both outputs preserving absolute polarity; *ie*, they were non-inverting. With the variable output-level control active, the maximum level before clipping with a full-scale 1kHz digital signal was 6.62V with the volume control set to "87." The control operated in accurate 1dB steps, meaning that, as the maximum setting is "99," there is up to 12dB of gain available, though this won't be usable playing CDs or with external PCM data.

The balanced source impedance was a low 94 ohms, and, as expected, exactly half that value from the single-ended outputs. Error correction, judged using the Pierre Verany Test CD, was excellent, there being no glitches in the Meridian's output until the gaps in the data spiral reached 2mm in length.

To examine the behavior of the Meridian's "apodizing" reconstruction filter, I created a 44.1kHz-sampled test signal comprising a pair of positive single-sample pulses spaced approximately 5ms apart. The first pulse of the pair triggered my digital oscilloscope, which I'd set to "one-shot" mode so that the player's reaction to the second pulse appeared in the center of the 'scope's display. (The 'scope lacks an anti-aliasing filter; provided sufficiently fast sampling is used, it accurately displays time-domain data without obscuring those data with its own impulse response.)

Fig.1 shows the impulse response of a conventional finite-impulse-response low-pass filter, that used by the Benchmark DAC1 D/A processor. You can see that there are symmetrical patterns of ringing before and after the peak of the impulse. (I call it "ringing," but, as I'm sure engineer readers will point out, the impulse shape actually maps the values

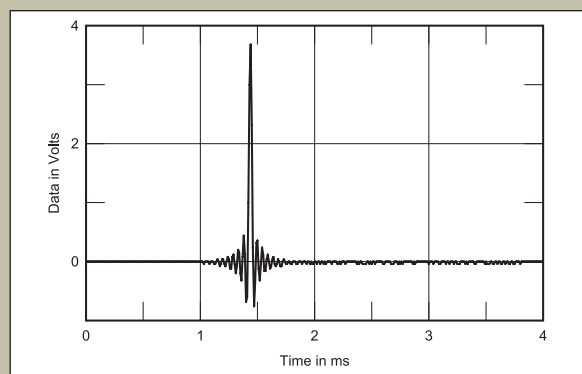


Fig.1 Benchmark DAC1, response to single sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampled data (4ms time window).

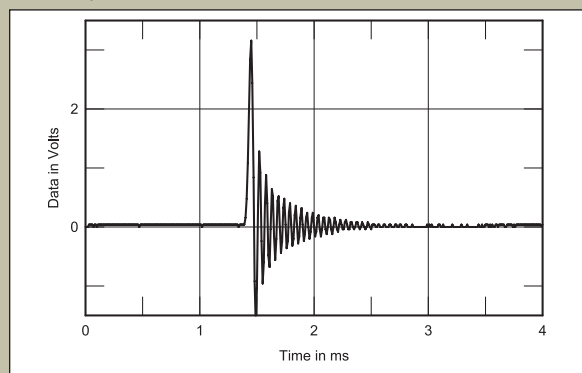


Fig.2 Meridian 808i.2, response to single sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampled data (4ms time window).



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nal Nyquist frequency, thus sacrificing a small fraction of the top octave of the original passband in order to optimize the time-domain performance.

The apodizing filter used in the 808.2 and 808i.2 was optimized using listening tests. It is realized using a DSP chip operating at 150MIPs with 48-bit precision that also performs the upsampling. It appears that the CD data are first upsampled to 88.2kHz, then processed by the apodizing filter which has a null at 22.05kHz. This is the datastream that is fed to the Meridian's SpeakerLink digital output. The DSP chip then further upsamples the data to 176.4kHz to feed the player's DAC chips.

Sound

For this review, I focused on the Meridian 808i.2's performance as a standalone

CD player. Meridian also supplied me with a pair of their new DSP7200 loudspeakers, so I will examine the 808i.2's performance as an analog preamplifier when I review the DSP7200. I first had the 808i.2 set to what Meridian refers to as Type 1 (CD player with fixed output, external inputs disabled), when it behaves like the preampless 808.2. However, I then reset it to Type 3 (Preamplifier, fixed output), so I could use it to decode the digital output of my Logitech Transporter network player.

The 808i.2 is obviously a Class A player, I thought while using it for my regular listening for a couple of weeks—but I wasn't sure I could point to anything it was specifically doing that would move it to the front of the pack. Then, sorting out the mess of open jewel cases on the floor in front of the system in order to avoid

working on this issue's "Recommended Components" listing, I had an epiphany.

It is a truism that our choice of system dictates our choice in music. You tend to focus on recordings that benefit from the system's virtues, not ones that reveal its flaws. Over the past few years, I have found myself playing fewer and fewer recordings of large-scale classical orchestral works. It's not that I'm falling out of love with the music—though I must admit that, as I get older, I'm increasingly attracted by the intellectual challenge of chamber music—but that the scale and drama of orchestral music is not as well served by the CD medium as it is by LP. Consider, for example, Vernon Handley's 1990 performance of Bantock's *A Celtic Symphony* with the Royal Philharmonic (CD, Hyperion CDA66450). Engineered by Tony

of the digital filter coefficients.) By contrast, fig.2 shows the 808i.2's impulse response. There is no ringing before the main peak, but then about 1.5ms of damped ringing after it. While the absence of pre-ringing very likely contributed to the 808i.2's fine sound, the post-ringing was both higher in amplitude and lasted a little longer than I was expecting.

Turning to the frequency domain, the Meridian player offered a flat response over most of the audioband with CDs (not shown), the output at 20kHz being down just 0.2dB with normal data and -0.3dB with preemphasized data. Deemphasis error was otherwise negligible. The Meridian's response decoding external PCM data sampled at 88.2 and 96kHz smoothly continued the slight droop in output at the top of the audioband with CD data to reach -1dB at 38kHz, with perhaps a slight hint of ripple evident before the very steep rolloff begins. Channel separation (not shown) was superb below 100Hz, but decreased with increasing frequency due to capacitive coupling somewhere in the circuit, to reach a still good 75dB (L-R) and 85dB (R-L) at 20kHz.

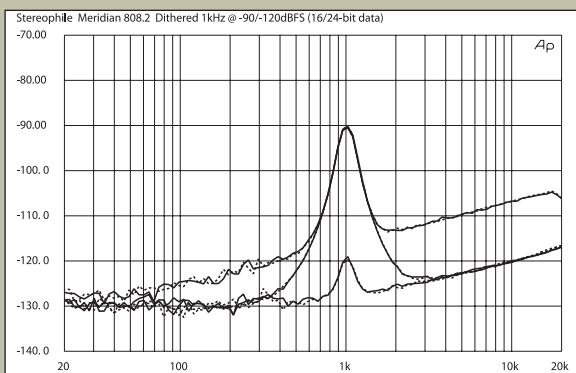


Fig.3 Meridian 808i.2, 1/3-octave spectrum with noise and spurs of dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS with 16-bit CD data (top), external 24-bit data (middle at 2kHz), and of dithered 1kHz tone at -120dBFS with external 24-bit data (bottom at 1kHz). (Right channel dashed.)

For consistency with my library of test reports, I still examine a digital product's dynamic range by sweeping its analog output with a 1/3-octave-wide bandpass filter from 20kHz down to 20Hz. The top pair of traces in fig.3 were generated in this manner while the 808i.2 played a dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS from CD. The peak kisses the -90dB line in the appropriate manner, and no power-supply or harmonic-distortion spurs can be seen. The baseline of this trace is actually the recorded dither noise on the CD, the Meridian's own noise lying below it. Increasing the bit depth to 24 (and feeding the data to the Meridian's digital input) gave the middle pair of traces in fig.5. The noise floor has dropped by around 13dB at higher frequencies, suggesting a resolution of at least 18 bits. A tone at -120dBFS, for example, is easily resolved (fig.3, bottom pair of traces). I was expecting somewhat better performance on this test, however, so I repeated it using FFT-based spectral analysis of the reconstructed analog signal with 24-bit data (fig.4). Again, the spike representing the 1kHz tone peaks at exactly -90dBFS, but now the noise floor is significantly lower than in fig.5. I suspect

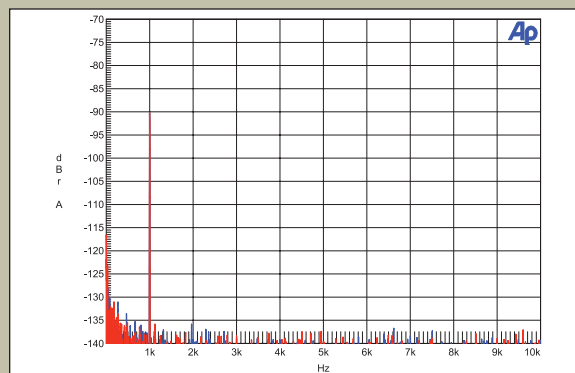


Fig.4 Meridian 808i.2, FFT-derived spectrum with noise and spurs of dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS with external 24-bit data (left channel blue, right red).





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Faulkner, this is perhaps the most natural-sounding recording of a string orchestra I have heard, with an enormous dynamic range.³ But at levels approaching what I would hear in the concert hall, the midrange becomes congested, the mid-treble hardened. Decreasing the volume minimizes these problems, but then the scale of the music is also minimized. The SACD medium better serves the sound of an orchestra in full song, but while I have built up a reasonable collection of SACDs, most of my favorites are still available only on CD.

So when I began returning the CDs to their cases and noticed how much orchestral music I'd been playing since hooking up the Meridian, it was apparent that something special was going on, even with early digital recordings. I had been playing: Bernstein's Mahler

2 with the LSO, recorded in England's Ely Cathedral (CD, Sony Classical SM2K 47453); Kurt Sanderling's set of the Brahms symphonies with the Dresden Staatskapelle (CD, RCA 130367); George Szell's Beethoven Symphonies with the Cleveland Orchestra (CD, Sony Classical SBSK 48396; transfers, like the Mahler and Brahms, from analog masters); and, from Vladimir Ashkenazy and the Philharmonia, Sibelius' Symphony 5 (CD, London 410 016-2, digitally recorded in 1981) and Symphony 1 with *Karelia Suite* (CD, London 414 534-2, digitally recorded in 1985). With all of these, the Meridian got the scale right, without the usual midrange congestion or treble hardness intruding. It also got the soundstage depth right, with, for example, the brushed on-beat cymbals in the first movement of *Karelia* set well back yet without any smearing of the image.

Were these benefits the result of the 808i.2's apodizing reconstruction filter eliminating the time smear from a recording's original A/D converter? I'm tempted to say yes, except that there are many other aspects of digital music play-

back that also have to be gotten right. But now that I've discovered anew the sonic beauty of so many CDs in my collection, it's going to be difficult to relinquish the Meridian when the loan period is over.

And, of course, the apodizing filter won't fix a recording's balance and mixing problems. I mentioned last month my appreciation of harpist Andreas Vollenweider, though he has not been particularly well served on CD, especially after he began recording in digital. His *Dancing with the Lion* (CD, Columbia CK 45154), for example, remained bright and brash, even though individual elements of the mix—drums and piano, in particular—seemed more fleshed out through the Meridian. But even as I wrote those words while giving another listen to this 1989 recording, the brashness seemed more bearable, more of the music making its way to my ears.

And when a modern recording has been produced with care, and with attention paid to sound quality—such as this issue's "Recording of the Month," *Jason Isbell and The 400 Unit* (CD, Lightning Rod)—the Meridian 808i.2 retrieved

³ "I am 95% sure the main mikes were Neumann M49s (ex-Bob Auger)," Tony Faulkner told me a few years back. "The location was All Hallows, Gospel Oak, a massive barn of a church close to Hampstead Heath. A wonderful, bighearted orchestra (RPO); a wonderful conductor (Tod Handley). No rehearsals, no concert of the music before the recording sessions. Extraordinary music."

measurements, continued

that ultrasonic noise from the noiseshaping used by the Meridian's DAC chips is corrupting the skirts of the $\frac{1}{3}$ -octave bandpass filter used to generate the traces in fig.3.

I include the 16-bit fade-to-noise test in my CD-player reviews, again for reasons of consistency, but the result for the Meridian 808i.2 really showed only the recorded dither noise below -100dBFS (not shown). Decoding undithered 16-bit data representing a 1kHz tone at exactly -90.31dBFS gave a waveform with the three DC voltages that describe this signal well-defined and symmetrical above and below the time line (fig.5). The reconstruction filter's asymmetrical ringing is also readily apparent. Fed

24-bit data, the Meridian output a superbly defined sine-wave at this low level (fig.6), with low noise and, again, excellent waveform symmetry. This is indeed a high-resolution player that will merely coast with CD data.

The Meridian 808i.2's output stage features low distortion—the THD+noise percentage present in the balanced outputs driving a full-scale 1kHz tone into 200k ohms was just 0.0036%—nor did distortion significantly increase when the output was loaded down with the punishing 600 ohm load. Moreover, the spectrum of the distortion harmonics (fig.7) featured the subjectively innocuous second and third harmonics at -90dB and -100dB, re-

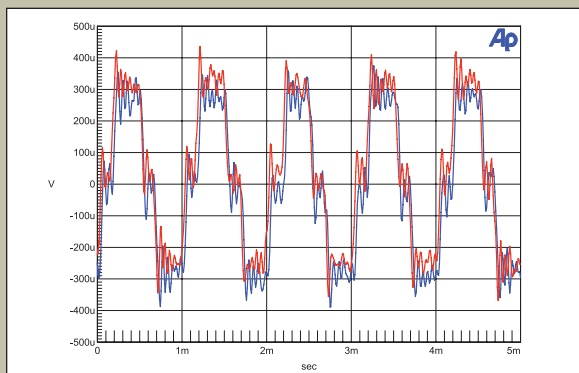


Fig.5 Meridian 808i.2, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, CD data (left channel blue, right red).

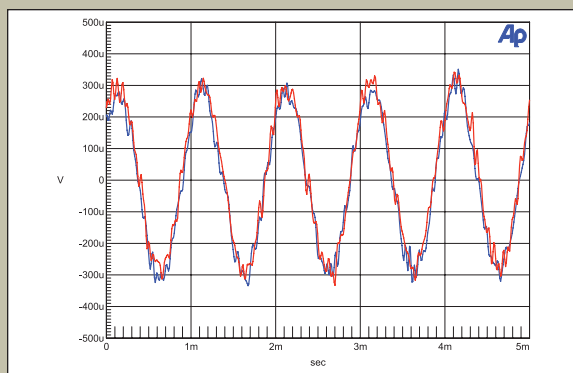


Fig.6 Meridian 808i.2, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, external 24-bit data (left channel blue, right red).





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detail without exaggeration, and threw stable images that hung in the space between and behind the speakers. The 808i.2 enabled the transmission of the music from CD to me in an extraordinarily effective manner, yet without calling attention to itself.

I reached for *Sensuous: la musique de 21^e siècle* (CD, Warner Japan ECE016), from the DJ Cornelius, aka Keigo Oyamada, in which sampled vocal, guitar, and turntable sounds are mixed with naturally recorded percussion, synthesizers, and intelligent if aleatoric vocals. The drums on "Fit Song" had a superb combination of weight and low-frequency definition via the Meridian. More important, "Gum, Scum" which combines sampled vocal syllables with drums and an eighth-note speed-metal backing, began to make musical sense with the Meridian at the front end and the 750W Musical Fidelity 750K Superchargers driving the Revel Ultima Salon2s at >100dB. This track tends to sound a mess through lesser systems, but the Meridian kept the musical threads separated. In a mix like this, there's no real space—just what

the producer, or in this case the DJ, has decided to synthesize using artificial reverberation. Components that diminish the effect of this process, that smear the soundstage, thus detract from the musical message. The Meridian did as good a job with the Cornelius CD as it had with recordings where there *was* a real acoustic event, such as the Bantock and Sibelius symphonies mentioned earlier. In this respect, it is the best CD player I have used.

Comparisons

The Ayre Acoustics C-5xe universal player (\$5950) has been my primary reference for CD playback since I purchased it three years ago, I used it for my primary comparisons, with the players' levels matched at 1kHz to within 0.1dB. As the Ayre's sole digital output is AES/EBU on an XLR jack and the Meridian has only coaxial and optical S/PDIF data inputs, I fed the Ayre's digital data to a dCS 904 digital format converter, set to do nothing other than pass the incoming data to its outputs. I connected the dCS's coaxial output to

one of the Meridian 808i.2's coaxial inputs with a short length of Stereovox XV2 S/PDIF cable. The Ayre's reconstruction filter was set to Listen, which trades off a premature top-octave response droop against better time-domain performance.

For my first comparison I used Robert Silverman's performance of Liszt's *Liebestraum*, from *Editor's Choice* (CD, Stereophile STH015-2). The result wasn't what I was expecting from my prior auditioning of this track with the CD played in the Meridian, in that the piano now sounded a touch more bright and not as palpable. The Ayre was clearly preferable. I checked the setting of the dCS. Ah... I'd forgotten to change the 904's output frequency from 96kHz to 44.1kHz, meaning that the dCS was upsampling the CD data before sending it to the Meridian, an additional variable that worked against the English player. I tried again.

Now it was not so clear-cut. After many A/B comparisons, if I had to swear, the Meridian produced a better sense of the piano in the space where I had made

spectively, with all higher harmonics around -120dB. The 808i.2 also did well on the high-frequency intermodulation test. Even into 600 ohms, the second-order difference product lay at -96dB (0.0015%), with all the higher-order products even lower in level (not shown).

Probed with the 16-bit J-Test signal, the spectrum of the Meridian's output (fig.8) is dominated by the residual harmonics of the low-frequency, LSB-level squarewave. (The spectrum of the test signal can be viewed at www.stereophile.com/features/1208jitter.) Some spectral spreading can be seen at the base of the spectral spike that represents the high-level $F_s/4$ tone, however, and some

components are apparent midway between some of the squarewave harmonics. The right channel (red trace) is also a little quieter than the left (blue), though the noise floors of both channels are still well below the 16-bit level (fig.8, cyan, magenta). The Miller Analyzer indicated some 250 picoseconds peak-peak of jitter, though this is close to the resolution limit of that test gear.

The Meridian 808i.2 Signature Reference's measured performance is close to the state of the art for a digital player, and well exceeds what is required for CD playback. And the behavior of that asymmetric apodizing filter is intriguing.

—John Atkinson

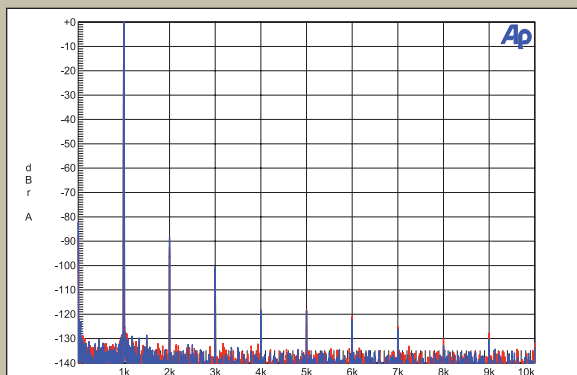


Fig.7 Meridian 808i.2, balanced output, spectrum of 1kHz sine wave at 0dBFS into 600 ohms, external 24-bit data (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

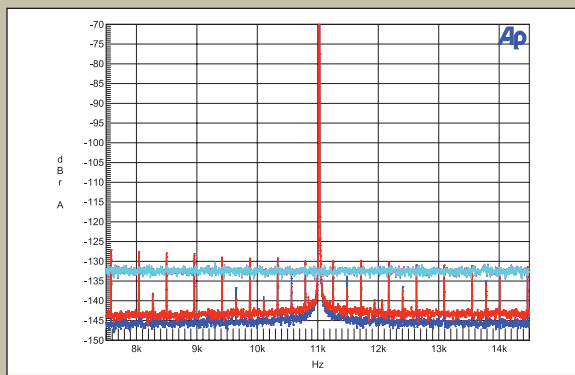


Fig.8 Meridian 808i.2, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at -6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz, CD data. Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ± 3.5 kHz (left channel blue, right red), 16-bit noise floor (left channel cyan, right magenta).





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the recording, the Ayre a more robust midrange that pushed the piano image forward a little.

Next up were the three Gershwin *Preludes* from *Editor's Choice*, arranged for piano and chamber orchestra. Again the piano image was set a little farther back in the acoustic via the Meridian. But the percussion instruments—particularly the snare drum in the second *Prelude* and the tambourine in the third—sounded better defined through the 808i.2. By contrast, the Ayre tended to run the tambourine jingles into one another a little more.

Ultimately, as much as I have appreciated the Ayre's playback of CDs, it was outpointed by the Meridian. Recorded soundstages were more expansive, yet without individual images within those stages becoming bloated or more diffuse. The relationships between the instruments and the surrounding space on Jerome Harris's arrangement of Duke Ellington's "The Mooche," also on *Editor's Choice*, sounded slightly blurred through the Ayre, slightly better delineated via the Meridian—not an enormous difference, but still an important one, I feel. In the words of the inimitable Sam Tellig channeling Gertude Stein, with the Meridian, there was more "there" there.

At the 2009 Consumer Electronics Show last January, Ayre announced that they were offering an upgrade service by which both their C-5xe and CX7-e players could be retrofitted with minimum-phase digital reconstruction filters, one of which is similar to Meridian's apodizing filter. I'm sending my sample of the C-5xe back to the factory for the upgrade, so a rematch with the 808i.2 lies in the future.

My final comparison was intended to provide an answer to this question: How does the CD playback of the Meridian 808i.2, with its apodizing filter, stand up against genuine high-resolution recordings played through the Ayre? I burned the 24-bit/88.2kHz two-channel masters of two of my recent recordings—Attention Screen's *Live at Merkin Hall* (Stereophile STPH018-2) and Cantus's *While You Are Alive* (Cantus CTS-1208)—onto DVD-Audio using Minnetonka Software's Discwelder Bronze program, then played them back on the Ayre. The CD versions were played on the Meridian with as close to perfect time synchronization as I could manage. Again, levels were matched to within 0.1dB at 1kHz.

Having lived with these recordings for months and played the files through

conventional D/A converters such as the Benchmark DAC1 and the Logitech Transporter, I'm convinced that, as good as the CDs sound, the hi-rez masters go that essential step further in soundstage solidity and image palpability. So it was with some surprise that I found it very difficult—even impossible, at first—to hear any difference between the two players: "Red Book" audio through the Meridian didn't sound appreciably different from hi-rez through the Ayre. Tonally, spatially, the presentations were virtually identical. In the end, there *was* a difference, though not one I was expecting: The hi-rez playback had slightly better defined and slightly more extended low- and mid-bass with the bass guitar, tom toms, and kick drum on *Live at Merkin Hall*, which in turn led to a very slightly less congested lower midrange.

Ultimately, my preference was still for the hi-rez versions of the music, but it was a closer-run thing than I had expected.

Downsides?

Only one: Sometimes, when I'd accessed a track via the Meridian remote's numeric keypad, the player would clip the beginning of the first note with some discs, though not others. This suggests that the player is a little slow to lift its mute when it finds the track-start marker in the CD's PQ subcode. When I master CDs, I place the Track Start Marker about a quarter of a second before the beginning of the first note, to allow players time to unmute. Other engineers leave as little as a tenth of a second, which can catch out tardier players. This becomes irrelevant when a CD is played from beginning to end, of course.

Summing up

The Meridian 808i.2 Signature Reference didn't beat me over the head with its quality. Rather, as its English heritage might suggest, it let me discover for myself how wonderful its playback of CDs could be. I doubt this sonic excellence is due to the new apodizing filter alone—every other aspect of the player's performance has also to be first-rate, which it does appear to be. Without any hyperbole, therefore, I can say that the Meridian 808i.2 is the finest-sounding CD player I have yet heard. Yes, it is expensive, even without the preamplifier option, but it will allow its owners to rediscover the joys in their collection of music. ■

