

Timeless Design

Since 1977 Meridian has been one of Britain's leading audio manufacturers. **Howard Popeck** recalls its BS Meridian Series 1 system, a collection of components whose looks have stood the test of time

Emerging phoenix-like, or should that be Cinderella-like, from the turmoil of Lecson via the short-lived Orpheus designs, Bob

Stuart and Allen Boothroyd announced the arrival of BS Meridian in the pages of *Hi-Fi News* 28 years ago. The Series 1 system initially comprised the 101 pre-amp, the 103 power amp and the astonishing M1 active speakers with six on-board power amps and a radical electronic crossover.

This was shortly followed by a brilliant refinement of the 103 into the 103D, the only adequate 104FM tuner, and the justifiably legendary 105 mono power amplifiers. During the 1970s all of these items were favourably reviewed (occasionally ecstatically so) around the world.

The visuals are stark. The cosmetic design is timeless. The components look as modern today as they did back in the late 1970s. Finished in brown or black, the 101/103 combination was short on facilities, virtually idiot-proof and sonically a revelation. Excellently engineered from architectural extrusions with an unshakeable focus on sheer musicality and listenability, the 101, and latterly the 101B pre-amplifier, gave dramatically more expensive units a real run for the money. My Mark Levinson ML6a pre-amp was more musical, less transistory, and more natural, but then it was almost 27 times the price. The differences were noticeable but not jaw-dropping. That's a remarkable achievement.

The 101 pre-amps had a carefully engineered system designed to optimise LP input precisely for all the major m-c cartridges via customised replaceable matchbox-sized modules. These included the Supex, Denon and Fidelity Research

families, and it really worked. It made Naim pre-amps of the same era sound anaemic on everything other than the Linn Asak cartridge.

Even today, my 101B driving my Meridian M1s gives a bass slam, tightness and attack that is astonishing – an effortless 25Hz. Admittedly, the M1's midrange is a bit old-fashioned now and the treble lacks true sparkle. Nevertheless, this combination today represents the reference standard in bass performance beaten in my

the seven black-cased 101s with chrome front plates and deep blue lettering. These are utterly beautiful, and probably priceless now.

From memory the 102 was a stand-alone m-c step-up that reached prototype stage but was never released. The 103 is a modest looking two-box power amp with Meridian's characteristic transparency, bass control and superb dynamics and natural detail without harshness. You look at the tiny boxes and wonder how they achieved the

The visuals are stark and the cosmetic design is timeless. They look as modern today as they did back in the late 1970s

experience only by the Wilson Puppies, the LumenWhite Flames and the Burmester B100. Meridian wasn't the first to use the active speaker principle – the Philips Motional Feedback speakers preceded it. Nevertheless it promoted the concept and refined it to a high degree.

USED BARGAINS

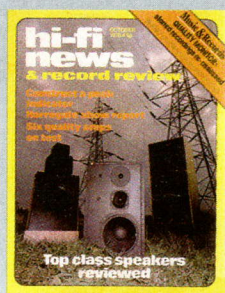
Today the 101 series pre-amps are tremendous value on the used market fetching ridiculously low prices given the clarity and transparency of the reproduction. They use DIN plugs throughout, other than the later versions, which had RCA/phono female connectors on a short trailing lead for LP input. The brown versions were cosmetically more durable than the black, but the 'real prize' is

dynamics, given the comparatively primitive components that were then available.

Bob Stuart paid close attention the effects of power supplies on power amplifier sound. It was rumoured (although never substantiated) that this might have been initiated by considering how Naim achieved its characteristic sound – exemplified by the NAP 250. Perhaps it was careful tweaking of the Naim power supply? The NAP 250 was gaining justifiably high accolades for the then-new aspects of rhythm, timing and so on. The Meridian response was the three-box 103D with twin power supplies. The 103 could easily be upgraded to the 103D.

In pure musical enjoyment terms I personally feel the 103D has never been bettered by

The early Hi-Fi News tests



Meridian product was first reviewed by *Hi-Fi News* in the October 1978 issue when Martin Colloms looked at the Meridian 101 MC with the 105 power amplifier in a six-way test of pre- and power amps. He concluded: 'This clean-looking product completely satisfied the majority of lab and listening requirements, and offered generous power delivery as well as great tolerance of difficult speaker loading'. In the June 1981 edition of *Hi-Fi News* the Meridian 105/101 amp system was revisited by Martin Colloms who noted: 'The Meridian system has shown continued improvement, notably in terms of noise levels, RIAA accuracy, distortion and sound quality'.



The June 1981 issue of *Hi-Fi News* carried a review of the 105/101, plus an advert for an add-on m-c module for the 101 Control Unit

Above: Meridian's Series 1 pre-amplifier, or Control Unit, tops a stereo amp chassis and two outboard PSUs, one per channel. Good clean secondhand examples can make these spectacular buys

Meridian. It stands comparison to any power amp up to £2.5k at today's prices yet can be picked up on eBay for as little as £200. Putting ultimate power to one side, the 101B/103D combination shows conclusively that amplification of musical performance has not evolved very far during the past 29 years. I believe it is impossible, within the context of the release date and the price, to over-praise this combination – it's a work of genius in every respect (and very reliable too). No software, no RS232 ports, no multi-channel and no gimmicks. Just watertight engineering principles intelligently applied to achieving the goal of musically realistic listening.

Despite all this, the 103/D was modestly powered at around 45 RMS per channel, doubling into 4 ohms. Meanwhile, two speakers were gaining prominence and notoriety and the then Meridian power amps just didn't have sufficient muscle to partner them.

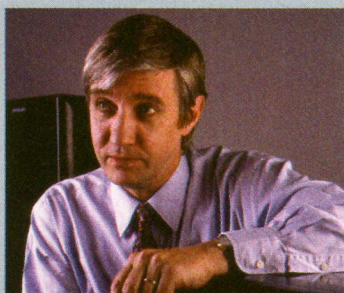
First, the Gale 401A speakers. Chrome ended, heavy, and capable of uncommon dynamics if you could overcome the 3.4 ohms at 5kHz load. These speakers were substantially free of coloration although with a slightly rising treble which was otherwise sweet and detailed. Meridian rose to the challenge with the twin monoblock 105s. Many of these were sold with the Gales with the 105s connected to the speakers on short speaker leads and on long signal leads from the 101B. The resulting sound was almost ethereal, very light, open and airy. However Meridian had another ace up its sleeve: the Meridian 107.

RE-BADGED ORPHEUS?

In reality the 107 was a re-badged version of an amp from the previous Boothroyd-Stuart company, Orpheus. An effortless 150 RMS into 8 ohms and nearly doubling into 4 ohms, this one-box unit clad in copper-coloured mirror glass was magnificent. From memory, only nine were ever built. Whether this was prudent recycling of old stock or the release of a statement product is far from clear. My bet is that it was a bit of both.

This was without any doubt the first UK power amplifier to produce proper, appropriate and authoritative bass weight, slam and control in the

The Meridian brand



Bob Stuart (pictured left) and Allen Boothroyd founded Meridian in 1977 after they discovered they had shared interests and philosophies regarding audio equipment design. Its product line-up is designed and made at its factory in Huntingdon, England. Since 1977 the Meridian Audio designs have received much critical acclaim including winning the Design Council Award for Outstanding British Product three times as well as winning the EISA European Product of the Year twice. Impressive stuff in any language.

way that USA companies such as Great American Sound and Threshold had been achieving for years. The NAP 250 of that era, notwithstanding its timing and rhythm, sounded feeble in comparison unless used with bass-heavy speakers. Even today, the 107 is a tough act to follow.

The gauntlet having been thrown down, so to speak, Meridian took on the challenge of trying to coax a half-way decent sound out of the Linn Isobarics for owners who wouldn't choose the Naim solution. At that time many Naim dealers literally refused to sell Naim amplification to customers who didn't own a Linn LP12. Meridian, no doubt with one eye on the dawn of digital, built five sets of its Isobaric amplification solution,

Worthy of mention, if only for the cleverness of the user interface, the Meridian 104 FM tuner was a sensible, if far from exceptional sounding, tuner. The 1970s were the pinnacle of tuner design from the Japanese giants such as Trio, Sansui and Yamaha. Personally speaking, tuner design hasn't been the pinnacle of Meridian's expertise. The 104 sounds pleasant enough today and looks good with the 101 and partner amps, but nothing more.

THE MERIDIAN SOUND

So how would one characterise the Meridian sound from the 1970s? Well, crisper and clearer than almost anything else from that period. It is

"The 103D stands comparison to power amps up to £2.5k at today's prices yet can be had on eBay for as little as £200"

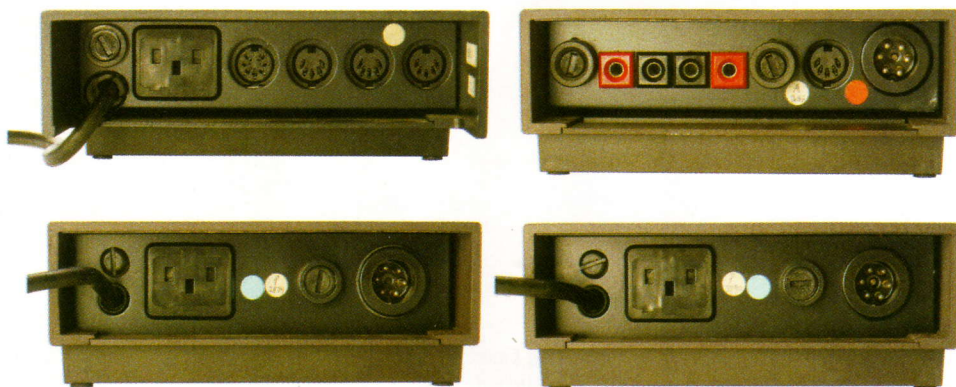
three pairs of 105s and no crossover. Each pair of 105 power amps was customised for treble, mid and bass respectively. It was neat, tidy and precise – and it worked – to a degree. Once in place, the sonic shortcomings of the Isobarics became apparent and Meridian, sensibly, turned its attention to other and more worthwhile amplifier/speaker projects and new active speaker designs of its own. These included the clever but ultimately disappointing M3s and the peerless M2s.

lively, even today. Under certain circumstances, with inappropriate loudspeaker matching, it might be termed as sounding mildly bright – but nothing more than that. But it's the bass that continues to impress. Transients are delivered with a speed, precision, liveliness, impact and control that cannot fail to impress – for all the right reasons. It's a cold bass if you like. I prefer to think of it has having no artificially induced bloom.

The M1 active speakers deserve a page all on their own. They are certainly worth buying for up to £900 and I wouldn't sell mine. But remember that there are no replacements for any of the original drivers and the electronics trays have components that are difficult to replace.

The 104 isn't worth chasing unless you want the complete set. The 103 is great, but the 103D is amazing. You aren't going to find a 107, so we'll leave it at that. The 101B is one of the finest reproducers of vinyl available at any cost – but check what cables you get with it, or at least can obtain a full compliment of DIN leads first.

So, where does that bring us? Well, when I visited the Munich high-end show in April this year I put my head into the Meridian stand. There was a big screen showing a 'boom-bash' movie. The noise was, well merely hi-fi. It wasn't music. I didn't stay. I suddenly felt very old, somewhat nostalgic and just a bit gloomy. ■



The pre-amp (top left) with its 5-pin DIN socketry for line-level sources and power amp (top right) with two sets of speaker terminals; below these are PSUs, each with power leads but no speaker connections