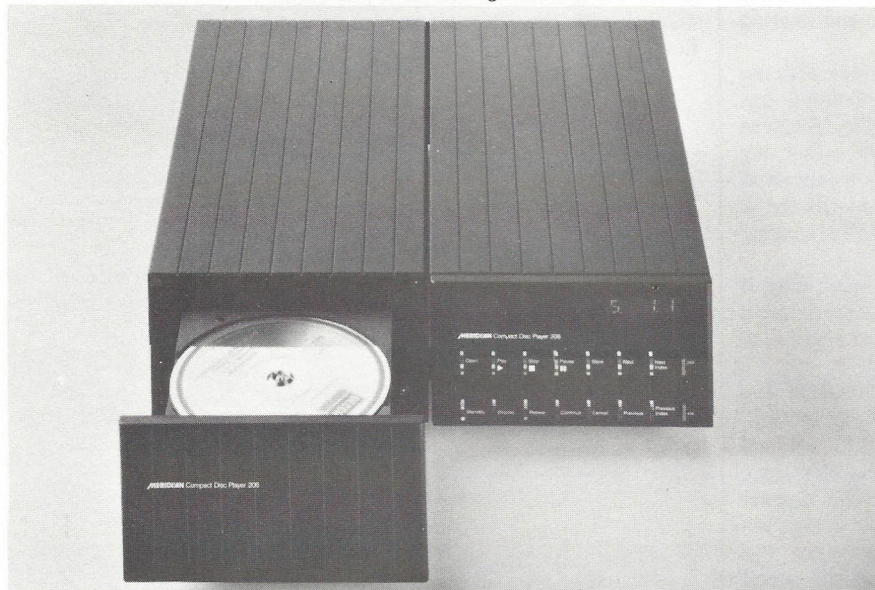




CHOICE SESSIONS

Things we hear . . . This month, a new preamplifier called Finestra raises eyebrows; Snell's smallest Type K loudspeaker temporarily replaces the larger Type JII in Jason's system; the Meridian 206 sounds even better than last year's 207 Pro.



16-BIT SOUNDS

John Seabury finds few faults with the new Meridian 206 16-bit CD player.

Opening boxes is one of the best things about being a hi-fi writer, especially when the product in question is as interesting as Meridian's 206 CD player. The 206 is a new 16-bit, four-times oversampling machine costing £800, and representing the lower tier in Meridian's revised CD line-up, with the upper tier to be occupied by its 208 PDM model. The 206 is a simplified version of the older 207 Pro model, designed as a stand alone player for consumers who don't need full system integration with other Meridian components. So gone are the 207's preamp facilities, including line, LP and tape inputs, electronic volume control and headphone socket – though the 206 can still 'talk to' other 200-series components via its network socket.

The 206 may be a simplified version of the 207, but the sound quality it promotes is truly excellent, pipping the 207 at the post time after time, with extra detail and a more accurate sound squeezed from each disc that was tried. In fact the 206 offers a seductive combination of controlled but generous power, fine resolution of musical strands, and the articulation to hold a performance together. I found myself digging out all sorts of discs!

The 206's build-quality is noteworthy, too, in an age of moulded plastic mechanisms and mass-produced audio circuitry. The new machine is a two box player, like the more costly 207 but here the boxes are permanently linked. The cases themselves are of black, epoxy-enamelled aluminium, and the disc drawer is solidly built with a soft Nextel-

type coating on the upper surface. The drawer action is smooth and the glass front fits snugly to isolate the disc from air-borne vibration. There's also a proper suspension, to protect the laser from vibration during play. Outputs are provided for both wired and optical fibre digital transmission, along with a pair of 'conventional' analogue phono sockets.

The 206's facilities, while slimmed down, are far from spartan. You can program 25 tracks in any order, or use 'cancel' to exclude a track. There are the usual display options, and the machine will display index points. There's also an intriguing 'continue' function. After 'stop' or 'standby', you can restart the disc at precisely the point you left off, by pressing 'continue'. With the 206 comes a slim plastic handset, allowing you to carry out most operations remotely. However, if you're hell-bent on accessing index points or on full 'cancel programming', you'd need the big 209-system handset.

In use, the 206 is straightforward. Meridian intends you should leave it connected to the mains all the time, since in 'standby' mode the low-level circuitry is kept warm, ready for action.

I've suggested I was pleasantly surprised by the sound quality – it's clear the 206 produces top-class sound on a wide variety of musical material. I also enjoyed the improvement over the 207: not earth-shattering, but the sort of all-round improvement which matters to a serious listener. In fact, these differences illustrate much of what is meant by 'better sound' and I think it's worth spelling them out.

The first thing which struck me was the 206's nimble-footedness in tracking fast

instrumental passages. The machine also offered fine vocal detail: when male and female vocalists sang in close harmony, as on Eurythmics' *We Too Are One*, the 206 made it clear who was singing what and when. I'm sure Dave Stewart will be pleased to know he's not just an Annie Lennox overdub!

The tonal accuracy of the 206 allowed closely-related instruments like clarinet and oboe to be distinguished more easily; music which depended on the interplay of different strands benefited considerably. And while some hi-fi components turn music into a spotlight foreground and vague background texture, the 206 retained detail and dynamics in the background parts. This made Strauss' *Tales From Vienna Woods* seem less a lightweight filler and more a carefully-crafted miniature.

With appropriate speakers the 206 can set up a wide and deep soundstage, and on discs like Chris Rea's *The Road To Hell* it gave the sort of full-bodied sound which makes you want to turn the volume up (and up . . .!) The bass on *Daytona* was gorgeous – rounded and deep but tactile too. And you could tell just how long each note lasted. The upper-bass and lower-mid were quite free of that 'bloom' which obscures detail. I did sometimes wonder if the 206 lost a little to the 207 in terms of 'bass drive', but it's simply that the leaner, tauter sound of the 206 seems less 'generous' against the slightly looser and cloudier sound of the 207. I always learned more about the music with the 206.

The 206 scores well if you judge hi-fi performance by 'feel', too. With almost every disc there was a good sense of flow or momentum with none of that 'it-sounds-impressive-but-why-did-they-bother-to-record-it?' sensation.

And the way one section of the music grew out of another brought the whole thing closer to real music. Not that the *206* is overly kind – if you present it with a sheeny, phasey recording, that's just what you'll hear!

So to two criticisms. First the lack of a headphone socket. What could be nicer late at night than plugging a good pair of 'phones into your new £800 CD player and hearing right in to the source?

"The *206* is intended to interface with the user's existing preamplifier", pointed out Steve Hopkins of Meridian Audio. "Because of this there's no volume control either; it's down to the way the *206* has been conceived – and priced." I suppose we'd hardly thank Meridian if it stuck a cheap potentiometer and budget IC in there . . .

The second moan is over pricing. Why, if it's a simplified version of the feature-laden £1,050 *207*, does the *206* still cost £800? Why not £499?

Steve Hopkins answered: "Most of the cost of the *207* was for the CD player itself, the extra inputs and tape facilities added relatively little to the cost. The electronic volume control was probably the dearest 'extra', but it just isn't realistic to expect the price to be halved." And I can see I've answered my own question – as the sound quality, construction and appearance do make the *206* well worth the money in my opinion.

But why buy a 16-bit CD player now, when PDM and PWM 'bitstream' models are already with us? In the *206*'s case, the answer is the way it sounds. Meridian has learned how to get the best out of this tried-and-trusted technology.

So if you want a player with preamp facilities, and can afford Meridian's *208* PDM

player at £1,479, great, but the *206* is a fine model in its own right. We now know that things like power supplies and mechanical integrity matter just as much as the digital technology used. This is where specialist firms like Meridian score, and is one reason why it's still worth spending £800 on a CD player. For me, the resolution of fine detail, coupled with the *206*'s sense of drive and 'flow', is what hi-fi is all about.

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