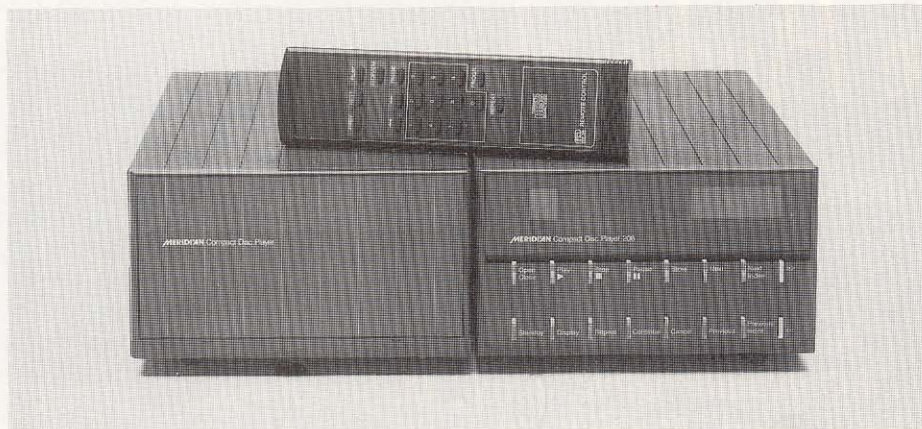


Meridian 206B

Recommended

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Meridian was the first British hi-fi specialist to get into CD, and the company has worked hard and effectively to maintain its lead in the audiophile sector. Extra money and management arrived from KEF a couple of years back, and the result is now seen in the rapid introduction of a number of new models, all based on the same basic proprietary engineering and technology, but tailored to create a real element of choice for those who are more interested in performance than price.

The current surge of activity really began with the 206 and 208 models which were introduced in early 1990 and reviewed (very favourably) in our June issue. The 206B covered on this occasion is a logical extension.

All are built onto the same very attractive chassis. The original 206 is a straight – though very refined – standalone CD player based on Philips multi-bit DACs and transport alongside Meridian components, selling for £800. The 208 went straight to the top of the price ladder, the £1,490 pricetag (more or less) justified by a more elaborate remote control unit, a built in high quality preamplifier and – most important of all – it was the very first commercial CD player to incorporate the Philips bitstream (low-bit) DAC, and in an unusually advanced application.

The new £900 206B is a logical development of the above, taking the basic 206 standalone player but replacing the multi-bit DAC with a bitstream implementation similar to that used in the 208. It's not quite that simple of course, since ongoing incremental improvements are made to all players, with the availability of new devices – on this occasion an improved control microprocessor now permits direct music drive from load, for example. Incidentally, another new model introduced at the same time is the 200 CD transport,

which leaves out the DACs and audio circuitry and costs £750.

Build is reassuringly solid, especially the substantial disc drive/drawer mechanism, and controls have good feel. Recalling the radical two-box 207 of several years ago, the unit is effectively made up from two separate side-by-side sections, keeping transport, control chip and power supplies away from the processing and audio electronics. A deep and substantial drawer mechanism takes up the left hand half, and this seals against the alloy casework to provide a measure of acoustic isolation for the playing disc.

The Philips Hall motor swing arm transport is mechanically stiffened and mounted on Sorbothane decoupling. Two bitstream DACs are used in true differential mode, an external shift register and logic circuitry sorting out the timing. Good quality analogue components and circuitry is used throughout.

Lab Report

It almost goes without saying that the 206B produced a textbook series of test results. What's rather more interesting is to compare and contrast the findings with those from the 206 and 208 before. And in almost every respect, the 206B matches the results obtained with the expensive 208 – notably the superb low level linearity but also including the slight peak clipping on white noise overload, 0.3dB de-emphasis error and slight channel separation asymmetry.

Sound Quality

Sound quality too matched the industry reference standard which was set by the 208 – indeed, the 206B seems to have a slight edge in terms of dynamics and grip. Stereo staging is superb, with excellent width and depth, while focus and definition are very precise.

By absolute standards the 206B still

shows the fundamental character which some regard as the Achilles heel of low-bit processing to date. The bass sounds a little reticent and compressed, and the full dynamics of expression are somehow a little muted. But the strengths are there in abundance too: in the neutral balance, natural vocals, the sparkling and almost grainless treble and the purity of violin sounds – virtues for which many would willingly sacrifice a little get-up-and-go.

Conclusions

The 206B's £900 pricetag precludes Best Buy status, but it handsomely deserves the heartiest of Recommendations, setting a new standard of sound quality amongst CD players regardless of price.

TEST RESULTS

Test resolution (L/R av)	16 bits
Output level, dB rel 2V, Source	2.18V, 0.75dB, 12ohms
Effective dynamic range (-70dB thd + N + dither)	100dB
Harmonic distortion	20kHz 1.0kHz 20kHz
Full level ref 0dB	-94dB -91dB -90dB
at -70dB encode + dither	-47dB, 0.447%
Stereo separation	126dB 123/110dB 116/103dB
Stereo balance L/R	0.15dB 0.13dB 0.10dB
Frequency response (ref 1kHz) 20Hz to 20kHz	±0.13dB
Audible high frequency intermodulation	-108dB
Audible electrical noise	-97dB
Audible mechanical noise	very low
Ultrasonic noise	-98dB
Error correction	1.5mm gap
Shock/vibration resistance	good
De-emphasis	±0.3dB to 5Hz
Track finding speed (15, YEDS 2)	3 secs
White noise overload test	slight peak clip
Size (w x h x d)	32 x 10 x 33.5cms
Typical price inc VAT	£899

