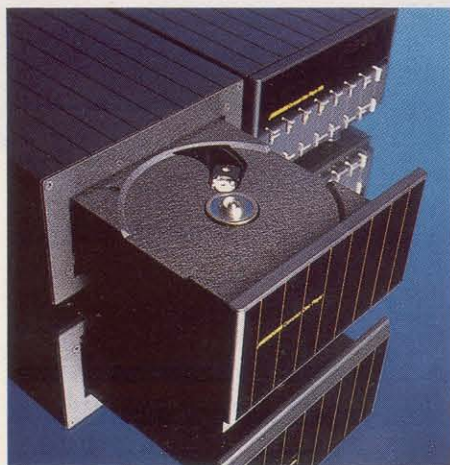
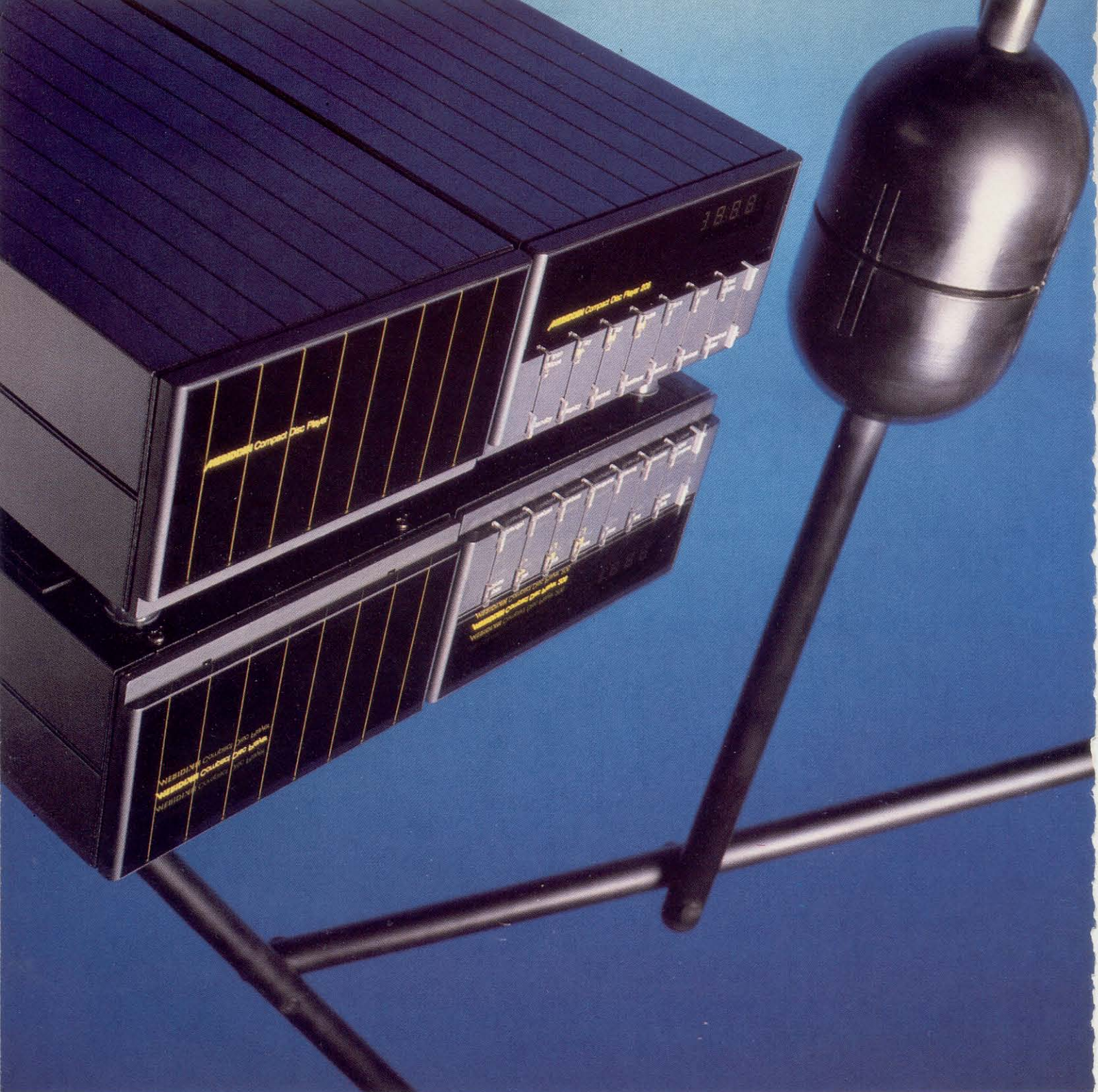




MERIDIAN 206B

Revitalised with the the DAC7 chip, Meridian's new look sub-£1000 integrated CD player faces up to the rigours of both a Keith Howard review and a blind listening test

Trust Meridian, which has ever been a company to challenge convention, to have conceived a way of blurring our neat categorisation of one-box and two-box CD players. The 206B, Meridian's least expensive player at £971, and the related 208 player/preamp, both use what the sales brochure calls 'separated box construction' - a sort of one-and-a-half-box hybrid. It comprises two narrow, deep boxes placed side by side and bolted together, with short wire connections running between the two adjacent sides.

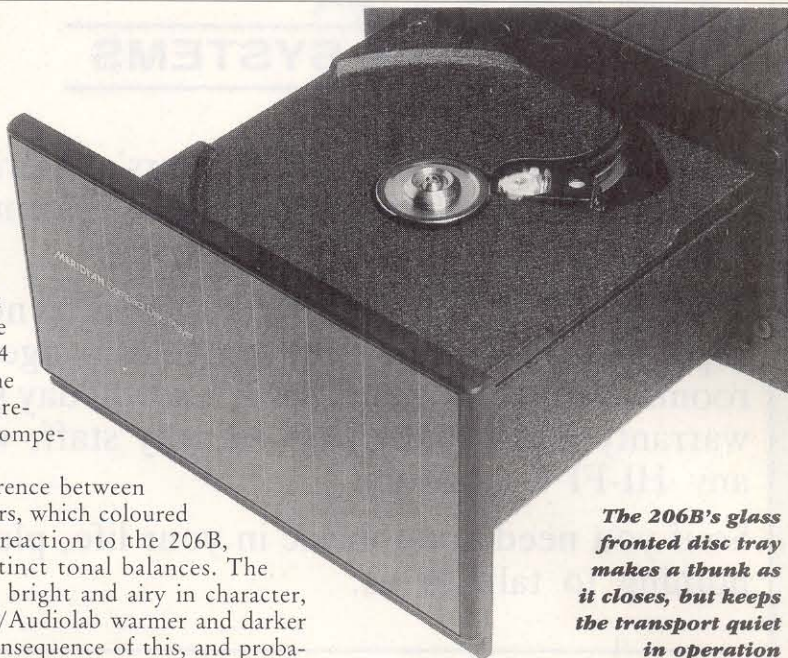
Anyone familiar with other Meridian products such as the 201 preamp, 203 D-to-A converter and 204 tuner - which are compact enough to occupy just one of these extruded aluminium cases - will recognise this construction for what it is: invention born of necessity. It might even be thought somewhat crude - particularly if you lift the 206B up to see the metal bracket bolted beneath - but for two saving graces. First, the player looks smart and modern in the distinctive Meridian style. And second, it surely benefits from the improved electrical screening that the separate boxes provide.

Here, then, is an integrated CD player which promises to trade punches with comparably priced two-box alternatives while not looking out of place beside one's Mar-

DP-X9010 transport and Audiolab 8000 DAC converter. As one of the best CD playing partnerships available at the price, one which is £224 in excess of the 206B's, it represents stiff competition.

A key difference between the two players, which coloured much of my reaction to the 206B, was their distinct tonal balances. The Meridian was bright and airy in character, the Kenwood/Audiolab warmer and darker hued. As a consequence of this, and probably other factors besides, the 206B tended to convey an impression of greater detail and crisper dynamics, whereas the Kenwood/Audiolab scored through its bigger, fuller and weightier presentation.

Were I an alchemist I might concoct some mixture of the two, but given the bald choice I generally preferred the cohesive and unfailingly music nature of the Kenwood/Audiolab. In comparison the Meridi-



The 206B's glass fronted disc tray makes a thunk as it closes, but keeps the transport quiet in operation

an tended to sound a little lightweight, a little lacking in what I can best describe as 'structure', and would occasionally push the system into hardness.

The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, the opening track of *The Odin Sampler* (NJ 4028-2), encapsulated the differences. Radaka Toneff's pure voice was well projected by the Meridian, and Steve Dobrogosz's restrained piano

The 206B is a lucid performer which earns its place on any £1000 CD player shortlist

cel Breuer chaise longue and Alvar Aalto drinks trolley (as featured, somewhat preciously, in the style-conscious Meridian brochure).

I listened to the 206B in a system comprising, in signal path order, Hot Pot passive preamp, Audio Innovations First Audio Amplifier power amp and Alphason Amphion speakers. Despite the limited power output of the First Audio this is a system capable of convincing dynamics allied to full-bodied imaging - but it is picky about front ends. Give them an excuse and the Amphions will take on a hard-edged quality which detracts from their uncommon powers of resolution.

In the role of benchmark product was cast the two-box combination of Kenwood

Inside the Meridian 206B

The Meridian name on its front panel immediately tells you the fundamentals of the 206B's engineering. It is of course, like all Meridian CD players before it, a Philips-based design. That means a swing arm mechanism with single-beam laser pickup and - since guru Bob Stuart is a committed supporter of single bit conversion - BitStream DACs.

Still, individual Meridian touches abound. Bob Stuart discovered long ago that disc vibration hurts sound quality so the glass-fronted disc tray - which, unusually, brings the mechanism out with it - is sealed against airborne vibration when shut. It consequently makes a distinct thunk as it closes (in addition to an unattractive scraping sound while opening or closing), but does ensure that the transport is quiet in operation.

Within the circuitry, Meridian has cast its beady eye over everything from the operation of the servos to the differential configuration of the DACs. This latest variant of the 206B differs from its predecessor in using Philips' latest DAC7 (TDA 1547) Bitstream chip, fitment of which to the 203 converter elicited such positive reaction in November's *Audiophile*. Improved signal-to-noise ratio, lower distortion and reduced modulation noise are the principal benefits.

Unfortunately the 206B's control logic is al-

so of Meridian's design, and on certain functions it remains as frustratingly slow-witted as ever. The mechanism itself is twinkle-toed, but the brain controlling it gives every indication of suffering a two-digit IQ.

In every other CD player I have ever used, a prod on a control button, any control button - be it on the fascia or remote control handset - brings an instant response. Indeed, if you press play, stop or pause on the 206B, then the reaction is similarly prompt. But ask it to change tracks, via the remote's 0-9 keypad or the last/next buttons, and the 206B will continue to play the current track for fully two seconds while it gathers itself for action. During which hiatus, if you don't consult the display, you are quite uncertain whether the message was received and understood.

Even when I had used the 206B for some days this pregnant pause remained a frustration, and I imagine it always would.

Incidentally, don't be fooled by the fact that the remote control has volume up and down buttons - these only function with the 208, which is a 206B with integral preamp. The 206B's analogue outputs are of fixed level.

Meridian has been a pioneer of multi-room systems, and of course the 206B is multi-room compatible. A control socket on the back panel allows the player to be operated from other rooms in the house.



Blind test: Meridian 206B vs Kenwood DPX9010/Audiolab 8000

On the first track, the Meridian sounded darker, louder and more solid than the Kenwood/Audiolab combination, which had a slightly brittle if vibrant and atmospheric presentation. But the more significant difference was that, with the 206B, I could sense the effort Jacqueline du Pré was putting into her playing. With the Poulenc *Quatre Motets pour le temps de Noël*, it was the DPX9010/8000 that impressed more. I found it louder and more authoritative, with greater definition to the different vocal sections and clearer counterpoint. It made the 206B's presentation seem anaemic, vague and brittle.

The Michael Hedges track left me more equivocal, as did the Cowboy Junkies track. If pushed I'd say I could hear more of the boom from the stage PA and a greater solidity to vocals with the 206B, the sound of the two box marred by a slight edginess to the lead vocal. Both of these performances were very convincing in their different ways, however. There was some confusion too, listening to *Mars* from the Pickwick recording of *The Planets* with Hickox and the LSO. After four presentations I felt the Meridian was the most realistic, trumpets snarling away powerfully, yet not ear splittingly, and the full weight of the orchestra more apparent.

With CPE Bach's *Fantasia*, I initially found that the Kenwood/Audiolab created a stark yet earthbound sound, with little sense of acoustic or natural decay to the sound of the fortepiano and less sense of bow on violin strings than was the case listening to the 206B. Yet repeated listening gave a fuller picture to the musical event and the acoustic within which it was happening.

On other tracks, such as a heavy electronic rock piece by Kraftwerk and a Telemann Flute and Recorder Concerto, I was uncertain which of the two I preferred.

My judgement on the two is that the DPX9010/8000 was strongly preferred to the 206B when listening to the Poulenc, but on other tracks I was more equivocal. I thought neither was poor, and that in many respects the different programme material may have been responsible for my reactions. I could have lived with either combination quite happily.

Jonathan Kettle

I imagine the art critic who reviews a pointillist painting in terms of dot quality yet never steps back far enough to see that the painting doesn't actually depict anything. There was a danger of that kind in this comparison.

On the most revealing piece played – a Fantasia for violin and fortepiano by CPE Bach – the 206B was far more satisfying in hi-fi terms. It made the violin sound like a violin rather than a scratchy, oversized cello, for example. But these are the dots.

For as far as the musical performance as a whole was concerned, the two box was streets ahead. It made the two instrumentalists sound like living musicians, reacting to one another's skill and insight. On the Meridian the two parts could have been recorded on different days in different studio booths. I've not often encountered two players where my preference divided so clearly along hi-fi/musical lines.

On Holst's *Planets*, I recorded another divided reaction. Here the differences weren't so pronounced, but the DPX9010/8000 seemed to me more involving rhythmically, more dynamic, and spatially better organised. Crucially, on a piece of music like *Mars*, the two box was more exciting.

Kraftwerk's version of *The Robots on The Mix* is the product of an entirely electronic soundstage, but nonetheless revealing for that. Here I preferred the two box by a considerable margin. It was more dynamic and musically better differentiated. The Meridian produced a more persuasive sound on the electric kick drum, but generally it didn't come across as exciting or quirky in the way the music demands.

The final piece used was the Michael Hedges track *Because It's There*, played on his bizarre augmented acoustic guitar. It's a typical, ultra-close Windham Hill recording with good bass extension and masses of attack. Reassuringly, my musical preference went hand in hand with my hi-fi preference on this occasion. The Meridian threw the track away. It sounded flat and indifferent. The two box not only resolved more information in the hi-fi domain, it also made sense of the piece musically. The title is a famous justification for climbing a mountain. The 206B made me wonder why Hedges had bothered.

George Entwistle



Note the unconventional two pin mains socket featured on the 206B

accompaniment nicely delineated. In quick comparison the Kenwood/Audiolab sounded a little thickened, a mite less crisp. In short, poorer hi-fi.

But if the track was played in its entirety, on one player and then the other (with due correction for their 1dB level disparity), the somewhat superficial nature of the Meridian's music-making became apparent. I was aware on the 206B that Ms Toneff's range of vocal colours had been curtailed, and I missed the image scale and dynamic authority of the Kenwood/Audiolab which lent a palpable atmosphere to this relaxed, intimate performance.

Small-scale classical works – for example, the exquisite Adagio from Arensky's Piano Trio No2 (Delos DE3056) – elicited similar reactions. The 206B sounded superficially sharper, but the Kenwood/Audiolab consistently conveyed a greater sense of light and shade. While on harder-edged rock material like The Sensational Alex Harvey Band's *Faith Healer* (a recent rediscovery), I preferred the Kenwood/Audiolab's greater drive, better instrumental separation and disinclination to harshness.

I could go on, but as these are contentious areas of assessment, to some extent influenced by partnering equipment, it would be unreasonable to overemphasise them – the more so as I have found the Kenwood/Audiolab a very tough act to follow in respect of sheer musicality. The reactions of the two blind listeners, who I know grappled with these distinctions too, will make interesting reading and might even provide a counterpoint.

Better, rather, to recommend the Meridian 206B as a lucid performer which earns its place on any £1,000 shortlist, but to add a codicil that auditioning equipment at this level is something you need do carefully and at length.

■ **Right of Reply:** see page 89

Neither writer was aware of the identity of the CD players under test when they wrote their reviews. The product names were added to their pieces after they were submitted

Right of Reply

Linn Karik/Numerik Page 32

The review of the Linn CD player reminds us of when Linn launched the LP12. The Karik/Numerik is entirely different to everything else on the market.

Like a Lingo/LP12/Ekos/Troika or a Kairn or a Kremlin, the Karik and the Numerik set new standards. If the primary characteristics of music are used to assess the performance of the products, or if an in-depth technical evaluation of their performance is undertaken, it is clear that these products are in a class of their own.

It is unfortunate that Jonathan and Alvin did not have more time with the products due to the pressures of wrapping up the magazine before Christmas, and we are disappointed that this first review in our home market did not produce the extremely positive results received in America, and other major markets, where the Karik/Numerik was judged to establish a new standard of performance.

A new product from Linn is always controversial and often challenges people's preconceptions. As always, of course, your readers should listen for themselves and make up their own minds.

Due to the high level of demand we will only be able to supply these products to a limited number of retailers in the UK in the coming months. We will be delighted to advise your readers of retailers who are equipped to demonstrate the Karik/Numerik.

We would welcome Jonathan's and Alvin's views after a long term test, say three months, and will be pleased to supply products to them for extended listening.

Anne Young
Linn Products Ltd
☎ 041 644 5111

Meridian 206B

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Thank you, we are delighted you thought so highly of the 206B DAC7. As you pointed out, the lower distortion and particularly the (uniquely) low modulation noise of this design result in a very natural presentation - which by definition is not *always* remarkable.

We were flattered too - though somewhat puzzled - that you chose to compare it to a more expensive separate transport/converter combination. Anyone interested in spending a little extra should consider our 200/203 as well.

Had we wanted to, this player could easily have been built in

one box and still matched the range visually, but it could never have been so good - it was a matter of our choice, not 'borne of necessity'.

Bob Stuart
Boothroyd Stuart Ltd
☎ 0480 434334

Marantz AX1000 Audio Computer

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We agree that the Marantz AX1000 audio computer is a complex product to operate. However, the tasks that we can set the audio computer to perform are themselves complex.

It is a fact that the largest problem in the domestic environment is the performance of the average listening room. The response in any room will always show significant dips and boosts in the total audio band.

One of the functions of the Audio Computer is to remove the effects of the room by 'room acoustic compensation'.

There will be a major difference when using the AX1000 with a hi-fi system. It will take the performance closer to the original recording.

We would advise that the speaker positioning is critical. The audio computer will have to work harder with poor speaker positioning.

Finally the user has the ability to adjust his target spectrum, and therefore 'hands on' experience will lead to achieving this optimum performance.

James Lane
Marantz Hi-Fi Ltd
☎ 0753 680868

Heybrook Sextet Page 76

Chacun a son gout! Jimmy Hughes described the Sextet as a 'handsome piece of furniture with an impeccable finish', whilst Dave Wiley thought it 'hardly the most beautiful piece of furniture [he] had clapped eyes on'.

To one the efficiency seemed low, to the other, high. 'Lucid, cool, detailed and articulate' and 'detached and contained' versus 'a white knuckle job' and 'bashing, crashing and screaming ... in their element'.

It all goes to show that your own ears and taste must be the ultimate judge. With the wise help of a good dealer demo, using varied front ends, confirm for yourself just how superb the Sextets are.

DA Boughton
Heybrook Hi-Fi
☎ 0752 780311

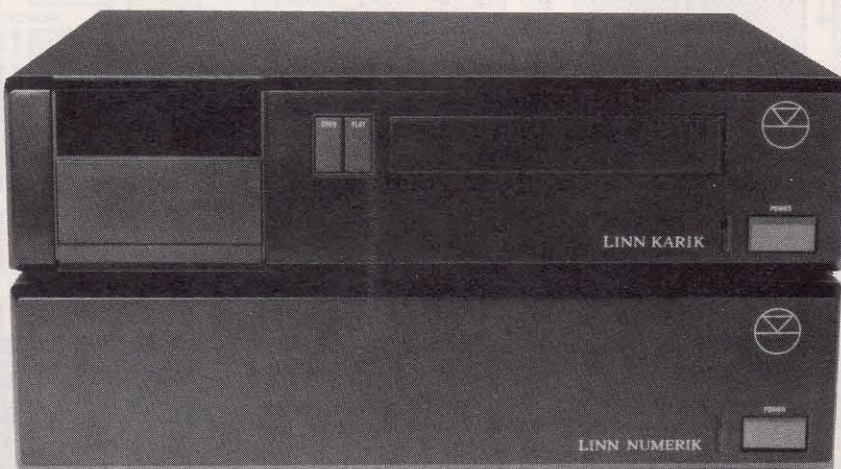
KEF K120

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Nice to have a convert! 'Accuracy' doesn't have to be 'uninteresting', although that proposition does raise a whole raft of complex questions, not all of them to do with hardware either.

Nice too, to have Dave get it all right. Clearly understanding the objectives, strengths and weaknesses and presenting them in a comprehensive and balanced manner.

David Inman
KEF
☎ 0622 672261



**The Karik/
Numerik:
Linn believes
it to be
unique in
the CD
market**