

Meridian 506

The Meridian 506 CD player is just one of a number of upmarket British players to feature the Crystal CS4328 DS processor. However, as you might expect from Meridian, it also has a radial laser

mechanism that is wholly contained within the bulky drawer.

In some ways the most glamorous of the CD players tested this time out, the 506 is compact, extremely heavy (because of the elaborate power supplies in particular), and superbly finished thanks to a subtle blend of matt-black metal panels and darkened glass. Subtle relief is provided by the controls and an excellent defeatable dot-matrix display. Socketry is available for electrical and optical digital outputs, and there are two proprietary communications sockets for use in full Meridian multi-room systems.

Sound Quality

This player attracted almost complete unanimity on test — each of the panel members categorised the performance of the player completely independently but in broadly the

same terms.

On the positive side, the Meridian was liked for its taut precision and control at both frequency extremes, but it was criticised, in effect, for being incapable of “letting its hair down”. ‘There is a strange dullness to the midband’ wrote one panellist, after hearing the Keb’ Mo’ track. ‘The bass is solid, and the treble sounds more extended than many of the others, but the overall effect is dull and sterile’.

The Beethoven came across to one listener as being ‘controlled and slightly restrained’ and as having a ‘strong sense of detail, but sounding as though the left and the right hand belong to two different pianos’. Another suggested that the 506 ‘could be a little more enthusiastic and committed’, and a third thought the sound ‘detached and distant’. A turn of phrase repeated almost verbatim several times throughout the tests was ‘devoid of emotion’. The Mahler was similarly characterised as having ‘a lot going on’, but in a wonderful phrase that somehow says it all, the Meridian was dubbed ‘a Mr Spock among CD players’. This panel member

recognised the brand of the player, knowing in advance only the broad price span involved.

Of course those with Meridian systems, especially digital systems that talk the same command language and use the same system remote control, will find a choice from the Meridian range almost irresistible. In its favour, the 506 is beautifully packaged, and remains capable of sounding both detailed and highly refined in a sympathetically chosen system. However, it is less of an advocate for difficult material than a number of others, and it can engender listening fatigue over long term use.

Conclusions

The Meridian 506 is a classic case of a player that time has caught out. It was highly competitive when first released, and was restored to that position following a mid-life revamp a couple of years ago when fitted with a three-beam laser. However, the goal posts have moved since then, and though it remains a competent and in many ways likeable performer, the 506 has been matched and even surpassed several times in the last few years.

VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★

VALUE ★★★★★

PRICE £950

▲ Style, display system (with off switch), flexibility and civilised sound.

▼ Lacks organic strengths of the best, and can sound mechanical.

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THE LAB REPORT

Like Linn's *Mimik*, Meridian's 506 employs the surface-mount version of Crystal's CS4328 bitstream DAC. Unlike the *Mimik*, however, the 506 is graced with one of Philips' CDM12.4 mechanisms together with an older, but thoroughly superior, SAA7310 decoder. This IC promises superb tracking of less-than-perfect discs.

Overall this is an accomplished design, offering low distortion across the entire audioband (0.0007-0.006 per cent), linearity true to within 1dB over a full 100dB dynamic range, an utterly flat frequency response and low 50 Ohm output impedance suitable for driving long-ish interconnect cable. An internal inspection revealed patches of a 'crusty' contaminant on the main board which may be a residue of the PCB detergent used during manufacture. Either way, the presence of a (possibly) semi-conducting impurity is unlikely to improve its performance.

The sonic 'character' of the 506 will be influenced by Meridian's choice of Signetics op-amps in the analogue stage, though its mild data-induced jitter pattern and immunity to outside interference suggest the 506 will sound closer to the Quad 77 than the Linn *Mimik*.

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HOW IT COMPARES

