

MERIDIAN 605

At a little under £2000, these new monoblocks are said to be the state of the art in power amplification. Alvin Gold and Jonathan Kettle take it in turn to check them out

Any high-end component needs to be used with the best of ancillaries. These monoblocks are no different. A Meridian 200 transport was used to test CDs with an Audio Alchemy Digital Decoding Engine v1.0. The DDE has a new digital interconnect with a pulse transformer built in, a crude but effective means of reducing phase jitter.

The phono source was based on a Roksan Xerxes with an Artimez arm and Koetsu Rosewood Signature cartridge. For the latter I used a DNM pre-amplifier, and for the rest of the time I used a Roksan preamp. I started out using Martin-Logan Quests, but they turned out to be less than ideal, and other speakers were added to the list, including the Musical Fidelity MC6 (lowish impedance but not too reactive and sensitive to boot), Celestion 5000 (lowish

impedance and lacking sensitivity) and Monitor Audio Studio 15 (medium sensitivity, easy load).

Various power amplifiers were available to act as yardsticks, including a set of Roksan power amps and Michaelson Audio Chronos valve amps. The amplifiers were used as close as possible to the speakers, and cabling was kept short at two metre lengths of solid core in bi-wired form.

The Meridian 605 monoblocks are near to the state of the art in power amplification, with one important caveat. Of all the amplifiers I have used recently, the 605 is probably the closest of all to a characterless black box, to the extent that it took quite a long time to get a clear picture of its abilities. On the other hand, a session with the Meridian monoblocks was sufficient to show where the others had gone wrong.

But the caveat is that the Meridian is not as oblivious as some to low impedance or reactive loudspeaker loads. In principle all that suffers is maximum output levels, but this wouldn't be a big problem with the Martin-Logan Quest, a fairly sensitive speaker which shouldn't need too much power.

In practice, although the Quest was pushed to satisfactorily high volume levels, it did so at the expense of a degree of compression and a slightly shut-in quality at all volume settings. I had already discovered how sensitive the Quest is to the amplification that feeds it, but the Roksan sounded completely at home at all volume levels, and even the valve

powered Chronos drives the Quest with complete freedom up to a certain level, though it does get into trouble with choral music at medium to high levels.

Matching the Meridian with the other speakers, none of which offered the holographic stereo perspectives of the Quest, there were no such problems, and the amps showed the side of their nature that I think most people will hear.

The midband and top end were outstandingly fresh and alive sounding. The bass was always a little self-contained and lean, even dry, and the ever tidy sounding Meridian 605 lacks Krell-style authority and power.

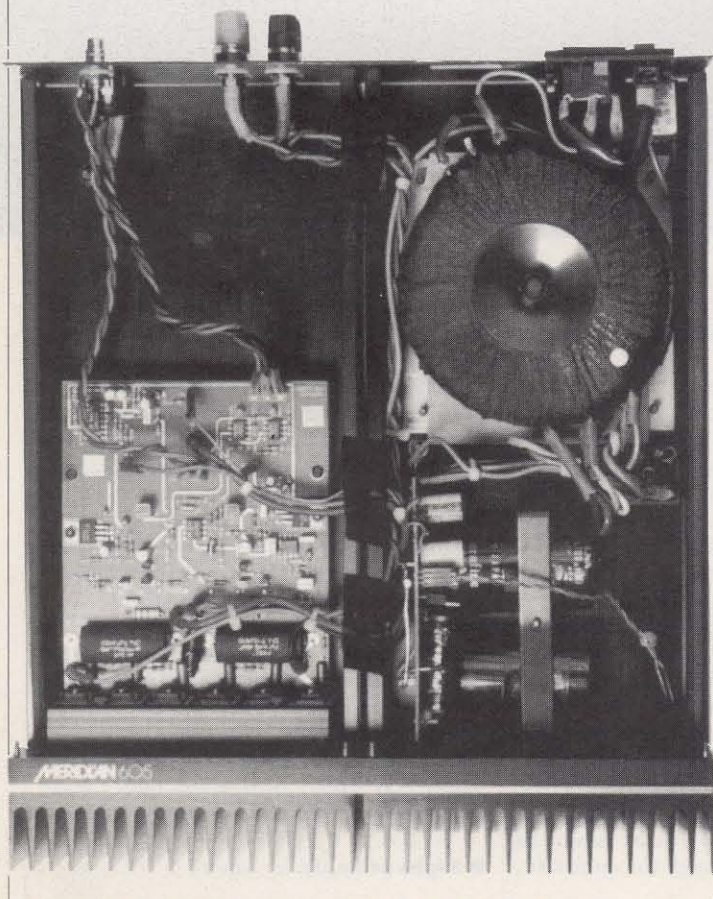
The 605 monoblocks are so good they are probably among the 10 best throughout the world

The Chronos had an airier and more spacious, less cluttered bass, but to an extent lacked the rhythmic urge and start and stop on a sixpence quality of the Meridian.

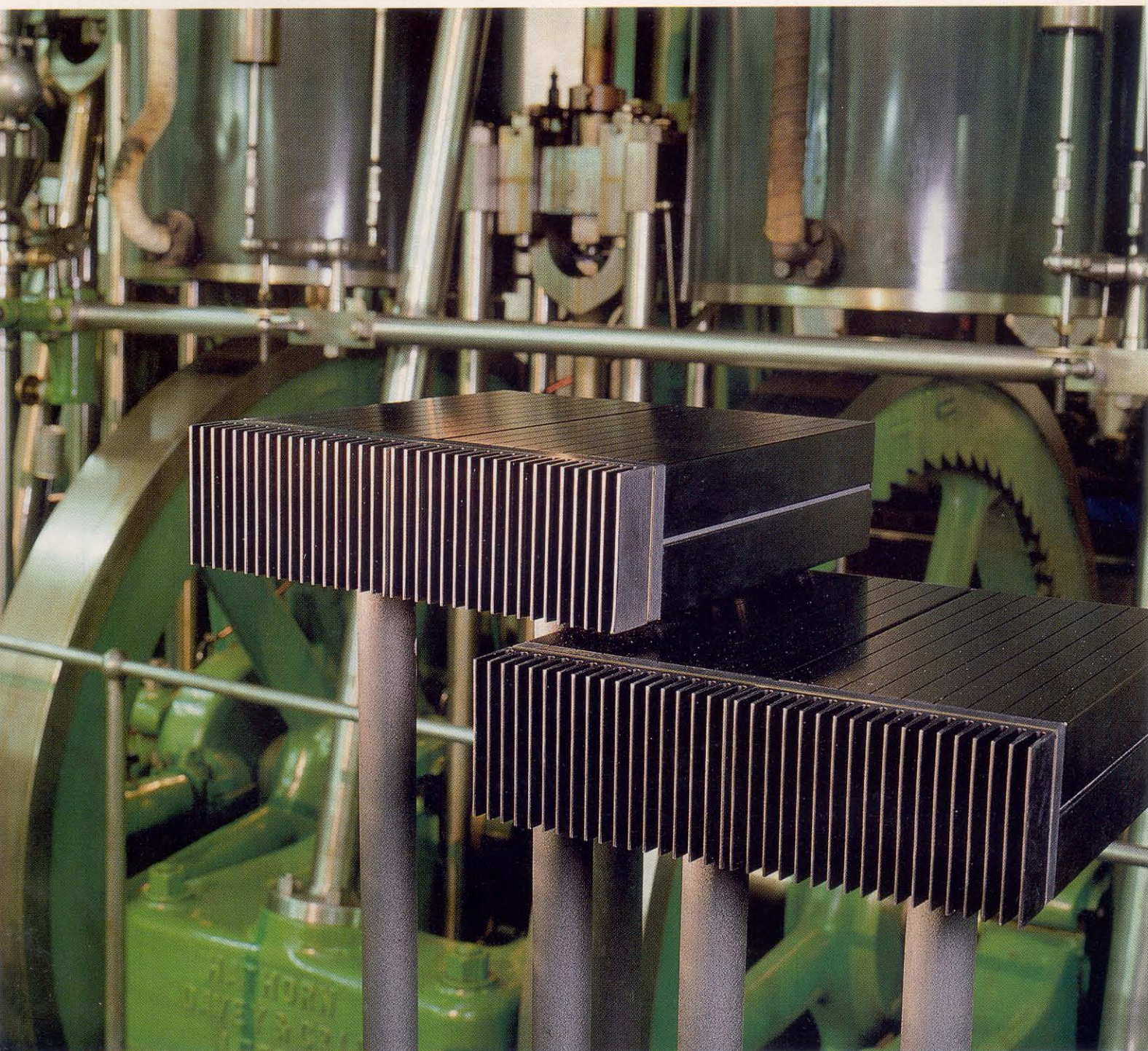
It is the Roksan that produced the ideal compromise in this region by displaying qualities from both amps – good timing, spaciousness, scale and tunefulness – with none of the attendant disadvantages.

The Roksan may reign supreme in the bass, but is no match for the Meridian or the Chronos at high frequencies. Not that the Chronos sounds like the Meridian. Ever the valve amp, the Chronos is all about light and shade, spaciousness and grace. But the Meridian is taut and fast and fluid. We're talking about small differences between products which are among the best you can buy: their characteristics cannot be measured against a yardstick scaled in degrees of goodness, but are matters of taste and suitability for individual systems.

With the Meridian there was no sense in



The 605 is Meridian's first mosfet design and the whole topology of the amplifier is regarded as innovative by the company



which performance tailed off at high levels. The sound maintained presence and clarity even at low volume. At medium listening levels, in some combinations, however, there was a trace of 'glare'. I missed the organic ebb and flow of musical argument and the unobtrusiveness of the Chronos, but the Meridian's superior timing and vitality was more than adequate compensation.

This is not a perfect amplifier, and it doesn't answer all needs in all situations. But in most systems it proved hard to fault. There was a trace of glare, and presentation that could be described as dry, yet these monoblocs are good enough to belong among the top two or three amplifiers made in the UK, and probably in the top 10 worldwide. Therefore, a price of £1850 is entirely realistic.

Alvin Gold

Second Opinion

If you think there's not much difference between amplifiers, try switching from Audio Innovations Second Audio valve amplifiers to these Meridian 605 monoblocks. It's not a case of viewing the world through differently coloured spectacles, more one of imagining alternative worlds.

To put it another way, the Second Audios and 605s are, to music, what the flamboyant Gary Kasparov and the cool, calculating Anatoly Karpov are to chess. Both are capable of getting results but anyone with the remotest feel for the game knows whose style he likes and whose he really hates.

I'm using the Second Audios and had to steel myself to switch to such a diametrically opposite type of amplifier as the 605. Where the Second Audios have body, weight, tangibility and sheer blood and guts, the 605s have poise, space, atmosphere and wide bandwidth.

Let's put some flesh on the bare bones of these generalities with some examples of how the 605s fitted into my system, comprising Snell Type J II loudspeakers, ART speaker cable, Audio Note Silver interconnect and Meridian 206B CD player.

My first reaction was one of surprise at the sheer volume level at which the power amplifiers were comfortable playing. It made a Mozart Violin Sonata recording project like a real performance with a true sense of bow on gut, the nuances of sound easily,

almost too easily, audible. The Meridian was the very essence of squeaky clean hi-fi.

Amplifiers tend to fall neatly into two categories: those that are analytical to the point of tearing recordings apart and those that focus attention on the heart and soul of the music.

It didn't take long to find that the 605 is strong on analysis and much less of a 'let your hair down and boogie' amplifier. It let you know all about analogue master tape hiss, bass compression, scrawny or fizzy treble and classically poor digital recordings such as the recent sanitised to death Joni Mitchell releases.

I found it really difficult to get stuck into John Schofield's easygoing, well recorded guitar/sax/small jazz ensemble, the amp emphasising the sting and bitterness of the percussion without giving the body and focus, or the sheer impact and rhythmic precision of the outfit.

The 605 has a standard unbalanced input circuit and an XLR balanced input which is recommended for better sound



Similarly fifties jazz such as Art Pepper's elusive *Modern Art*, for all its technical flaws, can provide a vibrant and satisfying experience. Not so with the 605s which simply made the bass sound tubby and disregarded the feeling of life and spontaneity in the two track recording.

Where I found myself pondering long and hard over the performance of the 605 was in listening to better recorded twentieth century classical orchestral works. The way the amps handled Rachmaninov's *The Bells* was

in many respects impressive. There was power and attack, remarkable inner detailing from the choral parts, soloists stood out with exceptional poise and precise localisation, but ultimately the sound lacked the magical bloom and warmth that I know to be this Decca recording's signature. In not capturing this quality, and by providing a stark presentation the 605 painted a familiar picture: on one hand it had great incisiveness; on the other it was slightly standoffish and musically uncommunicative.

From 205s to 605s

The internal topology of this amplifier is new – and something of an experimental departure for us, Bob Stuart, designer of the 605, told me during the preparation of this review. The 605 is a return to the kind of circuit he designed for the Lecson, for those who remember those beautiful but unreliable cylindrical amplifiers.

All the power modules in Meridian's active loudspeakers have been based on refinements of the generic design first used in the 205, which has been around for almost a decade. That was a bipolar design, with a non-switching (pseudo Class A) output with a very low (3mA) standing current. The 605 by contrast is Meridian's first mosfet design, with a standing current in the 200mA region, though it still runs fairly cool due to the large area heat

sinks. At around 30dB overall, the 605 also has much lower feedback levels.

Another departure is the use of a massive 470VA transformer feeding a comparatively tiny 4700mF reservoir capacitors, which makes the amplifier quick, and also reduces noise since charging times are much reduced.

Reliability has been a primary design goal. Although mosfets are inherently proof against thermal runaway they can still blow up when presented with certain types of reactive load.. No attempt has been made to maximise power output for the devices employed. Although the 8ohm power rating of 150watts is respectable enough, a current sensor restricts output to 12 amps, even on short term peaks, and the 605 is not explicitly designated as suitable for any class of load.

There are two inputs. One is a standard (unbalanced) circuit but with an unusually high sensitivity and input impedance (47k), which means that it can be driven successfully by passive preamplifiers/volume controls. The other is an XLR's based balanced input, which could not be used on this test for lack of suitable partnering equipment. Balanced operation provides a clear sound, according to Bob Stuart, and is the preferred method of use.

The 605 is dc coupled to its load, and incorporates a dc monitor which switches the amplifier off in the event of an internal fault, or if dc is applied to the input. Thermal protection is also fitted.

The amp uses high grade components, including Solon polypropylene capacitors, and van den Hul signal wiring. It is mounted in two screened boxes bolted together, with a black finish and a gold coloured trim line.

The 605s proved to be a mite disappointing – I really missed the sense of the musical event gelling

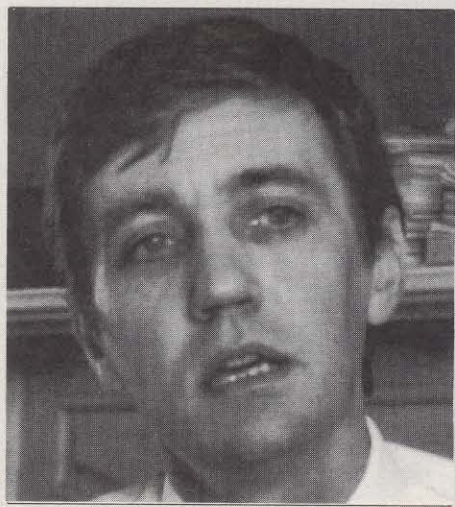
Often with rock and jazz the bass from the 605 seemed detached and slightly ponderous as if it was a fraction behind the beat it was aiming for. This was at odds with the amp's very crisp, finely etched detailing of instruments like the piano, saxophone, flute and violin.

The sheer delicacy and meticulousness of these sounds, like the breathy fluttering quality of the flute in Panufnik's *Homage to Chopin* or the shimmering beauty of the instrumentation in his Violin Concerto were really very special.

As a whole the 605s proved a mite disappointing, for the simple reason that the things it did well were those I happen to value lower than those it did less impressively. Stereo perspectives were especially good. What I missed was any real sense of the musical event actually gelling.

Jonathan Kettle

■ **Right of Reply:** see page 87



Meridian 605

Page 38

We are delighted that you found so much to please you in reviewing our 605 power amplifier.

Voting it among the 10 best throughout the world we have no problem with. You didn't actually say which would come out top...

Of course one's opinion of a power amplifier like this will depend quite a bit on the speakers and preamp used in the system. The 605 has two

Right of Reply

matching 600-series preamps, the 603 and the imminent 601. We hope that you will soon find a chance to try out the 605 in a complete Meridian system – they you really might vote it number one.

Bob Stuart

Boothroyd Stuart/Meridian

☎ (0480) 52144