



If it's a self-contained digital system of devastatingly high resolution you want, then Meridian's 808.2i/DSP7200 disc player/digital active speaker combo is in a gang of one, says Noel Keywood...

Lone Star

My system was entertaining even before it was unpacked. I puzzled over the natty packaging, a change from the usual crates we encounter, and was entertained by its novelty. Once Meridian's DSP7200 powered loudspeakers had been carefully extracted, I wondered why there were no signal input sockets, nor any power sockets. They must use a wireless link, I thought, and perhaps there's a mouse on a treadmill inside to generate power? So where does the cheese go then? The handbook, best consulted in times like this, said virtually nothing. It makes blandishments like, "if the display is not lit check AC power is connected". Oh, cheers, thanks. In my case it wasn't because there was no power socket - or not one I could see!

Meridian have their own way of doing things, which is one reason why this system is so different from anything else. The other is that the loudspeakers are 'active', meaning they have power amplifiers onboard, and digital signal processing is included, hence the DSP acronym. And it gets worse, my CD player was also a preamp! Before I confuse you any further let me explain...

Nowadays most sources are digital, and Meridian firmly believe in keeping it that way until the last moment, until the sound pops out of the loudspeaker. So the 808.2i

CD player feeds its signal to the loudspeakers in digital form through a single Ethernet cable that offers a balanced digital link, Meridian told me. Only one cable is needed between CD player and one loudspeaker. It goes to the Master (in my case, Left channel), then out and onward to the other, the Slave on the Right channel.

The missing input sockets were found by removing a cover held by Torx screws Meridian expect the system to be installed by a dealer that has received training by them. So he won't be puzzled like I was. Heavens, I couldn't even find the valves!

So the amplifiers are in the loudspeakers, but they are the last bit of the signal chain. The digital signal from the CD player is processed in the loudspeaker (equalisation, etc.) and then split into three frequency bands, one for each loudspeaker drive unit. Each is then converted to analogue and sent through a 100 Watt power amplifier - there are four per loudspeaker - coupled directly to its drive unit with no intervening crossover network. The benefit of keeping the signal digital is to avoid degradation by cables, connectors and intervening electronics. It also allows digital signal processing to be used to split the signal between the drive units in the loudspeaker, as well as effect tonal compensation, room boundary compensation, axis skewing and other tweaks.

Each loudspeaker has two 8in bass units, a 6in cone midrange unit and a 'composite' metal dome treble unit, sitting in a small depression that acts as a short high frequency horn. So the DSP7200 is a world apart from other active loudspeakers. And all this technology is controlled by a battery powered remote control unit.

The DSP7200 needs either a Meridian digital preamplifier, or in my case, the new 808.2i CD player with preamplifier facilities on board. This is a sophisticated new player that upsamples 44.1/16bit CD data to 176.4/24bit with 48bit internal precision, Meridian say. In conjunction with Apodizing Filters that preserve time domain pulse shape. The new 808.2i is a substantial piece of digital engineering. Being a preamplifier too, it has an analogue-to-digital convertor on board so you can feed in both LP from an external phono stage and VHF/FM radio if you so wish.

SOUND QUALITY

The sound of this combo is quite unlike that of most other systems. After sixty hours of gruelling run-in, it still sounded unusually dry and tight, but that's the nature of the beast, as I will explain. One reason is that the amplifiers exert so much control over the cones a fierce sense of grip permeates, but at the same time this does well reveal inter-transient details, so the constant beat of a kick drum doesn't overwhelm all

else around it, revealing a wealth of activity in a performance. Cue Steve Earle, chiming steel string guitars, solid kick drum and 'Even When I'm Blue' from Copperhead Road. With everyone out of the office building for the night I could wick the 7200s and they almost literally lifted off, delivering a wall of sound that, remaining clean, could be enjoyed loud. With pinpoint stereo imaging Steve Earle with his rich Southern drawl was as large as life - or perhaps even a little larger! - centre stage, whilst the drum kit shook our walls and guitars peeled like church bells.

I don't normally listen loud but the DSP7200s thrived under these circumstances and proved more adept at delivering high volume than anything except much larger Tannoy Yorkminsters. It was an exciting performance, tightly ordered and highly controlled to give a breath-taking sense of high fidelity. Opening kick drum of the following track, 'You Belong to Me', nearly blew me over the back of the settee; it was awesome. The DSP7200s were running in a 28ft square room and they needed all of this space I felt, plus a shortage of neighbours!

In spite of heavy running in I was happiest with the sound smoothed out a tad, with treble at -1.5 (-0.75dB) and bass at +2 (+1dB) to add warmth and body. In spite of what you might imagine the DSP7200s did not sound bass-heavy like this; I arrived at the setting to better hear the body of Nigel Kennedy's violin as well as soften string tone a tad (I suspect poor recording quality). Then they came alive at higher volumes when handling large orchestras, reminding me of the grand scale achieved by Yorkminsters. So in effect the DSP7200s are a medium size loudspeaker with the sound of a really big one.

Measurement showed output rolls down below 250Hz and it is this that makes the DSP7200s sound dry in their delivery, but very low frequencies extend down to 20Hz, giving a feeling of solid, deep bass. From the midrange up to 20kHz the DSP7200s measured unusually flat and smooth, on and off axis, showing just how good Meridian's own drive units are. Although high frequencies sound quite obvious from the DSP7200s, giving a strong presence to cymbals for example in Joan Armtrading's Down to Zero, the speakers actually measure perfectly flat. But the DSP7200s are like this: sounds can really jump out suddenly, such as the short sharp entry of strings in Jupiter, from Holst's Planets; they all but rushed at me then were

gone. Impressive stuff.

This unusually projective nature wasn't kind to poor recordings though, nor even average ones. They are revealing loudspeakers more than kind ones and this means revealing the harshness in many recordings. Ally this to a dry lower midrange that lessened the body of kettle drum and piano and you have a loudspeaker that comes across as taut and revealing but cool and analytical too.

The DSP7200s go very low and I have never seen our room's modal peak at 24Hz so excited when making measurements. This is why the Meridians seem to have seismic bass: it's because they do! Magic bullets have yet to be found in loudspeaker design and whilst the DSP7200s run deep and sound superbly tight, there is a little boomph to their bass; limited cabinet volume impacts bass quality. All the same, you'll not hear a performance like this from a passive loudspeaker, nor the sheer technical accuracy of the midband and treble either as few loudspeakers are so totally accurate across the high frequency range.

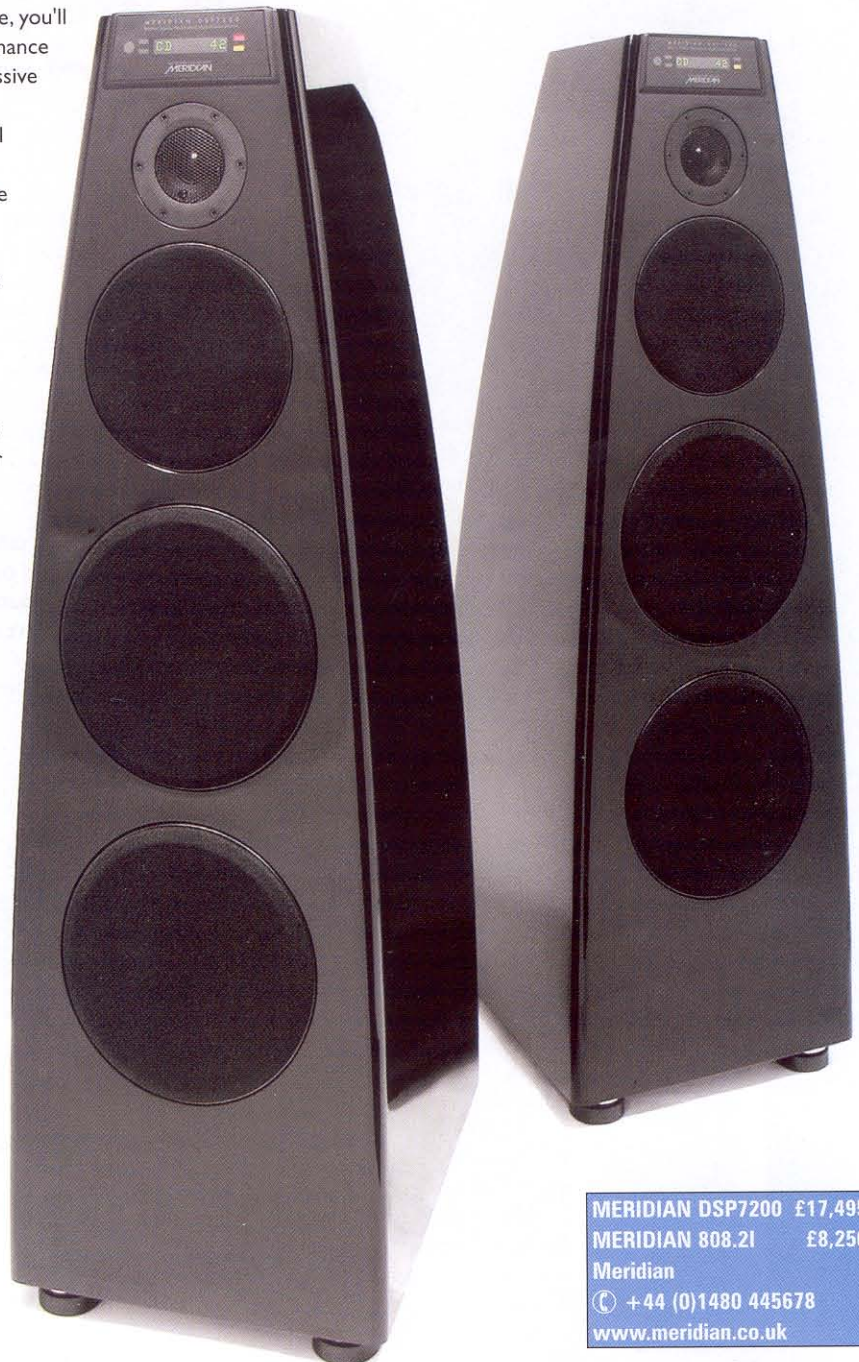
I was made very aware of this when I span a test CD from Revolver containing demo tracks. They are all top flight recordings and the DSP7200s lapped it all up and really shone: I sat there in awe of their rigour and control. Other loudspeakers could not track the dynamic shifts so effectively, nor hold onto a rhythm with such apparent grip by eliminating time domain equivocation and blur.

That's what you get from this super hi-tech combo: fantastic grip and insight, as well as awesome

DP SAYS:

There's nothing like a Meridian active system, but that doesn't mean it is for everyone. First, being a bespoke one-make system, it's lovely to use, the supplied system remote (if that's not too humble a term) being one of the best in the business. It's also highly accessible too - there's no faffing around with acres of cables and mains socketry. Once fully run in - and this takes a long time - you're greeted with a stark, spry sound with masses of detail. With great recordings like Donald Fagin's 'The Nightfly', the system is majestic; massively powerful and propulsive yet insightful and subtle too. But it doesn't forgive poor recordings and you find yourself listening to certain types of music above others. In some ways this was the most capable system; crank it up with a great disc and it's a showstopper. Others however will want the easier, more forgiving sound of Channa's vinyl and valve system, instead...

bass power with seismic subsonics. In a nutshell then Meridian's latest components offer a spectacularly modern sound from spectacularly modern technology.



MERIDIAN DSP7200 £17,495
 MERIDIAN 808.2I £8,250
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