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Harmony in G

Meridian's new G Series dispels all myths about high-end complication. by Chris Lewis

The G98 (top) is a transport, meaning it pulls a signal off the disc—be it a DVD-Audio, DVD-Video, or CD—and sends it, unprocessed, to a controller like the excellent new G68 (bottom).

Even people who admittedly know next to nothing about high-end audio always seem to know two things about it: It's expensive, and it's complicated. The expensive part can be tricky to dispute, as the high-end designation really refers more to price than it does performance (great sound isn't exclusive to the high end, and not all high-end equipment is up to par sonically). Thus, high-end does become a self-fulfilling prophecy when it comes to the dollars, pounds, etc. Expensive is a relative term, however; don't believe anyone who says that nothing expensive can be a good value.

As for the complicated part, that's getting easier to dispute with each passing year, especially because of products like Meridian's new, highly user-friendly G Series components. It's only fitting that Meridian finally makes their way into the Hook Me Up column, which is dedicated to integration, connections, and all other things system-oriented. When it comes to creating systems—truly integrated systems from source to speakers—no one on the planet is better at it than Meridian.

In terms of scale, the G Series may be Meridian's most ambitious product launch in recent memory. It includes four source units, three power amps, two preamps, a surround processor, and even a receiver (yes, a Meridian receiver). As we've come to expect from Meridian, these models are highly configurable in terms of options. They also have a considerable degree of futureproofing, both through downloadable software updates and a modular hardware design that offers major flexibility with configurable inputs/outputs and card-based updates.

New control systems are also aboard the G Series components, including a sleek new remote control unit (dubbed the MSR+) that's about as fully featured a remote as you'll find anywhere. It's intuitive, comprehensive, and backlit. Also new is a unique soft-key control system that makes front-panel operation about as easy as it can be. Few buttons on the G Series front panels have locked functions. Users can cycle through an array of controls using the same relatively small set of buttons, guided by a wizard function (if need be). It's simple, quick, and highly effective.

We introduced ourselves to the G Series with a slick, fully integrated system consisting of the G98 DVD transport, G68 surround processor/tuner, and five of Meridian's DSP5000 active digital speakers. The system's in-room footprint is small by any standard, let alone for one this advanced that offers this degree of performance. While the connections between the various components are unique in some

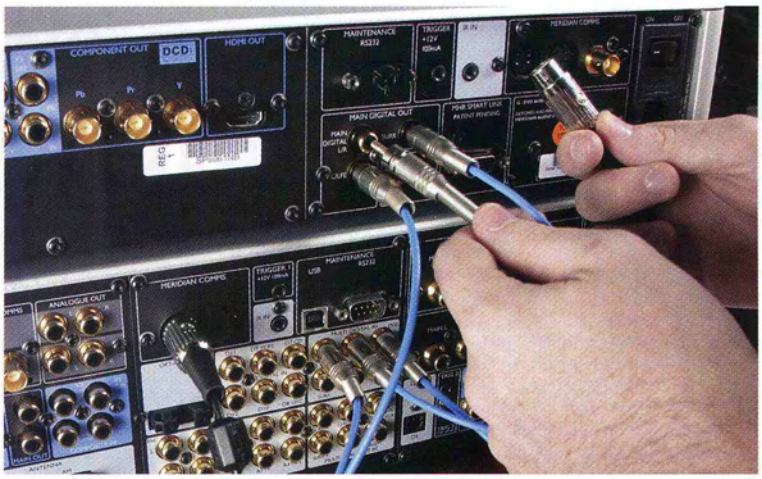
In addition to perks like an HDMI output on the G98 (top) and digital speaker outputs on the G68 (bottom), Meridian includes unique connections like the MHR SmartLink and Meridian Comms ports to make it even easier to set up and integrate the gear.

cases and uncommon in others, they are simple enough to understand and surprisingly minimalist, given the capability they provide. More on that soon.

The Guts

As the name suggests, the G98 DVD-Audio transport wastes no internal space with processors. It simply pulls the signal off the disc and passes it along to the processor. If that processor is a Meridian, it passes the signal via the unique, highly impressive MHR SmartLink digital transfer system (see sidebar). Like all Meridian products, though, it's fully functional with out-of-the-family equipment, too. Two versions are available; ours was the G98DH ($5,995), which adds some extra digital interfacing. Both versions of the G98 incorporate Faroudja's highly regarded DCDi processing/scaling technology, highly tweaked by Meridian, which can benefit video signals routed through the G98 via three S-video, two composite, or a component video input. Outputs of each variety are included, along with an HDMI output that gives the unit more video flexibility (including high-definition) than almost any piece I know of. The HDMI output can also carry audio signals, including high-resolution varieties.

The G98's digital audio outputs include three digital coaxial

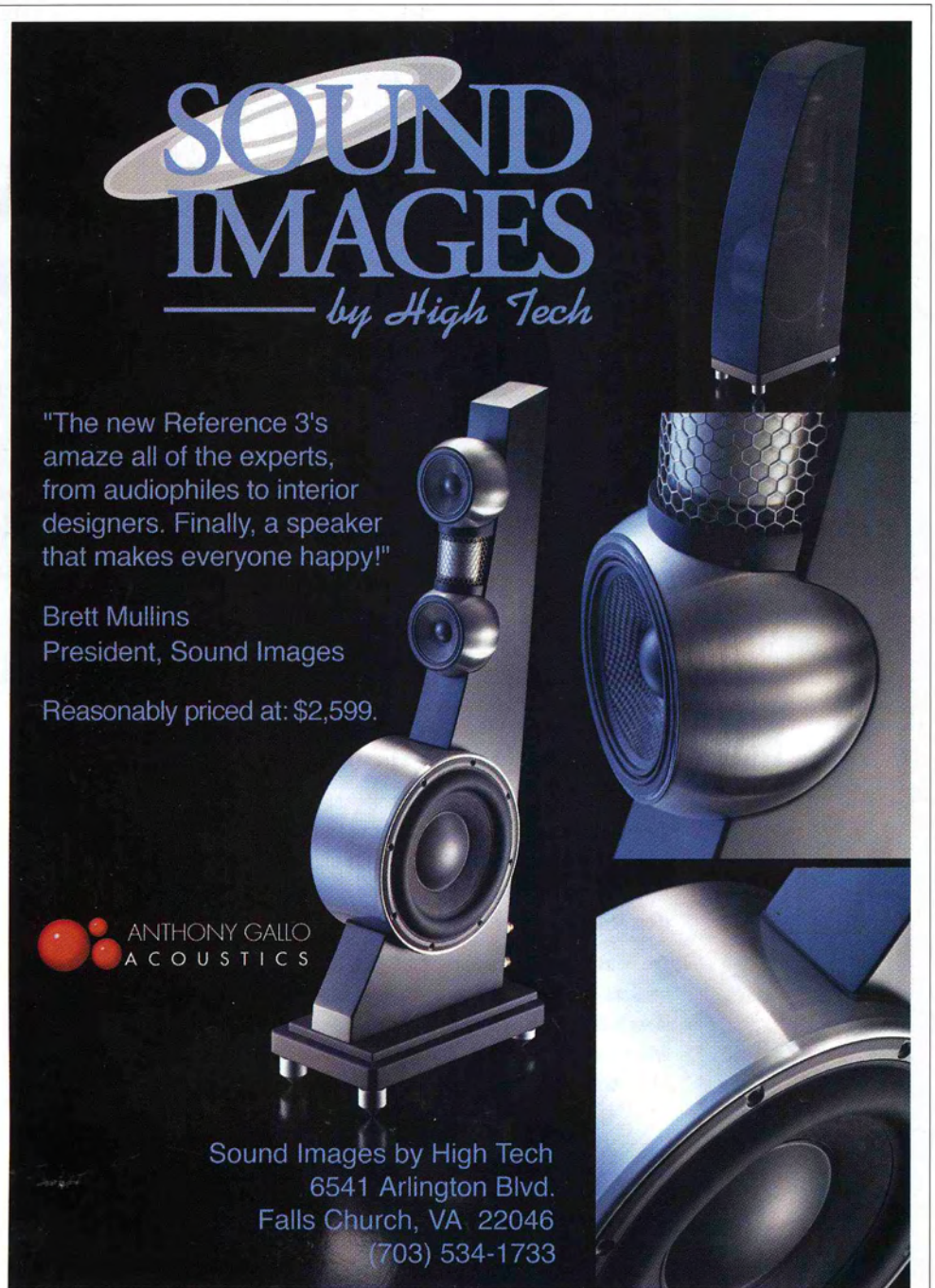


The MHR SmartLink consists of three coaxial digital audio connectors that allow you to transfer high-resolution, multichannel signals in the digital domain. The Meridian Comms DIN connection lets your Meridian components talk to each other.

connections for SmartLink, plus an auxiliary coaxial digital output. RS-232, a 12-volt trigger, and DIN ports for the impressive Meridian Comms system (see sidebar) round out the back panel.

The G98 will handle virtually any format on a 5-inch disc except SACD, and it can pass high-resolution, multichannel DVD-Audio signals to a Meridian processor digitally through SmartLink. Meridian gave extensive attention to keeping the digital signals pristine, including using a triple-buffering system to minimize jitter (a four-letter word in Meridian's mind).

When it comes to capabilities and connections, the G68 surround processor/tuner could fill several pages on its own. As we have no such luxury here, we'll stick to the highlights and direct you to Meridian's Website (*www.meridian-audio.com*) for more details. The G68 obviously participates in the MHR SmartLink process and reaps all of its benefits. Processing options include all of the latest Dolby (including Pro Logic IIx) and DTS modes, THX Ultra 2 and Surround EX, and both Ambisonics and Trifield formats. The G68 can also upsample film soundtracks to 24-bit/96-kilohertz—and rather effectively at that. Crunching the numbers are five Motorola 56367s running at 150 megahertz, for a whopping 750 million instructions per second. Processing is done at high sample rates with 48-bit precision. You can tweak all of that processing, and everything else about the G68, using the front panel, remote, or an included Windows-based configuration system that leaves no stone unturned. I can't do it justice here; trust me, it's simple and intuitive to use, yet it will make just about any adjustment you can



The Value of Connections

Much of what makes Meridian components function so well together as a fully integrated system are their connections, which are usually uncommon, occasionally unique, and always impressive. They include:

MHR SmartLink

MHR's headliner has always been its ability to pass high-resolution, multichannel audio signals digitally from source to processor, and it did so long before anyone else was doing it. It carries all forms of PCM-based signals, along with data that tells the processor exactly what's coming in so that it automatically selects an appropriate DSP mode and a wide range of corresponding parameters (including appropriate speaker settings) based either on factory presets or values you assign. MHR also helps further reduce jitter by not embedding the digital clock into the signal, as coax and optical digital links do. This adds a cyclic pattern to the signal, which can produce jitter. MHR's encryption scrambles the data and clock, to be reassembled at the other end, so that these cyclic problems disappear. The MHR signal is carried via three digital coaxial connections in the G Series, but a patent-pending, one-cable link that terminates in a 15-pin jack is coming.

Meridian Comms

This control connection allows any integrated component to talk to any other in the system, including relaying user commands. The link terminates in a DIN connector and is available on all Meridian products.

S/PDIF Link from Processor to Speakers

Meridian's speakers are not only active (i.e., they house their own amplifiers; see the February 2004 installment of this column for more on the benefits of this approach), but they also house their own digital-to-analog converters, DSP, and tone and volume controls, so they can receive audio signals digitally. This provides multiple advantages, including a guarantee that the digital signal remains in that domain from disc to speakers, with no conversion whatsoever until the end. It also makes the signal more immune to electromagnetic interference, which is especially important with the long cable runs often needed to reach all of your speakers.

think of, not to mention a few you never did.

As if all that weren't enough, the G68 also has an outstanding automatic room-correction system, which uses a microphone to detect response anomalies and then counteracts them with up to 60 filters. You can access the filters graphically or numerically, and they're highly adjustable and flexible. There's also an extensive bass-management system for up to three subs. The AM/FM tuner gets its own 24/96 analog-to-digital stage and does much to improve the quality of both AM and FM signals. The G68 supports two additional zones, with discrete source and recording capability.

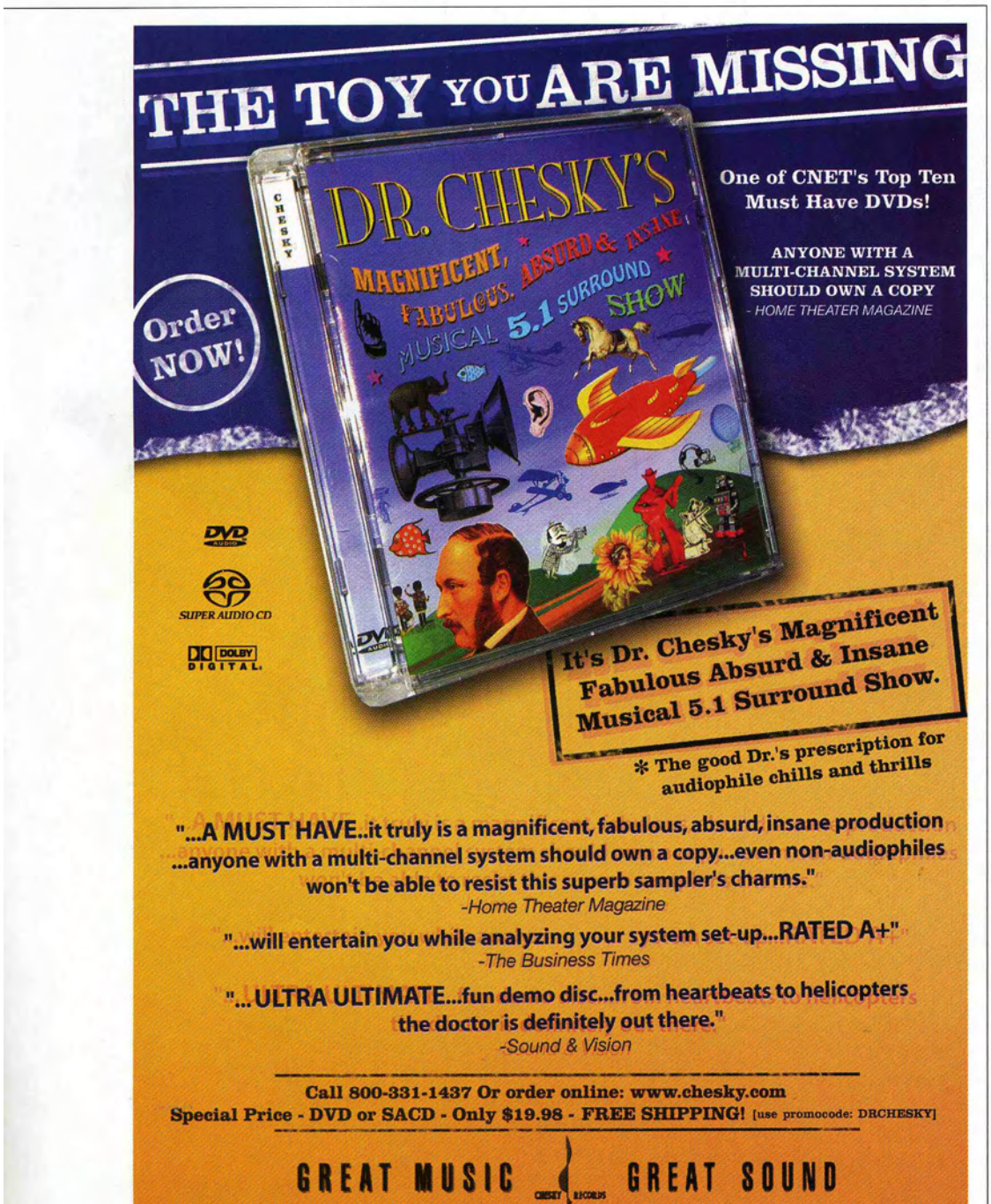
The G Series components come with a new remote control unit called the MSR+—a fully featured, backlit, intuitive device.

The G68 will play nice with outsiders, including amplifiers and passive speakers. Our version was the G68ADV ($8,995, one of four available configurations), which adds a useful complement of analog audio and video connections, although it lacks balanced jacks (which we didn't need, since we used active, digital speakers). It has two MHR multichannel digital inputs, 11 digital audio inputs (six coax, five optical), two outputs (coax), 10 channels of digital output to Meridian speakers, five analog audio stereo inputs and two outputs, and a 5.1-channel analog input and output. Video gets three high-bandwidth component inputs and an output, plus four S-video and composite inputs with four outputs of each type (including one of each for zones two and three). There are also RS-232 and USB ports, three 12-volt triggers, IR input, and three Meridian Comms ports.

It sounds daunting on paper, but most G Series configurations are relatively simple, as ours was. We ran three digital coax MHR links between the G98 and G68, along with a Meridian Comms connection and an optional video link. We then ran the Meridian Comms links and digital audio signal paths (coax again) to the speakers, but only three of each are needed from the G68, as each speaker pair includes a master and slave. Communication and audio signals are piggybacked from master to slave, significantly cutting down on wiring and back-panel clutter.

The Glory

Unique connections and endless capabilities are impressive, but what matters most is the end result—which is absolutely top-shelf with the G Series components. My first performance question was quickly answered: Do these new components have that same masterful Meridian sound I've come to know from the 800 and 500 Series? Not in the sense of coloration or even character, as we don't want too much character out of our audio gear, especially electronics. We want an open window to the source, and Meridian components have consistently set themselves apart by the depth to which



Chris was highly impressed with everything the G98 and G68 offered.

they dig into music and movie material—call it an open window in 3-D. Like its predecessors, the G98 and G68 conspired to unveil detail you rarely hear, if at all, from other components, regardless of the cost or form. Even with 16/44.1 stereo material, this system offered soundstage depth and transparency that is virtually unmatched.

The stage presence of high-resolution material was that much more remarkable. I've run Bucky Pizzarelli's sweet-sounding *Swing Live* DVD-Audio (Chesky) through everything I've reviewed since it came out, and I can easily say that I heard things I haven't heard since reviewing the Meridian 598 and 568.2 two years ago. The clarinet's full body, the bass drum's big, round kicks, and even the sounds of the audience were so accurately reproduced that, although I hate to resort to cliché, I truly felt like I was in the club that night when I closed my eyes. This disc always sounds good, but the G98 and G68, with significant contribution from the DSP5000 speakers, clearly brought it to another level.

For movie lovers, the experience will hardly be less profound. Even without the upconversion, I heard nuance and detail that I haven't heard before. By the time the G68 is done converting soundtracks to 24/96, you'll almost certainly hear movies in a way you haven't before, short of other Meridian components. I ran through my favorite battle scenes, from *Saving Private Ryan*'s Omaha Beach scene to *Glory*'s Sharpsburg scene to the Air Cav assault (you know, the Wagner scene) in *Apocalypse Now*. I can say without hyperbole that goosebumps were the norm. Again I found myself closing my eyes and placing myself, without any effort necessary, in the middle of these hells on earth. The Omaha Beach scene was particularly hair-raising, as the hissing of bullets that dominate this scene had never seemed so immediate, accurate, and deadly.

When the dust cleared, I was left with the simple impression that I have never reviewed a system that is this fully featured, easy to operate, room friendly, and flexible—and still sounded this good. I must emphasize how complete this system is, in every sense of the word, including a harmony between its various parts that's rarely matched. At this price, it's obviously not for everyone, but this system delivers everything you could ask for outside of a top-shelf audio system—headlined by performance with music and movies that will rarely be topped—right down to user-friendliness, simplicity, and flexibility. Whether you know anything about high-end audio or not, that's a résumé you can appreciate.