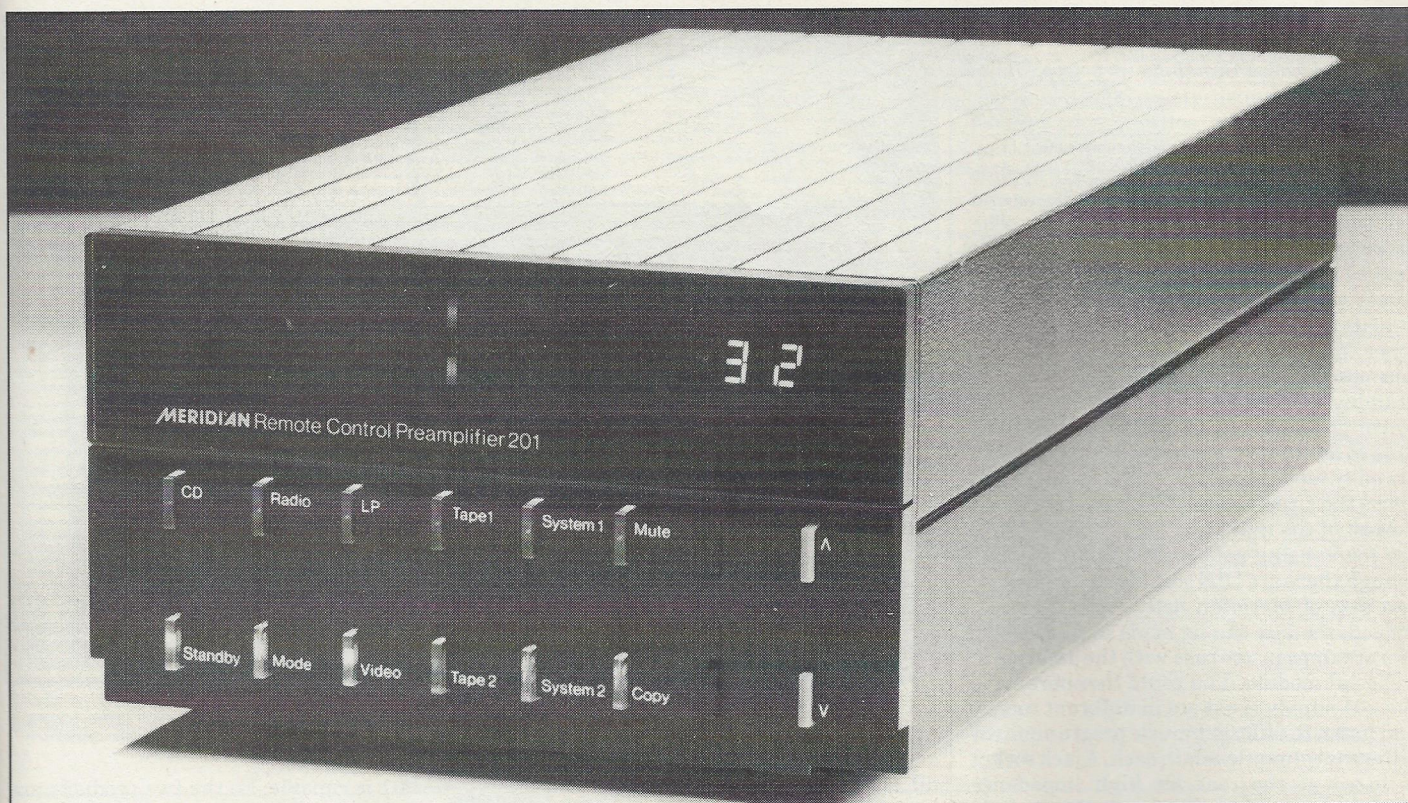




MERIDIAN 201

Second arrival in Meridian's new 200 series is the 201 preamp. It combines flexibility, good looks and fine sound with optional remote control. **JIMMY HUGHES**

AFTER THE LIMITED SUCCESS OF THEIR modular range of hi-fi, Meridian clearly saw the need to come up with a fresh range of equipment to meet more closely the wants and needs of today's market. The first product in the new range was the 207 CD player, ironically perhaps the one item that should establish a market position independently of the other products in the range. I reviewed the 207 in the January issue and expressed certain reservations about its sound — reservations that time has not altered, incidentally, though essentially the 207 remains a good player. Because of Meridian's previous 'audiophile' MCD Compact Disc players, the 207 is likely to appeal to discriminating users looking for a superior CD player, whether or not they own other Meridian items.

The 201 remote control preamp is likewise a separates unit that can be purchased and used independently of other Meridian items. Here, however, the likelihood is that a potential purchaser will want to make the 201 part of an all-Meridian system — though I do emphasise that the preamp can be used successfully with other items. The reason lies in the 201's remote control facilities and the way it is designed to interface with the

other Meridian items (CD player, tuner, power amplifiers, active loudspeakers) that go to make up the complete 200 system. In much the same way that Bang and Olufsen products tend to be used together because of the way each item interfaces with others in the chain, the Meridian 201 will make its greatest impact as part of the corporate whole.

As a basic preamp the 201 offers a useful and varied range of inputs. It can accept a moving coil or magnetic cartridge (internally switched), tuner, video machine, CD player and two tape decks. Nominal input sensitivity on the line stages is 150mV, but all inputs including LP disc can be varied in sensitivity by plus or minus 12.5dB — that is to say, 25dB in total. This allows each input level to be adjusted so that volume levels remain consistent when switching between different sources. The 201 has an electronic volume control rather than a conventional rotary potentiometer, with 64 discrete 'steps' of 1.25dB from zero to maximum. A visual display gives a reading of the current volume setting, so you can see at a glance where you are.

Although some of its functions and remote facilities are a little bit involved, the 201 is

essentially a very easy and direct product to operate. I expressed reservations about the somewhat cumbersome way the CD player operated and bemoaned its lack of direct track access (though matters improve when you operate it from the remote control handset), but I feel no such doubts about the 201 which is a delight to use. As a person who generally doesn't like this kind of remote control product, I can truthfully say the 201 answers all my objections, mainly because you can always see exactly where you are at any given time. In general use the 201 is excellent.

Although the 201 has an outward air of simplicity, it does in fact offer a number of useful options that are not at first obvious. For example, you can choose to limit the maximum volume level of the unit, perhaps to prevent anyone turning it up too loud and causing speakers damage at a party. A Mute button is provided too, which immediately cuts the signal when pressed. You can, however, choose that the volume level is only reduced by the mute switch rather than have it cut the signal altogether. When first switched on the 201 sets itself to volume level '32', a relatively low, safe setting. But this too can be altered at will. To improve

sound quality, tape copying outputs are disconnected during normal use.

Many of these functions (pre-set volume level, input sensitivities, muting level, maximum volume setting etc) can be memorised by the unit so that once set they remain in force. However, this only applies while the unit is plugged in to the mains and left switched on or in its Standby mode. The mains switch proper is on the rear of the unit next to the 3-pin IEC socket that takes the power cord, and if the unit is switched off here its memory settings will be erased. The other good reason for leaving the 201 permanently plugged in and switched to Standby is that the unit will not need to warm-up — though I felt it took very little time to do so even when used from cold. The Standby mode shuts the unit down but still keeps the circuits powered.

Most of the input and output connections are made using gold-plated phono sockets, though there are DIN sockets too for feeding two sets of Meridian active loudspeakers. Indeed, the 201 can be made to function as two preamps in one case with the addition of a special module. You could therefore have the 201 supply speakers in different rooms, and listen to different music programmes at different volume levels in each. A jack socket is fitted at the rear for high impedance headphones, and two further multi-pin DIN sockets come into use when you connect up the Meridian 204 tuner and/or 207 CD player. Since the latter has an electronic volume control itself, this is effectively disabled when it is connected to the 201.

Internally, the 201 is neatly built, the large amount of circuitry having been packed economically into the space available. The previous modular system had a slightly cheap, plasticky sort of feel, and as a result was not quite as impressive in the flesh as it was in pictures. No such worries with the new 200 series, which looks and feels very classy indeed. I especially like the use of glass rather than Perspex for the transparent upper front panel. Glass is much easier to keep clean, won't easily scratch and is much less inclined to attract dust through static charges. The 201 feels nice and heavy, and despite its elegance and attractiveness has a very solid chunkiness. One minor complaint would be the tiny size of the turntable grounding screw which is really too small to take a decent sized tag without pushing it aside as it is tightened up.

Had you asked me for a candid expectation of the 201's sonic performance before I heard it, I doubt I'd have been that optimistic. Happily this expectation proved entirely groundless, and any misgivings I harboured to begin with quickly evaporated once I started to listen to the unit. There are certain hi-fi products you can just listen to and accept in a kind of non-critical, appreciative manner, despite the fact that the item in question may not actually be superlative in an absolute sense. In a nutshell that more or less sums up my reaction to the 201. I liked it from the outset, and enjoyed listening to it on its own terms, without wanting or needing to find out how it compared.

I was agreeably surprised at its realistic selling price too, though remote control is extra. Had I been told the preamp retailed at £595 or even £695 I would not have been at



Flexibility is the keynote, with six inputs and the ability to feed two systems

all surprised. At £495 it really is rather attractively priced given everything you get. For many the remote facilities and other extras, not to mention the attractive appearance, will be what sells the 201. Although a 'serious' audio product in its own right, many will be attracted to this unit, and indeed the whole system 200, for reasons other than sound quality. But the 201 passes muster on its sonic performance alone.

On both LP and CD sources it proved capable of clean, articulate, detailed sound with what I can only describe as an attractive and honest quality of presentation. In demanding audiophile terms it might be faulted for a lack of genuine subtlety and finesse, but these qualities aren't really missed in the long-term. Indeed, I found myself thinking that the 201's sound would probably be exactly what a great number of musically-orientated but non-specialist listeners are likely to regard as the authentic sound of top-class hi-fi. The 201 impresses by virtue of its sharpness and detail while at the same time sounding tidy and controlled without obvious flaws or weaknesses to draw attention away from the music. The result is a sound that is essentially lucid and uncomplicated with lots of detail and presence, while at the same time retaining an innate pleasantness that is attractive and involving.

I felt this way about the 201 both on LP and CD — both sounded very good. There is perhaps a tendency for the 201 to sound rather the same from one recording to the next, in that you do not hear the degree of subtlety that an expensive specialist preamp like the DNM can produce. Such detail as the 201 produces tends to be explicit rather than implicit, and although the Meridian produces nice bright tonal colours that sound attractive, a more discerning ear will pick up lack of individuality and fine shading that better products can produce. Having said that, a DNM costs £1,800 and offers none of the remote facilities of which

the 201 is capable. So the two products are hardly comparable even if, essentially, they set out to do the same job.

So, a clear recommendation is due for the Meridian 201 preamp. Quite apart from suggesting its audition to those strongly attracted by its remote control facilities, I think it is worth hearing by those who simply want a capable and fairly comprehensive preamp costing less than £500. Those who like sophisticated hi-tech product will adore the 201 for its sheer class, yet even the more purist user like me will like it too because the technology hasn't been allowed to obscure the basic simplicity of the preamp's various functions. Although a thorough read of the 201's comprehensive instruction manual is advisable before installation, the unit is nonetheless sufficiently simple and straightforward to be used in its standard functions without the need for instruction.

How the 201 will interface with the other new Meridian products to form the complete system is something I cannot comment on at this juncture. The tuner should be available within a few weeks of this review being published. Nor have I got to grips with the optional plug-in module that allows the preamp to control two systems with complete independence. Clearly the whole concept is aimed at the individual who is attracted to Bang and Olufsen equipment because of its technical sophistication and chic styling. These new Meridian items are very much our home-grown equivalent, but don't let appearances delude you: the 201 at least is also a very fine performer.

*Boothroyd Stuart Meridian Ltd
13 Clifton Road Industrial Estate
Huntingdon, Cambs*

☎ (0480) 57339

*Price: £495 UK stockists: 50
Serial No: G100104*