



Meridian 206

MERIDIAN MAY BE ON THE BITSTREAM BANDWAGON, BUT IT HAS THE NEW 16-BIT 206 PLAYER, TOO. DAVID VIVIAN GRABS AN EARFUL OF REALITY

The notion of an expensive 'audiophile' CD player like the new £795 Meridian 206 seems faintly absurd in the light of Philips' original dictum for the silver disc medium: 'Pure and perfect sound forever'. How can you improve perfection? Tricky one, that, and something which has perhaps prevented the Dutch giant from serving up something a little tweaky itself. There's Marantz to dabble with the digital plumbing for the corporate good, of course, and numerous other outfits who've made a living — Boothroyd Stuart Meridian notably — by squeezing every last ounce of performance from Philips' proprietary chipsets for their own machines.

The so-called 'audiophile' players have found their toughest competition coming not from other audiophile players but middle-market and, sometimes, budget hardware enjoying the fruits of a rapidly evolving technology. Remember the original Cambridge CD1 — the £1500 two-box masterpiece from designer Stan Curtis which, for about a year, was incontrovertibly the finest-sounding CD player anyone had ever heard? The cream of today's £250-300 players would see it off. That's how much CD sound has improved. And now, of course, Bit Stream is poised to hike standards still higher. As last month's CD player comparison clearly signalled, Philips has muscled its way to the front of the pack with its outstandingly musical £350 CD 840.

Meridian would be the first to admit that Bit Stream — at least, as represented by the Pulse Density Modulation 1-Bit 256 times oversampling technology — offers a very promising avenue of development. Indeed, its own

Bit Stream player, the 208, has just gone into production. But the company also argues that there's far more to making a good-sounding CD player than merely using the latest digital technology. And as one of the few UK manufacturers researching all aspects of CD player performance, Meridian should know. It's been mooted that as little as 30 per cent of ultimate sound quality is determined by the components that take care of the digital-to-analogue conversion. If you accept this line of thinking, it's reasonable to assume that the 16-Bit four times oversampling digital-to-analogue conversion used by the 206 reviewed here will remain a valid technology for a while yet. Certainly, there seems little danger of it disappearing overnight.

In essence, the 206 is a pared-down 207 without the integral pre-amp but benefiting from a still higher quality audio stage. The two-box configuration of the 207 is retained — left section for the drawer mechanism, right for the controls and display — but the two halves have been siamesed together to make a single unit, thus obviating the need for connecting cables and making transport an altogether easier affair. Absolute-phase invert, the error-correction tell-tale light and single track time-code (to indicate how long the track playing has to run) have been left off but remote operation with 10-key entry remains.

Styling is a particularly elegant evocation of the modular 'black box' school of design long favoured by Meridian. An easily-read pale green display shows either the track number, elapsed track time, elapsed disc time or disc time remaining. Two rows of transparent plastic buttons (back-lit as necessary to indicate the function in use) take up the rest of the right-box facia and, with the exception of the 0-9 entry key-pad, mimic those on the handset. Programming allows insertion of index points. ►

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The back panel incorporates the on-off switch, an IEC socket for the mains lead, a socket for the direct-coupled and fixed (nominal 2V) audio output, and sockets for the digital output — one coaxial and one optical. Finish and build quality appear to be first class.

And that's just on the outside. Meridian has always devoted plenty of energy to getting the physical aspects of its CD players right, and the 206 is as painstaking as you might expect here. The CDM-4 chassis is constructed from reinforced plastic beefed-up by a diecast metal top plate and de-coupled from the laser transport — with its Hall-effect drive-spindle motor — by a compliant three-point Sorbothane suspension system. Just as thorough is the design of the disc drawer, the front plate of which mates tightly with the casing lip to form an acoustically isolated enclosure for the disc when the drawer is shut.

All this, I have to say, inspires tremendous confidence and is entirely in keeping with the £800 price tag. But does the 206 have an £800 sound? The shortest way to find out, of course, would have been to compare the Meridian directly with the Bit Stream CD-840. Unfortunately, Philips couldn't deliver on this occasion but the 16-Bit Marantz CD-80 (£500) which acquitted itself so well against the 840 in last month's 'Battle of the Bits' was available, as was my resident 200-quid Sony CDP 770 (resident mostly because of its slightly soft and un-CD like sound).

Most listening took place with the players hooked up to a Naim Nait 2 amp and Linn Kan ('88 vintage) speakers coupled firmly to the floorboards via Kan II speakers. If this sounds like an odd choice for a CD front end, it is. Some CD players have sounded simply atrocious through this system, but I'm inclined to think that's their problem. The Nait and Kans are notoriously front-end fussy but that's only because they don't know what to do with a sloppy signal other than to reveal it for what it is.

First disc out of its case was jazz pianist David Benoit's latest offering on the GRP label *Waiting For Spring*. Since I'd nearly wrecked my back lifting the outrageously heavy and bulky Marantz onto the equipment stand, I decided to give it first crack. From the opening figures of Luther Hughes' fluid bass-work

on the title track it was obvious that the CD-80's delivery had tremendous authority and presence. The little Kans got the fright of their lives, convulsed into some serious crockery trembling by the Marantz's sheer bottom end oomph.

When Emily Remler joined in on guitar and Pete Erskine kicked his drumset into life, the CD-80's vivid presentation became more palpable still.

As for the playing, well it seemed OK. Benoit was hitting all the right notes but, I mean, he was really *hitting* them. There was something strangely mechanical about his playing, as if someone had scrubbed all the *pianissimo* directions from his score. Come to think of it, Hughes' bass was starting to sound a little leaden and plodding, too.

This wasn't how I remembered it, to be sure. So before trying the Meridian, I connected up my cheap Sony out of curiosity. Sure enough, Benoit and gang suddenly didn't seem tangible and 'live' but Benoit immediately stopped pretending to be a Grade 5 exam candidate and started playing like the accomplished and expressive musician he is. Compressed and veiled as the Sony sounded, it was at least allowing the music to flow in a natural and unforced manner.

Enter the 206. We were back in the big time, Hughes' muscular bass runs once again giving the Kans an invigorating workout. But there was a crucial difference: he actually seemed to be enjoying himself. There was more bounce but more subtlety, too. Erskine's delicate brushwork on *Some Other Sunset* became more intelligible, Remler's guitar more incisive and expressive. As for Benoit, he seemed to have sprouted an extra couple of fingers and, in the break, taken a crash course in coolness.

More than that, however, everyone was playing *together* with flawless timing and seamless integration. There seemed to be a more clearly defined acoustic around the musicians while resolution of timbral and harmonic shading focused with greater precision giving a still greater insight to the music. And while the Kans aren't great at imaging, you could almost believe they were with the Meridian playing. Benoit's grand piano, in particular, locked firmly into place just right of centre.

So much for jazz. And so much for the

Sony. It's a game little player with some alluring qualities but it came as no surprise at all to discover that the Meridian could do everything it could and a lot more besides. It costs £600 more, after all. The remaining listening would involve just the Meridian and the Marantz. Next in the trays, by way of complete contrast, was David Lee Roth's *Skyscraper*: a touch of thinking man's — but nevertheless gloriously OTT — heavy metal.

The Marantz closed the gap a little, here, propelling a gale of sound from the Kans that was barely credible and all but pinned me to the wall. The sheer confidence and enthusiasm of the sound was almost frightening. Yet switching to Meridian once again revealed that there was a lot more going on than met the ear with the Marantz. This time, production tricks and subtleties were laid bare and Steve Vai's insanely fast and virtuosic guitar runs weren't merely exciting but absolutely scintillating.

And that's how the score remained for the rest of the session. At the end I was left with nothing but admiration for the Marantz's big, bold and inviting sound. Even so, I felt that listening to it for extended periods had strong parallels with watching a good television with the colour turned up a little too high: the softer shades tend to blur into the primaries.

Listening to the Meridian, on the other hand, was like watching a professional studio monitor — you weren't aware of the colours, there was stronger sense of reality. Let's not forget, however, that it costs £300 more than the Marantz.

Even so, I reckon the Meridian 206 is worth the extra. In fact, it's simply the best stand alone CD player I've heard at any price. If Bit Stream can better it for less than half the money I, for one, want to be first in the queue.

Meridian 206 CD player

■ **Value rating** ★★★★★

■ **Sound rating** ★★★★★

□ **Discs used included:**

David Benoit: *Waiting For Spring* (GRP-9595-2)

David Lee Roth: *Skyscraper* (Warner Bros 925 824-2)

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Design of the new 206, while one-box, echoes that of past two-box Meridian CD player styling

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