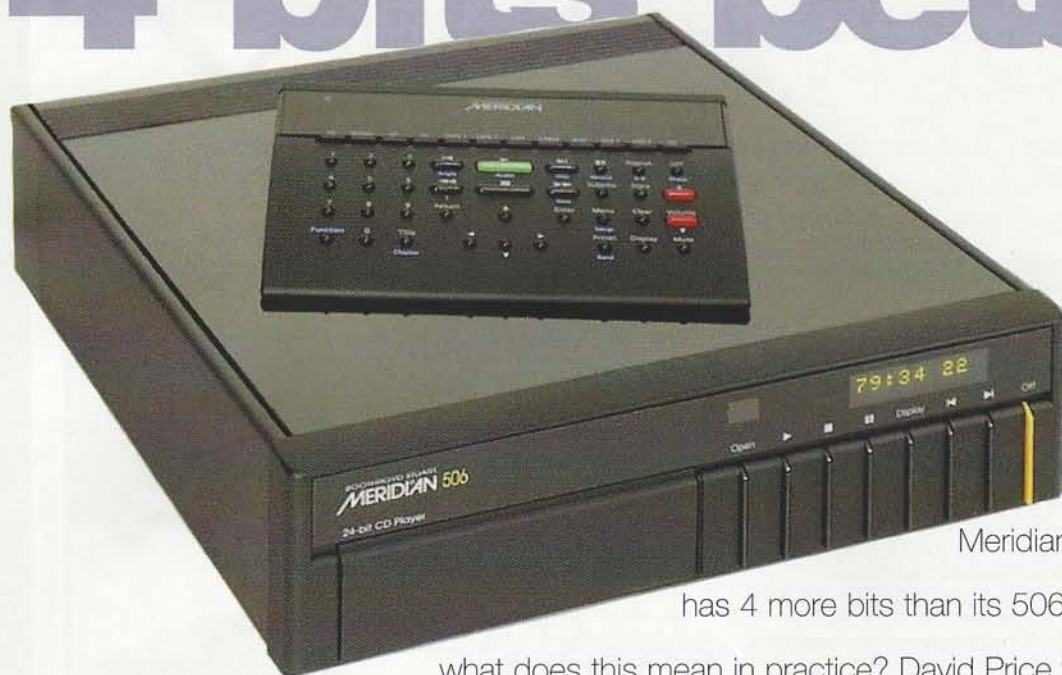


# 4 bits better?



Meridian's new 506.24

has 4 more bits than its 506.20 precursor. But what does this mean in practice? David Price tries a bit of the other...



I knew it would happen. After the temporary respite provided by Bitstream, the bit wars are raging again. Anyone into hi-fi at the end of the eighties was constantly assaulted by '18bit, 8 times oversampling' (or whatever) legends plastered all over the fascias of Technics, Denon, Sony, et al. Now the 'bit race' is back on track, so prepare yourselves for a Spinal Tap-style 'my amp's 11 louder 'cos it goes to 11' world!

In truth, using 24bit DACs to play 16bit CD is rather like buying a Ferrari with a Fiesta engine. Compact Disc simply doesn't have any more information than can be described in 16bits, so longer digital word lengths simply should not be necessary. When they introduced the 506.20, Meridian argued that its extra internal resolution allowed more accurate handling of the least significant bits of the 16bit word, plus better accuracy from any subsequent digital signal processing. Maybe so, but it still smacks of tinkering around at the margins. As I'm sure Bob Stuart would agree, the big gains will be when 24bit digital audio discs hit the market a proper.

Why bother with all this 24bit business then? Cynics would argue it's more about marketing. Certain

knowledgeable industry figures have argued that the original 16bit specification isn't what limits CD's sound, but that the damage is done by inadequate transports, high jitter levels, poor internal digital noise suppression and dodgy power supplies. Of course, these all cost lots of money to sort and aren't easy to explain to marketing departments. On the other hand, buying in DACs with more numbers after their names is cheaper and easier to sell to the punters...

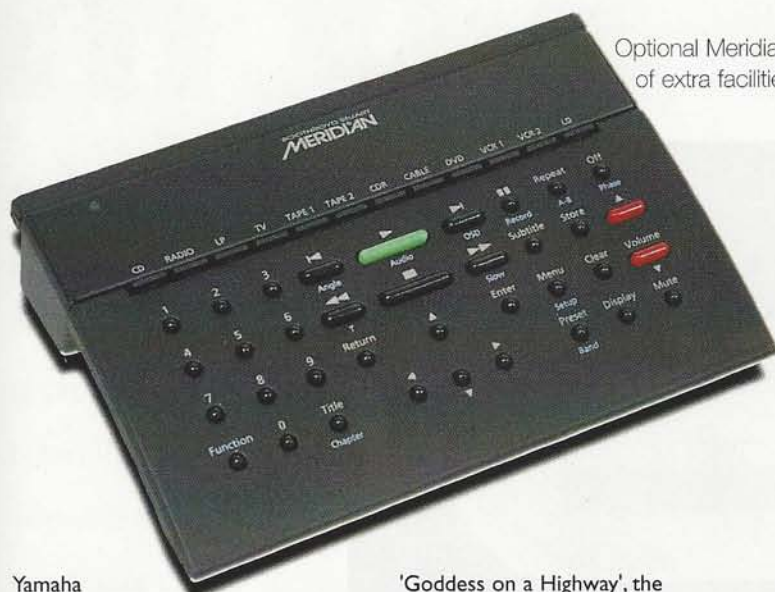
Well, I'm not going to level this accusation at Meridian. The black textured enamel and glass finished 506.24 looks and feels classy, and is surprisingly heavy considering its compact dimensions (6.4kg, 88x321x332mm) and modest £1195 retail price. Compared even to Marantz's CD-7 (costing three times as much) it seems better screwed together. One of the most pleasing aspects is Meridian's trademark glass and carbon fibre-damped disc tray, which gives the high precision data-grade (i.e. CD-ROM) Focault-focus linear three-beam laser pickup an easier time of reading the disc. Add custom servo software from Meridian and it's a very capable transport

indeed. Inside you'll find a smattering of audiophile components, a generous toroidal transformer and conscientious attention paid to smoothing the mains. The 24-bit dual differential Delta Sigma converter, apparently developed in conjunction with Burr Brown, feeds a discrete class A output stage.

Outside it's the usual Meridian look with a row of slimline transport controls running across the bottom half of the fascia, plus a purposeful eight character dot-matrix LED display showing track, time and index. Round the back you get fixed line level phono outs, plus optical and coaxial digital outputs. Last is the communications link, which lets you run any combination of Meridian kit from the single, rather swanky looking Meridian System Remote. More than just a standard plipper with a few extra buttons, it actually lets you extend the system into two or three rooms. In an increasingly multi-room world, this facility could be more useful than it first appears.

The bit question will run and run, but the real answer lies in the listening. After a few days intensive burn in, the Meridian went into my reference systems (KLP-PI, K5881,





Optional Meridian System Remote offers a host of extra facilities for all Meridian electronics

Yamaha NS1000Ms) via LFD's Spirolink 3 and we were away. I kicked off with 4 Hero's 'Cosmic Tree', a beautifully recorded slice of acoustic drum'n'bass including violins, viola, cello, Fender electric piano, Oberheim bass synth plus a fantastically recorded acoustic drum kit. To its credit, the Meridian conveyed the distinctive textures of all these instruments with tremendous accuracy. Rather than sounding airbrushed and artificial, the opening violins had wonderful lustre. The Fender Rhodes was rich and resonant, and the drums kicked in with machine gun speed and attack. The singer's voice was powerful and grainy, just like the gig I went to last year.

A real festival of the senses then, but this is no Japanese-style 'hi-fi sounding' silver disc spinner. Indeed the 506.24 had a nicely unforced musicality about it - not quite as beguiling as a good moving coil cartridge but not far off. It was able to excavate vast tracts of detail and string it all together very coherently, making for both a relaxing and engaging listen.

Moving on to Mercury Rev's

'Goddess on a Highway', the Meridian's performance proved all this sweetness didn't come from coloration. On this rather sterile rock recording the 506.24 didn't add a thing - gone was the sumptuousness of the 4 Hero track and in its place a clean and dry recorded acoustic. This track also showcased the player's tremendous ability to resolve low level detail - there's a lot of weird, multi-tracked production effects going on over the main vocals, guitar, bass and drums and they shone through far more than with the Naim CDX I recently reviewed. Nothing added, nothing taken away.

Moving on to a bit of old school rock'n'roll in the shape of Rush's 'Fly By Night', I was better able to identify the essence of what is by any standards a highly neutral and self-effacing player. Compared to the aforementioned Naim, plus the new Linn Genki I'm currently trying out, the Meridian sounded slightly slow. Being so even-handed, it isn't set up for playing one particular type of music - rather, it's a great all rounder. By contrast, the Linn and Naim both seemed to live or die by their ability to resolve attack transients and

dynamics, leaving things like low level detailing and accurate soundstaging for the birds. They both made a better job of this track, pushing it along at double quick speed, whereas the Meridian was just a tad more sedate and polished in its performance.

Indeed, 'polished' is the Meridian 506.24 in a nutshell, and I mean this in the best possible way. Like Arcam's FMJ CD23 (one of its closest rivals) it's an extremely capable all rounder with an infectiously sweet and musical sound. Feed it anything from Debussy preludes to David Sylvian and you'll get a spacious, open acoustic with great stage depth, excellent low level detail resolving capability, a pleasantly sweet tone, grippy rhythms and strong dynamics - and it all hangs together superbly.

Another fine slice of British 'budget esoterica' then, and superb value at under £1200. It's also a welcome challenger to the previously peerless Arcam FMJ, with a marginally slower but weightier sound. Match it to open, transparent ancillaries and you'll have a peach of a system. If CD sounds this good fed by 16bits, the sky's the limit for Meridian's first 24bit DVD Audio player. ■ ▲



Tidy rear panel offers a host of analogue and digital audio outputs plus a COMMS link to connect to other Meridian electronics

Meridian 506.24 £1195  
Meridian Audio  
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Huntingdon  
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PE18 6ED  
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WORLD VERDICT



Highly musical yet very detailed sounding, this player almost has it all. Even-handed to a fault, it sounds great over a wide variety of music.

Measured  
Performance see  
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