



Styled to match
Meridian's 861
processor,
the 800 can
be expanded
with a host
of optional
modules...

Meridian 800

Satisfy the high-end, front-end wish-list. That's pretty much the brief, tall order though it is. To that end the Meridian 800 is something of a designer product: CD player, DVD-Video player, multi-input digital or analogue pre-amplifier, LP head amplifier, and now DVD-Audio player rolled into one. An 800 can be a selection of these things, or indeed others. Soon, perhaps, there will be a radio option as well. It's a mix and match product, rather in the manner of the typical PC.

Launched three years ago, the 800 Series comprises just two units: the 800 DVD player and 861 Surround Sound Processor. In top notch home

PRICE typically £10,805

SUPPLIER Meridian Audio

CONTACT 01480 445678

cinema systems they operate as a duo, partnered ideally by a set of Meridian's DSP speakers. There's a veritable arsenal of DSP processing on tap here, running to 48-bit precision, which can be used to double the effective sampling frequency of CD sources, render up to eight discrete channels, support those DVD-A

recordings that are made in 2+2+2 format (two front, two rear and two 'height') and so on. The 861 supports Dolby Digital 7.1 and Pro Logic II, THX, EX, DTS, Meridian EZ, 2+2+2, discrete Ambisonics, MPEG, MP3 and more.

The addition of DVD-A playback capability alone warranted Version 3 status for the 800, but the new model has significant enhancements in almost every department, including a new DSP engine. It's a physically imposing unit with a standardised fascia which gives little hint of its adaptability. It has a single transport fitted as standard, naturally, but there's space for a second

(inviting thoughts of a CD or DVD writer, although given Meridian's principled stance on the subject of copying, it's maybe better to think gain).

Like a computer, the circuit centres on a motherboard into which are plugged a number of function-specific modules (cards) according to the requirements of the particular setup. These add around £650 each to the basic chassis price of £10,925 (Hence the 'typical price' quoted, for a unit to accompany an 861.) Used without the 861, the 800 can itself be configured as a player/pre-amp with up to 11 other sources, to make it the centrepiece of a two-channel audio or AV system. One of the new optional cards (at £510) provides six-channel high resolution digital outputs via Meridian's MHR Smart Link, using proprietary encryption, typically for direct connection to its digital speakers and thus facilitating an extremely elegant multi-channel AV setup which is digital to the last moment. The card-based approach makes the units amenable to upgrades too.

Some of the 800 cards are mandatory: computer and DVD control, video DSP, video encoder (composite, S-video and component video outputs) and digital input plus either digital and analogue output (you can have both). The review sample had the latter plus an analogue input board to suit my predominantly two-channel, primarily audio-only interests.

Those familiar with Meridian's proprietary system control handset from the 500 Series will find the 800 entirely straightforward to operate; indeed, it's supplied with the latest (48-button) version of the same MSR remote. All controls are duplicated here, along with others including those needed for armchair DVD-Video control.

There are just seven main buttons on the fascia, enabling basic disc navigation. A hinged flap reveals 17 more which include source selection, volume, DVD video controls and more, plus a Function key (familiar from the handset), which enables various standard keys to perform other tasks. You need to spend a while on all this to be totally fluent at root level it's simple.

The 800 can be customised to an extent by bringing it out of standby with one or the other of the two Gain buttons held in. This gives access to menus which adjust things such as its compatibility with other Meridian units via the Comms link, whether the output gain is variable or fixed (for use when, say, the 861 is controlling the volume), or for adjusting individual input sensitivities. Complete system access is available using a PC, an RS-232 link (cable supplied), and the supplied Windows software; again, a concept familiar from the 500 series. Sources, display labels, signal routing, video options and more can be set here and the settings stored both in the player and on the computer. Normally, this would be done on installation by the dealer, who would then take away a 'user profile' on his laptop — an invaluable feature when it might be asked for card

updates or is called upon to offer troubleshooting advice over the telephone.

Elaborate multiple FIFO (first-in, first-out) buffering techniques are used to provide jitter-free data extraction from disc, the claimed result a sound stage of exemplary coherence and definition for CD and DVD-Audio, and pictures of exceptional resolution and stability for DVD-V. Upsampling is used, too, for both two- and multi-channel CD sources.

Cosmetically, the 800 is something of a contrast to the subtle elegance of the midi-sized 500 range. This is a 'statement' product and has

Nakamichi LX-5 cassette deck. The 800 analogue output card has balanced XLR and unbalanced phono feeds. I used the latter with my usual long pre-/power leads to a Veritas P400 Tripath-based power amplifier and Quad ESL-63 speakers. Later in the proceedings the Quads were replaced by a pair of KEF Reference 207 speakers, with their supersonic response.

Two caveats. First, there's a fan and although it's about as quiet as can be, if you sit within arm's reach you'll hear it — although I discovered belatedly that that the fan can be switched off in software configuration, so this need not be a

As is the case with a computer, the circuit centres on the motherboard, into which are plugged various function-specific modules

the physical presence to shoulder its way to the front of the high-end shelf. Although it maintains the house style of black livery and glass top, the styling is much stronger, with curved fascia ends and the company name bold in gold (too loud for my taste) and a much larger multi-character green display whose brightness can be varied in 15 steps — overall, it is beautifully made.

I used the 800 as the front end to my existing system — as a CD/DVD-A source *cum* pre-amp — patching it to a Sony SCD-XB970 SACD player a 504 FM tuner, Kenwood DM-9090 MiniDisc recorder and for old time's sake a rather good

problem. Second, it takes an age to load a CD — about 14 seconds from tray to play.

Three eulogies. First, this is the finest CD player I've heard. Second, it's the most convincing DVD-A player I've used. Third, it provides the clearest DVD-V replay I've experienced.

New media are fine and dandy, but with a 20-year legacy of releases in circulation, CD is going to be around for a long time yet. Wisely, Meridian continues to expend much effort in improving its replay. The 588 is, I think, as good a 'domestic' player as I've heard but the new 800 is its master, offering a stability of image and a level of definition that has to be heard to be appreciated; articulation of such effortless precision speaks for itself and one founders in trying to express it on the page. Partly it's the 'black' background from which the signal emanates, partly the seamless tonal balance, partly the sheer immediacy. This is some way ahead of anything I've heard before.

I've been listening to DVD-A (and SACD) quite a lot of late. It's easy to be seduced by the still somewhat novel involvement of surround sound, so it was instructive to focus on its two-channel capabilities. Again there's a special level of definition here, the subtlety of which evades all but the very best players. Given a source recording of sufficient quality, DVD-A has a tangibility that all but transcends the physical medium and I've not been persuaded by that 'absence of technology' experience so completely before. It really is as if nothing's in the way.

DVD-V has that black background again, but here it's behind the picture. Clarity, definition, stability are all ahead of what I saw and heard when I was minder of *Gramophone's* very fine Meridian/Séleco system a few years ago. I borrowed the 586 player a few times and it was extremely good, but windows are open a wider still with the 800. It's an amazing box of tricks.

WORDS IVOR HUMPHREYS

TECHNOLOGY

Data from the disc is read and if necessary re-read in conjunction with triple buffering stages to ensure data integrity ahead of the processors. Elaborate de-jittering techniques are also employed. The player incorporates Meridian's MHR Smart Link which provides an encrypted upsampled six-channel digital feed for the 861 surround sound processor.

On-board decoding of Dolby Digital, MPEG or DTS programme material is handled by a proprietary DSP to decode the soundtrack into to discrete channels. Video circuitry handles, and can convert between, PAL and NTSC. The 800 can be fitted with a output card to provide six discrete digital channels, allowing direct connection to Meridian DSP speakers or to an external multi-channel digital input controller.

KEY FEATURES

- DVD-A, DVD-V, CD, MP3, CD player/pre-amp
- Many config options and input/output cards
- DVD-V to 96kHz/24-bit resolution
- MHR Smart Link encrypted digital output