

Best buy over £5000

Meridian 808.2i/DSP7200 | £25,745



www.meridian-audio.com

This seductive set-up not only proves that CD listening isn't quite dead yet, but also offers something different from most high-end systems

FOR

Thrilling dynamic range; superb accuracy and detail; build, styling, flexibility and usability are first-rate; so very, very clever

AGAINST

Could be considered a bit too polite by some listeners

VERDICT

Expensive, for sure, but remarkable in so many ways – sonically, technically and aesthetically

VALUE JUDGEMENTS ARE always fraught with potential pitfalls, but Meridian's latest hi-fi system poses a sterner test than most. A little over £25,000 is a lot to spend on anything – especially something that doesn't come on four wheels.

But spend some time with it and slowly, steadily the Meridian becomes increasingly seductive. This is just incredibly clever hi-fi, as different as it is technically impressive.

The new DSP7200 loudspeakers form the heart of the system. They're fully active, digital speakers, containing all the amplification needed (400w per speaker!). Also, connect in a digital source and the speakers will receive the digital data from it, decode it to analogue and then amplify it.

Meridian believes this method ensures optimum accuracy, in that it preserves the digital signal in its original form for as long as possible. The '7200s adopt a new connection medium, though – they can be hooked up by coaxial digital cables, but also allow for simple, cheap Ethernet connections. That's a real contrast to most high-end hi-fi systems, which encourage you to spend plenty of cash on speaker cables.

Here, the DSP7200s are linked to the company's new flagship CD player, the 808.2i Signature Reference. Again, this is a bit different from the high-end norm: it uses a ROM-drive disc mechanism, visually far less impressive than the gigantic drives sported by some price rivals, but – the company asserts – no less technically

proficient. In its 'i' form, it's also a preamp, with analogue and digital inputs fitted for other sources.

Creates a sweeping soundstage

So, that's the technicalities: how about the performance? In almost all regards, it's hugely impressive. The Meridian combination makes instruments sound like instruments, it images superbly, and it creates a broad, sweeping

"It relays dynamics with effortless disdain – the thunder of Strauss or the rumbling low-end of William Orbit pose no problem"

soundstage that easily fills even our biggest listening room. It also relays dynamics with huge, effortless disdain – the crashing thunder of Strauss or the sofa-shaking low-end extension of William Orbit pose not the slightest problem. Volume, too, appears to have no limit (beyond your own), a legacy of the system's clean, accurate sound.

So why not five stars? Well, for some listeners, the Meridian's sound is a shade safe. It's not a real concern, but even so, the Meridian's balance isn't as direct and exciting as it might be.

With a more rounded approach to all genres of music, though, we'd have no reservations. Overall, this is about as impressive as modern hi-fi gets.

In a flap

The CD player's mechanism might be more than up to the job technically, but it doesn't feel or look that special. This flap folds down to reveal the disc tray, which pops out with little of the pomp you'd find in, say, the Chord Red.



WHAT MAKES THEM SPECIAL?



Powerful pair

The '7200s are self-powered, active designs: they don't need a separate power amp. With 400w built-in to each, there's tons of energy on tap, but you must have a mains plug for each speaker.



Master blasters

The speakers include preamp sections, with remote control sensor, plus DAC conversion – so you can configure a speaker as a 'Master' and use it to control the electronics even if they're out of view.



Able cable

The '7200s allow for a simple connection using off-the-peg Ethernet cables, which can be used to carry control signals and digital data. Few high-end firms would support such a basic cable.



Fully loaded

The CD player is huge, its bulk allowing for many configurations. Here, it can accept digital and analogue inputs from other sources (converting the latter to digital before sending them to the speakers).

SPECS

PLAYS CD, MP3
POWER 2 x 400w
INPUTS 3 x coaxial digital, 2 x optical digital, 6 x analogue
OUTPUTS Coaxial digital, 2 x analogue audio output
SUB No
HEADPHONES No
DIMENSIONS (hwd)
 CD player 17.5 x 48 x 41cm
 Loudspeakers 90 x 30 x 35.6cm

Showing off, or not

You can turn these displays in each speaker off if you prefer – same applies to the CD player – or display all manner of useful information about the signal, volume level and so on.

Towering presence?

As you'd expect given how much is crammed into each cabinet, the DSP7200s are heavy – but they're not actually as big and foreboding as their tower-of-power dark finish might suggest.

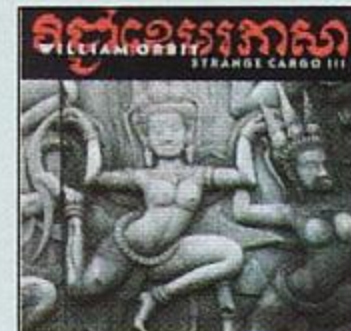
PLAY THESE TOP MUSIC MIX TO TEST THE MERIDIAN SET-UP TO THE MAX

**STRAUSS****Also Sprach Zarathustra**

It's hard to avoid grinning like a loon at that first, seismic opening – the Meridian set-up gives it thrilling scale.

**TORI AMOS****Strange Little Girls**

With its fondness for expressive vocals and phenomenal imaging, our system thrives on this intimately recorded disc.

**WILLIAM ORBIT****Strange Cargo III**

Eerie ambience, formidable scale and floor-shaking bass – through the Meridian set-up, this is sure to gather a crowd.



PERFECT PARTNERS SYSTEM PRICE £61,175



SURROUND PROCESSOR
MERIDIAN REFERENCE 861 ★★★★★

£ 8945

Fancy expanding your Meridian experience? Add the Reference 861 surround processor, and you can decode the majority of surround sound signals available, connect up more speakers and listen to music and movies through variables of two, three, five or seven channels, plus subs.



SUBWOOFER
MERIDIAN SW5500

£ 2995

So we've got our surround processor, CD player, speaker system: what else do we need? A DVD player? Meridian can help you out there, offering the Reference 800 at £10,805. Need some deep bass? The two 30cm drivers in the SW5500 subwoofer should round it all off nicely.



CENTRE SPEAKER
MERIDIAN 5500HC

£ 5995

Want the full multichannel experience for your Meridian system? Aside from another pair of DSP7200s (at £17,495), you'll need a centre channel – the DSP5500C being more than suited to the task. It's big, active, digital and, erm, expensive – but what else did you expect?

**NEED A
GOOD AV
RACK?**
See p140