

MERIDIAN 506

£795

The latest range of electronics from Meridian has lost some of the mechanical complexity inherent in earlier components, but, as Alvin Gold reports, that doesn't necessarily mean a worse sound



The 506 is a member of the first new series of Meridian electronics in over eight years. Until now, Meridian has had two ranges of electronics, the 200 and the flagship 600 series, both compatible with Meridian's active digital loudspeakers and multi-room systems. The 500 series is the nearest yet to a budget range from Meridian. The company's euphemism is 'more aggressively priced', which, I suppose, could be taken to imply that earlier products were torpidly priced. But to think of the Meridian 500 series simply as being aggressively cheap (or whatever) would give rather a misleading idea of what these components are about.

Reduced to its essentials, the digital heart of the 506 is very similar to that of the 206 Delta Sigma player. The mechanics however are completely different. The 206 was constructed in an

unusually complex manner, using two rectangular section aluminium extrusions bolted together. As anyone who has examined the detail of the design will testify, fabrication obviously involves a substantial element of manual labour, and this, of course, must have a heavy impact on the final costings.

For the 506, Meridian realised that there was scope to reduce costs without cutting important corners, and with minimal impact on engineering integrity. The double-barrelled construction has made way for a simpler, more conventional (and therefore altogether cheaper) steel case, which has a moulded fascia (cheaper again) with a blackened glass capping – the glass being a feature carried over from previous designs. The top is also of blackened glass, and this damps the steel case effectively while adding a touch of elegance to the design. It gives the 506 the unusual distinction of having one of the finest tops in the business, irrespective of how it sounds.

Electrical isolation is said to be as good as that of the 206, and the new construction is said to provide superior electromagnetic properties – lower radiation emissions, and reduced susceptibility to external electric and magnetic fields. Though the double-barrelled construction has gone, the advantage conferred by the technique – namely a high level of electrical independence of the various circuit blocks – has been retained by the simple expedient of including a full length internal steel wall. As a result of these changes the new case is actually much stiffer and more solid, which must be a good thing.

Another important distinguishing feature of the 506 is that its mechanism has been extensively redesigned while keeping to the general topology established by previous generations of

Meridian CD players. The disc is still placed directly on the carbon/glass fibre composite platter, with no intervening drawer mechanism. In common with other Meridian players, the drawer is in fact the complete transport mechanism: this slides back and is hermetically sealed when closed. The sealed, solid enclosure construction and well-weighted mechanism mean that the player is largely immune to acoustic feedback, but a redesign of the mechanism, which makes it much shallower than before, means that there is more room above the CD for a better disc clamp. The clamp is also constructed from a carbon/glass fibre composite, and has a felt mat to press on and damp the disc.

The rest of the story should make familiar reading. The player is built around the Crystal CS4328 Delta Sigma converter, which is now also used by such companies as Quad, Roksan and Linn. The circuit is built onto a sophisticated four layer board with independent ground and power planes and two circuit layers. Nicicon electrolytic capacitors are used for decoupling purposes, and the output stage is a discrete Class A circuit in place of the usual (and often unsatisfactory) op-amp. For those interested in building a Meridian-branded system around one of their digital speakers, the 506 (and indeed the whole 500 series) remain compatible with the 200 and 600 series, while offering a range of detail enhancements and additions based on higher speed comms. A typical improvement is that at turn on, all system components now start at exactly the same time. In some situations, wiring is also simplified. And that's most of what you need to know, except that the control system is rather simpler to get to grips with than with previous models, and also that facili-

“THE CHARACTER OF THE 506'S SOUND WON'T BE A SURPRISE, BUT THE QUALITY MIGHT”

DATA

Price:	£795
Size:	330x320x88mm
DAC:	Crystal Delta Sigma
Digital outputs:	One coax phono, one Toslink optical
Phones:	No
Remote:	Yes

DESIGN

- ▶ Crystal CS4328 Delta Sigma converter
- ▶ New slimmer mechanism with improved materials and disc clamping
- ▶ Simpler, improved case construction

PERFORMANCE

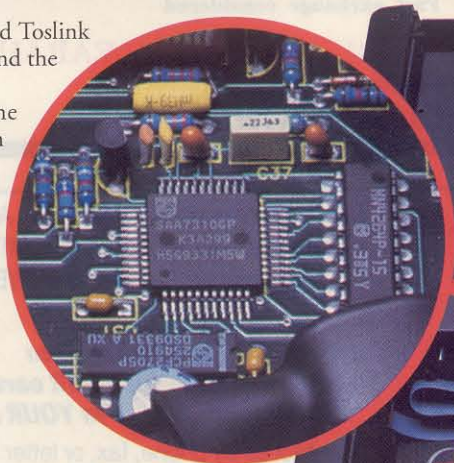
- ▶ Refined and clean, but less than state-of-the-art treble
- ▶ Unusually fine bass deals effectively with musical complexities
- ▶ As good as, or better than, the more expensive Meridian 206 (£995)



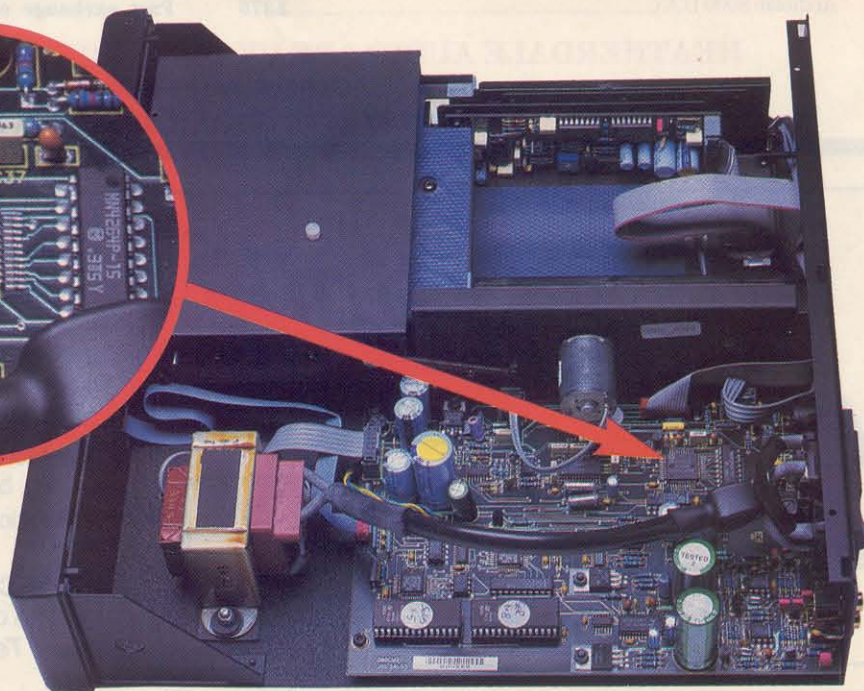
ties include electrical and Toslink optical digital outputs and the usual analogue outputs.

The Meridian had the usual prolonged run-in before it went on test, and was run as a part of a number of good quality systems in which it worked happily. Disc handling was faultless: this player tracked cleanly through some of my oldest and most badly pocked discs, and the character of its sound will come as no surprise to Meridian fans, especially those who know the 206.

Perhaps the quality of sound will come as a surprise though: if anything, the 506 is



The Philips SAA7310 chip, shown here in close-up, is used between transport and dac for its high quality error correction



HEAD TO HEAD: MERIDIAN 506 vs QUAD 67

Despite holding that well-designed CD players, amplifiers and the like all sound the same, Quad was kind enough to lend us one of its well-regarded 67 CD players to compare to the Meridian 506. These two are a well matched pair, and although a preference emerged, it was by no means clear cut across all performance areas. The Meridian 506 and Quad 67 are both eminently listenable designs and are both perfectly capable of extracting a great deal of raw information from a CD and presenting it in a coherent and entertaining fashion. And neither can be accused of overly sanitising the music.

First disc on the roundabout was a recording of the famous Scherzo from Mendelssohn's Octet (Sony SK48307), an intriguing recording made with Stradivarius instruments in a credibly real acoustic, namely the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York. This is an exquisite, yet distant and not always very communicative recording. The

with some strong bass and cello writing which was handled altogether more satisfactorily by the Meridian. It all sounded too easy, too facile with the Quad, and in this piece I also noticed for the first time some coloration in the violins and (especially) violas. Further listening tended to underline the observation. There is an upper midband coloration, a kind of electronic glare, that makes strings sound coarse through the 67: the 506 was sweeter and more expressive. The Quad is open and detailed in the midband, but the Meridian is even more so, partly because it lacks this glare.

The Mendelssohn set a true pattern, which was repeated with mild changes of emphasis with various types of music. But I don't want this to be seen as a walkover for either party. These are both excellent CD players, each of which makes a strong claim for itself, and where preferences are as much



The Quad 67 - an eminently listenable and informative CD player

string octet draws layer upon layer of sound in the air which can clog up, or simply obscure the tempo and drive of the music.

Both players coped well with the difficulties, but in quite different ways. The Quad is, I would guess, the one that many would pick. It sounded lighter, more agile and sure-footed, and it bounced through the piece with a charm and ebullience that suited the style of the piece to perfection. The Meridian sounded earthbound by comparison, and the word 'plodding' makes an appearance in my listening notes. It was not entirely one-sided though: the lowest few octaves were far more fully developed, and it was the Meridian that better revealed the complexities and layers of sound. These observations were reinforced in the concluding Presto, a more powerful, driving piece altogether

matters of taste as they are real musical substance. My preference for the Meridian is partly based on my rather analytical mode of listening, which often means that I prefer a warts and all approach. The Quad's relatively restrained bass tends to simplify and straighten the awkward bits, leaving a beautiful sound that I felt was slightly too well packaged to be believable under all circumstances.

The Meridian 506 is more muscular, and is better able to convey tension and dynamic range. Curiously, one of the best examples to illustrate this was a recording of Ernest Bloch Schelomo played by the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra and conducted by Howard Hanson (Mercury Living Presence). Recorded in glorious analogue, this recording dates from over two decades before the widespread application of digital technology.



The 506 can communicate with other Meridian items via its comms channel

better than the 206. There are two areas of special strength, of which the bass shows the greatest improvement. It is not just its depth or tunefulness that is at issue, but something more subtle, namely its ability to sustain several competing bass lines simultaneously without favouritism or muddle. This ability to resolve complex low frequency information gave the 506 an unusually rich and multi-faceted performance which allowed it to show greater change from one recording to the next than usual. This ability was particularly appreciated with demanding orchestral material. The Meridian was typically able to resolve wedges of cello or double bass into the individual instruments, and also to give their sound the kind of weight and gravitas you might expect from a live performance. In this sense the Meridian leaves most of the UK competition far behind, aligning itself closely with the best of the current generation of high-end US converters.

The midband also shows signs of increasing stature. The 206 was no slouch here, but the 506 has usefully greater midband resolving power, placing it very close to true high end standards. This is a bold, colourful midband, again with excellent resolution of fine detail, and assisted by that superb bass, it has an unusually strong ability to construct a solid stereo soundstage around the speakers.

Only in the highs was the Meridian less than completely ideal. Treble quality is smooth and attractive; there are no obvious digital nasties, and by ordinary standards resolution of fine detail is of a high order. But having experienced the same Crystal dac in a Counterpoint DA-10 - a more costly device, but one capable of an exquisite combination of sweetness, resolution and distinctiveness, perhaps the best I have ever heard from any CD player - I know that this chip has more to give. When questioned, Meridian confirmed that its more costly 500 series CD players show the greatest advantage over the 506 in precisely this area.

Overall the 506 shows solid improvements just as the old range was beginning to look a tad jaded. Improved physical construction allied to a proven converter topology has allowed Meridian to improve sound quality and reduce the price. Not bad at all!

■ **Right of Reply:** see page 52

Right of Reply

**Counterpoint
DA-11/DA-10**

Mr Dac-O-Tine offers you a dac,
Say No To Solder!

DA-11s who are experiencing the occasional burp or pop need only contact their dealer or MPI to arrange for a modification which eliminates the 'problem'; owners of DA-11s who are not having any trouble shouldn't do anything, secure in the knowledge that a digital silence is golden.

Alvin Gold's clanky drawer was due to our inability at the time to machine our own drawers. Readers might be interested to know that Counterpoint has always ploughed profits (when any are available) straight back into its manufacturing capability, rather than Harley Davidsons, expensive and complicated drugs or holidays in the Bahamas. The first lot of drawers were manufactured by outside machine shops whose 'What? Me

Meridian 506

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In designing the 500 Series, we set out to do exactly what Alvin Gold has appreciated – namely raising the performance standard at 'a better price'. The Meridian 506 is an excellent example of the outcome we wanted, and in particular it benefits from improved design of system mechanics, electronic layout and control software. These improvements combine to give the excellent sound, operation and error-handling that he has appreciated.

Bob Stuart

Meridian Audio

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