

MERIDIAN 500/563

£975/£695

In spite of Meridian's enviable reputation, some have always felt that its CD players have been a little too 'nice'. Malcolm Steward asks if that applies to the 500/563 combination



The 500 combines the benefits of top loading and the convenience of front loading

It's a tricky business, designing hi-fi, especially when it comes to the question of getting a component to work well with its fellows. A 'complete system' approach can result in equipment that doesn't perform well outside its natural habitat; concentrating instead on individual components can lead to problems with integrating them successfully into a broad range of systems. Neither tack is perfect but I suspect that the most sensible route involves taking a holistic approach to hi-fi systems, regarding each component as part of a larger whole as well as considering it in its own right.

One of the best examples of this strategy is seen in Meridian Audio's products. The company's early adoption of modular designs and its use of a communications bus demonstrates a particular regard for system cohesion. A recent discussion with Allen Boothroyd, one half of the design team, suggests that we'll see Meridian taking integration further still when it sets upon the home entertainment market.

The 500 CD transport and 563 DAC reviewed here are part of Meridian's latest range, the 500 Series, which occupies the gap in the company's market between the 200 and 600 Series com-

ponents and represents its first all-new system since 1985. The range is comprehensive and also includes a remote control analogue preamplifier – with or without video switching, an FM tuner, integrated CD player, super CD player, stereo power amplifier, digital music system controller, and, coming later in the year, an integrated amplifier, multi-room preamplifier, and a surround sound decoder. Everything in the range is compatible with 200 and 600 Series components and an intelligent system remote control eases the incorporation of non-Meridian components into a 500 Series-based system.

For this review I didn't have access to other 500 Series components so I had to explore the 500/563's potential as a regular CD front end for my own predominantly one-manufacturer system. This uses Naim electronics and loudspeakers, the latter being actively driven. (Both Naim and Meridian are proponents of active speakers although their applications of the technique differ.) All the electronics and speakers were supported by Mana Acoustics stands, interconnects were provided by Cable Talk and The Chord Company – except the digital interconnect, which was the supplied Meridian lead. As well as the standard Meridian mains leads I also tried Kimber 8TCM Powerkord cables supplying the player and DAC.

The 500 transport is an elegant looking device – not that you would expect anything ugly or indiscreet from a company with Meridian's aesthetic awareness. It combines the operational benefits of a top loading mechanism with the convenience of drawer-loading. The transport's drawer isn't a simple 'posting' mechanism; it slides the whole transport assembly out of the fascia. When the drawer closes, the loaded transport enters a damped and screened enclosure with the fully closed drawer front providing a sealed compartment to reduce its susceptibility to external influences. The disc is clamped by a non-magnetic mechanism and the single-beam laser is driven by a proprietary servo circuit. Reclocking and amplification of the digital output is used to reduce jitter.



DATA

MERIDIAN 500 CD TRANSPORT

Price: £975
Size: 332x321x88mm
Memory: 31 tracks
Outputs: Digital coaxial (RCA phono), one Toslink optical
Other: Proprietary communications channel

MERIDIAN 563 DAC

Price: £695
Size: 332x321x88mm
DAC: Delta Sigma
Inputs: Three unbalanced phono SPDIF (one with additional XLR connection) one optical Toslink
Outputs: Unbalanced (phono); balanced (XLR)
Other: Proprietary communications channel

DESIGN

- ▶ Two-box CD player in attractive new casework
- ▶ DAC uses Meridian's Dual Differential Delta Sigma conversion
- ▶ Supplied without remote control handset
- ▶ Minimalist styling but full range of facilities
- ▶ Can communicate and interact with other components in a Meridian system

PERFORMANCE

- ▶ Full bodied, refined presentation that's unlikely to offend even digital-phobes
- ▶ Detailed, tonally colourful sound suits classical music more than rock
- ▶ Gives voices an appreciable sense of human warmth
- ▶ Temporal smoothness can rob rhythms of urgency and drive

“THE 500/563 COMBINATION HAD AN EASE AND ASSURANCE THAT MANY WILL FIND APPEALING”



The 563 DAC also attacks jitter with dual phase locked loop circuits and relocking of the data stream. It uses Meridian's high definition, dual differential Delta Sigma converter, whose 64-times over-sampled, two-bits per channel conversion is said to give 19-bit precision.

The ease and assurance with which both units operate inspires confidence. However, the 500 transport surprised me; it didn't take kindly to being disturbed while it was playing. Footfall didn't make it flinch – even violent stomping

close to the table supporting it didn't provoke misbehaviour – but tapping a finger on the top of its case sent it into the digital equivalent of having its needle stuck in the same groove.

The sound of the combination also displayed an ease and assurance that many listeners will, I'm sure, find deeply appealing. I've often thought that Meridian's past CD components have had a rather overwhelming sonic niceness. The richness and warmth that made them appear powerful and engaging with orchestral

music has neutered their facility for attack, rawness and rhythmic drive with rock music. The 500/563 still has a touch of added sweetness and romance but in smaller measure. Switching components suggests that the 563 carries the can for most of the added sugar.

The 500/563's sound could never be called unpleasant or fatiguing. At times, and in many respects, it was highly engaging. Playing Aimee Mann's predominantly acoustic, slow-moving *4th of July*, the Meridian combination gave her



The 500 and 563 can be connected either by coax or optical leads

HEAD TO HEAD WITH THE MICROMEGA DUO CD3/BS2

Comparing the 500/563 with Micromega's Duo CD3 transport and Duo BS2 DAC also provided an opportunity to assess the Meridian components working not as a team but as individual items. I began by listening to a track that would be difficult for any player to sanitise or apply the brakes to, Carter USM's *Sing Fat Lady Sing*. The song certainly kick-started the reserved 500/563 into life but even at high playback levels it didn't quite convey the full impact of Fruitbat and Jim Bob's uncivilised wall of pop-punk sound. The Micromega pairing's presentation hadn't the likeable full, warm bass or vocal substance of the Meridian but it captured the music's frantic, thrash-and-burn attitude more succinctly.

Partnering the Meridian 500 with the Duo BS2 showed that the transport was capable of delivering a better turn of rhythmic speed allied to a solid cosmetic presentation – the song's meaty bass line was back but now it was charging. Pairing the Micromega transport with the Meridian 563 DAC lightened the

Merchant's idiosyncratic voice but found the band's playing sounded less cogent and strongly tied to her vocal line. The Micromega locked the band's playing to the singer more tightly. It also surprised me by portraying Merchant's voice not only in a more expressive fashion but also with greater refinement. I had expected the smooth, composed Meridian system to be markedly more flattering to a voice that often sounds irritatingly nasal but the Micromega triumphed here too. It also gave a better insight into her vocal technique, demonstrating how she regularly distanced herself from the microphone on peaks – either that or how quickly the engineer could pull back the fader on her mike. Several tracks further into the disc I realised that I wasn't missing the Meridian's tonal warmth. Alongside the Meridian the Micromega could appear slightly bleached but in isolation the French player had more than enough body to portray voices and instruments convincingly.

But the deciding issue wasn't one of cosmetics or presentation. While

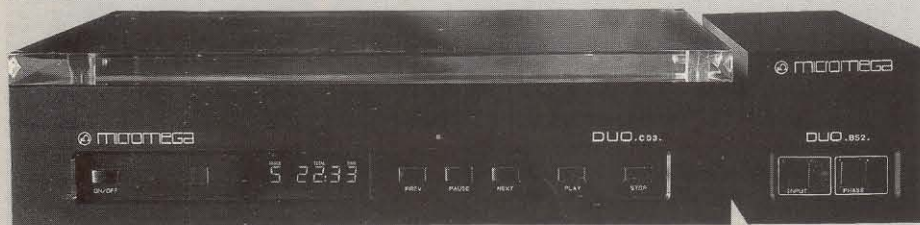
guitar a sense of harmonic and timbral depth, and her voice a human warmth that I found particularly good. In terms of its presentation the player was very convincing – unwaveringly solid and full blooded. Nonetheless, I felt that it missed the last degree of temporal urgency and passion; the musical and emotional flow was almost too relaxed. With Mann's more upbeat tracks the reduction in timing attack and dynamic contrast subdued the music's impact and vitality. Her performance, though appealing, seemed less spirited and compelling.

This slowing effect wasn't always profound or immediately apparent. Songs with varying degrees of liveliness on the Pogues' CD *Waiting For Herb* seemed to maintain their momentum better but as the tracks progressed I noticed that I was responding more enthusiastically to the brisker songs. Ultimately, though, even the wonderfully animated *Sitting On Top Of The World* didn't have the convincing blend of punk and folk vivacity that I normally expect to hear. The Pogues have replaced Shane McGowan with the noticeably more articulate Spider Stacey, but the band's music hasn't lost its sense of inebriated abandon. The 500/563 made it sound a tad too sober and civilised. What was beguiling about the player here again, though, was its facility for imbuing instruments and voices with splendid colour and timbre. You could never accuse this machine of sounding anaemic or making performers seem like cardboard cut-outs. Switching to the Kimber Powerkords enhanced this feature subtly but to good effect.

I expect that my next observation will seem rather predictable but I have to say, regardless, that I found the Meridian more persuasive with classical music. Listened to in isolation, its portrayal of the Naim Concerts Under The Dome CD was quite entrancing. Its recreation of the cello and piano in the adagio and allegro from Boccherini's sonata in A major blended power and delicacy in just the right proportions. Both instruments exhibited convincing depth and divergence of tone, with dynamic scaling that afforded the music a sense of variety and progression. The player also realised the wealth of detail in the recording without losing sight of the musical flow or the venue's ambience. Its sense of perspective on the event was excellent. However, I felt that it didn't fully capture the spirit of the playing as well as it might have done. I thought it diminished the vigour of Janos Starker's playing in the Allegro; he didn't seem to be bowing with his usual fortitude, sounding as if he were holding back and moderating his attack on the strings.

While the 500/563 was gratifying in being so easy to live with – I've used more expensive players that have sprung unpleasant musical surprises upon me – but ultimately I found its approach too tame to be fully satisfying. I never felt that it fully realised music's expression and drama. Though it had more get-up-and-go than previous Meridian players I've used, it still had a tendency to make nearly every piece of music I played sound easy on the ear; much of it was never meant to be that way.

■ **Right of Reply:** see page 59



music's tonality somewhat – the bass line and voices hadn't quite as much weight and body as before – but while the tempo seemed livelier it didn't offer convincing rhythmic coherence. Neither combination was ideal but were I forced to choose I'd take the Meridian transport and Micromega DAC.

10,000 Maniac's *Unplugged* version of *Hey Jack Kerouac* confirmed that this was still the best choice. Natalie Merchant's voice was more inviting, expressive and the song's timing flowed more persuasively on the Meridian transport and Micromega DAC. The song didn't hang together well, nor did it sound particularly appealing on the Micromega transport/Meridian DAC combination.

Listening to the same song on the wholly Meridian and Micromega combinations I appreciated the Meridian's presentation of

the Meridian system was enjoyable and free from any irritating vices, the Micromega system was more sympathetic towards music. It was more dramatic, involving, exciting, spirited – it had the qualities that made me want to dig out more discs. I found that I couldn't concentrate on working when the Micromega was playing but I could work and listen to music with the Meridian. That makes the Micromega bad news from a productivity standpoint, but that's the price you pay for a CD player that provides more stimulation than ambient music. Listening sessions where my mind was firmly focused on the music readily showed that the Micromega had a significant advantage here: discs rejected as insufficiently interesting after a couple of tracks on the 500/563 were often played in full, and appreciated, on the Micromega.

Technics SL-P2000

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At the time of writing... this is the definitive one box CD player'. We could not agree more with Alvin Gold's conclusion. Following excellent reviews on the SU-A600 and SU-A900 amplifiers, music lovers can be assured of the ability of Technics hi-fi equipment to deliver real sound quality.

Peter Larwood

Technics

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Spectra Dynamics Deflex Speaker Damping Panels

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We are pleased with Jimmy Hughes' concise, realistic and accurate review of the Deflex Panels.

The original idea for the damping panels came after a disagreement between two development engineers, a new whizz kid and an old timer, one pro-damping, the other not.

Spectra Dynamics has combined 18th and 19th century physics with 20th century computing technology to develop a product for the 21st century.

Hours of research in the lab, coupled to the results achieved are reaping dividends with the integration of the panels into other product designs. We always reference to live music to keep in touch with reality and avoid compounding errors.

Anyone on a tight budget may be interested to know that fitting just one panel to each speaker can make astonishing gains in overall performance. We have had good results from budget bookshelf to full blown studio monitors.

In a recent revamp to some 15-year old loudspeakers, Deflex panels gave them a new lease of life. This upgrade is likely to add another dimension to anyone's music collection.

John Morris

Spectra Dynamics

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Arcam Alpha 5 & 6

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I have one factual correction to make to your review. Contrary to Jimmy Hughes' comment in his review, the phono preamp stages of these two amplifiers are not identical. The Alpha 5 uses a Signetics NE5532, whereas the Alpha 6 is fitted with sonically superior (and more expensive) Precision Monolithics OP275.

Otherwise we believe the review represents fairly the relative strengths of the two models. All the customer has to do is to decide how good he or she wants the system to be before choosing the appropriate Arcam amplifier. (Of course, if you want even better sound quality from an integrated amplifier, then you should go for the Arcam Delta 290, but that's another story).

John Dawson

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Meridian 500/563

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I am delighted that Malcolm found so much about the new 500/563 that pleased him. He mentioned that the 500 is sensitive to being tapped. In the design of a CD servo system, there is a direct trade-off between shock resistance (which is different from music isolation), and the machine's ability to play defects on a disc and to track a normal disc with the minimum disturbance to the sound quality. The Meridian CD system is unique; we write our servo software in-house, and we have deliberately chosen to strike a balance that pushes in favour of better sound and handling of disc defects. The 500 was not intended to go jogging! Did anyone do this with a turntable?

I was particularly interested in Malcolm Steward's remarks about the system design philosophy. As he says, the 500 Series is comprehensive, with a wide range of high performance choices that allow you to start with any component and build towards a complete hi-fi system that is both extremely musical and highly functional.

This philosophy is at the core of

our 500 Series designs. We try hard to make each component as even-handed as we can when it comes to compatibility – this makes it easy to add any of our components to an existing system. It is true though, that the system Malcolm used to evaluate 500/563 is quite idiosyncratic.

That isn't to say that you must have an all-Meridian system, but system performance reflects another, very important aspect of the design philosophy. Our target is to make the sonic result as clear, as open and as natural as our reference – which is live acoustic (ie unamplified) music. Getting such music to be right must be the ultimate goal, because we are actually aiming for the sound of 'being there'. The real importance of this comes out in the long term, in the satisfaction your system can give year on year, and its ability to stay with you as your interests and taste evolve.

Of course we know how to give a CD player more 'bite' and apparent tempo and detail. You do that through emphasising or distorting the picture – after all, the formative years of digital audio were spent removing exactly that sort of problem. The twin phase-lock-loop and double-differential DACs that are used in the Meridian 563 make it quite unique in its ability to resolve – and not emphasise – the very low level details that tell us about the sound of the natural world.

What I am saying is that Malcolm immediately recognised the clarity, purity, naturalness, ease and assurance that we aimed for. He also recognised, without being so sure about it, the fact that 500/563 is as free of audio pyrotechnics as we can make it. The difference in viewpoint, then, is whether you want a CD system to have more 'temporal urgency' or whether you want it to tell it 'how it is'.

I suggest that anyone interested should visit a dealer and hear for himself. In addition to the 500/563 combination we have a 508 CD player that uses the same dual-differential DAC system in a one-box machine.

Malcolm, what other sort of urgency is there? I know – maybe 'temporal urgency' is having just two hours to produce an answer for Right of Reply!

Bob Stuart

Meridian Audio

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