

Meridian 800 DVD Player & 861 Reference Surround Controller, Version 3

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Every once in a while a reviewer gets a dream assignment: In this case, Robert Harley asked me to review the new Meridian 800 and 861, concentrating on their sound quality in surround music and stereo, and to determine whether that sound was good enough to merit nominating one or both as Digital Source of the Year.

If you have not been tracking the progress of surround sound, DVD-A, and SACD, you may well wonder why this assignment is so significant. Though Meridian is recognized as one of the top firms in audio equipment and digital

engineering, several others make great DVD/CD player/transports, and more yet can compete for top A/V preamp processor. What makes Meridian so special?

The technical reason is that this company, which developed much of the technology behind DVD-A, including the Meridian Lossless Packing mandated as part of the DVD-A standard, has provided the first combination of a transport and processor that can resolve DVD-A without the limits imposed by forcing the transport to include all the decoding, processing, and analog circuitry of a controller.

In addition, the latest version of the

For the first time, the Meridian components strip away the technical veils from DVD-A, and allow the audiophile to hear the kind of sound quality that has, to now, been possible only in a recording studio.

Meridian 800 and Meridian 861 can be connected by what Meridian calls the MHR Smart Link, a combination of three secure digital cables that make pirating impossible and allow the 800 to feed high-resolution digital signals to the 861. This is the first digital connection to be sanctioned for DVD-A content, and features special low-jitter technology. It allows the lossless transfer of digital data from DVD-A, DVD-Video, and CD, which in turn not only allows the full use of the digital processing circuitry in the 861 (which can pass a direct digital output to Meridian speakers), but also transfers all bass management to the 861 and ensures that the 861 gets all the digital data from DVD-Videos so it can identify which Dolby or DTS format is being used.

In addition to these technological changes, I found other reasons to praise these two units. Indeed, I would have nominated the Meridian 800/861 combination as Digital Source of the Year even if I were reviewing them only for their stereo performance. To begin with, this is the first combination of transport

and processor that, in my experience, proves superior to the combination of the Sony SCD-1 transport and Mark Levinson 360S processor, which I use as my reference.

The sonic differences between the two combinations were slight; top-quality CD equipment has so evolved that differences are limited and often can be reduced to a matter of taste. The Mark Levinson 360S was still slightly superior in reproducing the deepest bass. But the Meridians did a better job in those areas where CD is weakest—low-level transparency, natural harmonic integrity of musical notes, and natural clarity of the upper midrange and treble. After extended comparative listening with a wide range of material (using the demanding Pass electronics and such speakers as the Dynaudio Evidence Temptations, Thiel 7.2, and new KEF 205 Reference), I found that the Meridian combination was clearly superior in these areas—and not just to my reference components, but any other CD front end that I have auditioned or reviewed.

For those who want this equipment purely for stereo listening, the 800 can be fitted with inputs and configured to provide a variable output in two-channel mode—i.e., it can be used as a combined player and preamp for use with either conventional power amps and speakers or with a pair of Meridian's DSP loudspeakers. This reduces the ante considerably, since you then do not need the 861, and the combo is quite expensive: The Meridian 800 costs \$19,440–\$20,735 and the Meridian 861 \$13,745–\$19,000, depending on your choice of optional cards that fit into their chassis. If you buy them for surround music and home theater, of course you need both units, but you get the delectable bonus of truly superb CD and stereo performance. I prefer the combo for both because the Trifield digital-signal processing (DSP) mode in the 861 is the most natural and effective way I have ever heard of giving *stereo* a center channel and of creating a coherent soundstage without synthesizing unrealistic rear or side-surround channels or degrading left-to-right imaging.¹ For the

best surround performance, you will need a really good center-channel speaker and multichannel amplification that is as good as your stereo amplification (I use a Theta Dreadnaught II). With such equipment, you will immediately hear why the original experimentation that created stereo concluded that three speakers were necessary. In fact, the improved soundstage in the Trifield mode not only makes imaging more coherent, it improves apparent depth. No other signal-processing mode I have encountered has improved good acoustic stereo recordings with a natural soundstage. But with this combination, most of my reference CDs demonstrating excellent stereo soundstage actually sounded better through the Trifield mode.

In fact, the performance of the Meridian 800/861 with the best CDs is superior to the performance you can get with the great majority of SACDs and DVD-As through *any* player, even the few top-quality new-format discs through *most* players.

The grim truth is that most SACD and DVD-A recordings range from overpriced junk to upper-echelon examples of the mediocre in sound quality and musical performance. They are hampered either by the technical limits of the recording equipment or by mediocre musical material or performance (sometimes both). There are notable exceptions, of course, many of which have been identified in this magazine. But simply running a recording through SACD or DVD-A processing doesn't make digital technology sound better. Tweaking old recordings slightly for the SACD or DVD-A version is no demonstration of superior technology, either.

This is only one reason why a really good CD front end like the Meridian 800/861 or a processor like the Mark Levinson 360S can often get so much better sound from CD than is available from SACD and DVD-A. The sound quality of those new formats is limited by the built-in analog output stages of consumer-level SACD and DVD-A



players. These sharply degrade the sound, at least relative to what you hear in a recording studio with mastering equipment. You only have to listen to a true state-of-the-art demonstration of what is *really* on digital master recordings to know that the recording industry's insistence on copyright protection has made it impossible to build great SACD and DVD-A transports or to make the best use of the top-quality digital, D/A, and analog electronics built into today's best AV processor preamps.

Audiophiles have suffered from abuses on both sides during the introduction of SACD and DVD-A. First, the recording industry complained about the risk of piracy as it shamelessly issued a flood of low-quality and recycled material to capitalize on the new playback formats. Second, both the recording and electronics industries have failed to create an open standard for playback equipment that allows top high-end manufacturers to take advantage of the potential of SACD and DVD-A.

For this reason, the MHR Smart Link in the Meridian 800/861 (the high-resolution, multichannel digital interface) is potentially important. The Meridian 800 and 861 not only are top-quality components in their own right, they combine a no-holds-barred DVD-A transport and DVD-A processor-preamp from the manufacturer that virtually defined DVD-A technology. For the first time, they strip away the technical veils from DVD-A, and allow the audiophile to hear the kind of sound quality that

¹ An opinion I heartily second. —RH

has, to now, been possible only in a recording studio.

No, the Meridian 800 and 861 cannot perform miracles. No equipment can correct bad performance, bad material, or the tasteless fascination with random directional effects. In fact, if you listen to an SACD made from an old soundtrack, with obsolete or low-quality recording equipment, fake surround sound, or goosed-up bass, you will hear the problems even more clearly. And recording quality is even more of a problem with DVD-A recordings. DVD-A was rushed out with far less concern for sound and performance quality than SACD was. Many DVD-As are simply bad in recording quality and in musical performance. That may be a moot point, though. Recording engineers who have worked with both formats have told me that the sonic differences between SACD and DVD-A are so colored by today's players and material that DVD-A has gotten an unfair reputation. In all instances, when the recordings are good or better, the Meridian 800 and 861 will reveal that.

I am not giving up analog, and I'll be keeping my VPI TNT table, JMW arm, and van den Hul cartridge for years. But the best DVD-As played through the Meridian 800/861 outperform the best LPs in dynamic range, detail, clean bass, accurate frequency range, and upper octave extension. Most important, the Meridians reproduce top-quality material with a musical integrity, natural harmonic detail, dynamic contrast, and an upper-octave life and transparency missing in even the best reproduction of CDs and in any SACD setup I have heard, even the Sony SCD-XA777ES.

Let me stress here that I mean *average overall sound*. There are limited numbers of excellent DVD-As, and they cannot hope to match the quality of performances on thousands of LPs and CDs. However, two DVD-A recording companies stand out and I believe they will prove my point.

AIX Records offers naturally recorded DVD-A in stereo and surround sound at 96kHz/24 bits, plus the same performance on the other side on the DVD

in DTS 5.1 and Dolby Digital, with both stage and audience surround sound. The performances are good, sometimes very good; the sound quality is *terrific*. Take *Zephyr: Voices Unbound*: Both the DVD-A stereo and surround are excellent, and the complex voices come through with a level of clarity and musical detail that make even simple songs like the "Month of Maying" remarkably natural. The DVD-A stereo and surround versions also have notably more realistic vocal sibilants than the DTS 5.1 version, and are free of the slight upper-midrange harshness or dulling that seems to affect most Dolby digital music.

Somewhat similar sound patterns emerge from the AIX recording of the Brahms "Piano Quintet in F-Minor" played by Delores Stevens and the Ives String Quartet. The detail resolution and harmonic integrity of the piano are excellent, as are its dynamics. Strings are highly detailed without a trace of unrealistic harshness or even slight dulling in the upper midrange and treble. In fact, the Meridian 800 and 861 out-perform any other DVD-A players I have heard, and offer a level of dynamic energy and life I have not heard through SACD players.

A second recording firm of note is Tacet (www.tacet.de), which produces classical DVD-As that are straight 96/24 5.1-channel recordings with a sonic perspective that is generally more "stage," or immersive, than "audience." Unlike AIX, the Tacet DVD-As come with limited technical information, and that in German. The overall sound, however, again is excellent. The Gade Trio recording of the Mozart flute quartets [DVD D107] is a case in point. Digital has not always been kind to the flute, but here it is excellent; and the violin and cello have a natural grace and charm I rarely associate with digital sound. The Meridian combination is important in detecting this: The sound quality does not come through with the same distinction when played back by otherwise good DVD-A players like the Pioneer Elite DV-47A or Onkyo DVSP-800.

I auditioned eight Tacet recordings, ranging from Bach motets [DVD 108]

to Mendelssohn string octets [DVD 94]. These varied in recording and performance quality. Voices, however, were excellent in timbre, detail, and natural quality, and the character of individual voices was exceptionally clear. Strings were consistently good, and the surround effects were excellent in natural direction and imaging, even with octets—a type of chamber music that often seems hard to resolve. The cello on a Schubert quintet [DVD 110] was exceptionally good.

More broadly, the Meridian 800/861 did a great job of revealing how good other DVD-A recordings can be. I was not particularly happy with the Chesky *DVD-Audio Collection*. Until I heard it through the Meridian 800/861, it struck me as inferior to the Chesky SACD recordings and 96kHz/24-bit recordings, and not up to CD standards. It immediately became clear, however, that the problem was in the DVD-A players I had used and not in DVD-A itself. The recording came alive through the Meridians, just as some of the material had when I heard the mastertapes at the Chesky studios (Tracks 1 and 4 are particularly good).

The same was true of Chesky's live recording of Bucky Pizzarelli in *Swing Low*. The DVD-A version again sounded like the mastertape, and the sound was better than that of the SACD version, although a difference in soundstage perspective and the problems of having to use the analog output stages in the SACD player made real comparisons of DVD-A versus SACD impossible. The interplay between clarinet, guitar, and percussion had a natural energy and life that is missing in most CD recordings. This recording, played through the Meridians, gave the term "live performance" a new meaning.

If my bias toward classical music and acoustic jazz is coming through, let me also note that good DVD-A pop and rock recordings benefit just as much from the Meridian 800 and 861. The surround imaging on Faith Hill's *Cry* [Warner] may be arbitrary, but the DVD-A is cleaner, more dynamic, and more involving and the bass is more

convincing than on the CD. (In fact, deep bass is about as good as the recording allows with organ, double bass, synthesizer, and bass guitar, and exhibits excellent control, detail, and dynamics.)

A reissue of Linda Ronstadt's *What's New* [Elektra] is so dated sonically, it's in the "why bother" category in most respects. But 96kHz/24-bit surround and 192kHz/24-bit stereo were as clean as a good 1983 recording can be, and sibilants, triangle, and instrumental timbre indicated that some reissues may be worth the money. (I heard no sonic superiority in the 192kHz/24-bit stereo over the 96kHz/24-bit surround, but the stereo version sounded more natural in terms of soundstage because the surround effects seem to have been created in the studio.)

I brought in my sons and daughter to help me listen to rock and other pop artists, including Sting (good), Alanis Morissette (ugh), and about 12 assorted new and remastered rock recordings. Of them all, I connected only with the B.B. King and Eric Clapton recording of *Riding with the King* [Reprise] and the fairly sophisticated musical humor in parts of Yes' *Fragile* [Elektra]. The "Cans and Brahms" has held up well. The Meridian 800/861 combination was, however, the first demonstration of DVD-A to grab my children's attention and convince them that DVD-A had merit. They had earlier commented on DVD-A that it was a (expletive deleted) rip-off. This time they stayed, listened on their own, and concluded that the Meridian combination was slightly better than any demonstration of SACD they had heard, and significantly better than what they'd heard of DTS and Dolby.


So, in summary of my dream assignment: Are the Meridian 800 and 861 really as extraordinary as their technical potential promised? Yes! Are they worthy of the title of Digital Source of the Year? Yes! Good as some top-of-the line SACD players are, the Meridian combination is the first consumer SACD and DVD-A unit I have heard that reproduces DVD-A with the clarity and quality I have heard from mastertapes in a studio, and

some DVD-As proved to be superb.

I should not conclude this review without touching on several other aspects of the performance of the Meridian 800 and 861. If you ignored their outstanding reproduction of stereo CD, the Meridian 800 and 861 would scarcely live by DVD-A alone. But the Meridian 800, Version 3, has more powerful DSP engines and can process up to eight channels running at 96kHz/24 bits. It can upsample the output from all CDs and DVD-Videos and decode movies with 96kHz/24-bit resolution. This allows better use of the signal processing power in the Meridian 861, which also has an improved DSP engine, so that it generally works in areas like decoding Dolby with 48-bit precision.

The Meridian 861 can provide up to 10 outputs at 96kHz/24 bits and a true 192kHz/24-bit analog output for stereo. The end result is the best dynamic resolution and the most natural and exciting dynamic contrasts I have heard, whether we are talking stereo, surround music, or soundtracks. If you want musical and dramatic life, rather than just sheer power, this is as good as it gets.

If you have a top SACD player, the Meridian 861 has optional six-channel analog inputs and does a superb job of accepting six-channel inputs and providing bass management. Buying the Meridian 861 does not commit you to DVD-A. In fact, the modular architecture of the Meridian 861 allows you to configure it in virtually any way you want for a given video and audio system, and to chose among different types of video switching—including component—and balanced, RCA, and digital outputs. You get what you need and you pay *only* for what you need, with the option of going back at any time for upgrades.

The Meridian 800 and 861 are an unaffordable dream for most of us. However, you can get the Meridian 598DP and 568.2MM at about half the price, with the same MHR Smart Link, and about 90% of the video and sound quality. Certainly, I'd put both sets of equipment in the "must audition" category if you really care about getting the most out of multichannel music. 

SPECIFICATIONS

861 Controller

Inputs: Up to 12 analog (balanced or unbalanced) or digital inputs, depending on card configuration; digital inputs support 32kHz, 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, or 96kHz sampling, up to 24-bit precision
Outputs: Up to ten analog or digital outputs, depending on card configuration; internal upsampling
Optional cards: Tape loop with analog-to-digital and digital-to-analog converters; video switching; multichannel analog or digital input
Decoding formats: Pro Logic II, THX, THX EX, TV Logic, Dolby Digital (AC-3), DTS, MPEG Audio and MPEG Surround, Music, Trifield, Ambionics, Super Stereo, Music Logic
Dimensions: 18.9" x 6.9" x 16.2"
Weight: 40 pounds

800 CD/DVD Player

Optional cards: Analog output (the 800 can be configured as full stereo or multichannel audio-system control center with upsampling, volume control, and digital signal processing); analog inputs
Inputs: Up to 12 analog or digital inputs; digital inputs support 32kHz, 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, or 96kHz sampling, up to 24-bit precision
Outputs: Up to eight digital outputs for connection to the 861 or Meridian's digital-input loudspeakers; up to eight analog outputs for use as a CD player, or CD player and system control center
Video outputs: Composite, S-Video or component video; NTSC or PAL, 16.9 or 4.3 letterbox/panscan, extended-black option for NTSC
Dimensions: 18.9" x 6.9" x 16.2"
Weight: 40 pounds

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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Prices: 800: \$19,440-\$20,735; 861: \$13,745-\$19,000, depending on configuration