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

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Every once in awhile a reviewer gets a dream assignment: In this case, Robert Harley asked me to review the new third-generation Meridian 800 (V3) DVD player and 861 (V3) controller. If you haven't been tracking

the progress of surround sound, DVD-A, and SACD, you may well wonder why this assignment was such a plum. The answer 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 (the 800) and a controller (the 861) that can resolve DVD-As 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 Meridian 800 and Meridian 861 can be connected by what Meridian calls the MHR Smart Link—a combination of three secure digital cables that makes pirating impossible and allows 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. A high-resolution digital connection allows the lossless transfer of digital data from DVD-A, DVD-Video, and CD, which in turn not only makes possible the full use of the digital processing circuitry in the 861 (which can pass a direct digital output to Meridian's digital-input loudspeakers), 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 combo as Digital Source of the Year [in our sister magazine *The Absolute Sound*] even if I had been

reviewing it only for its stereo performance.

To begin with, this is the first combination of transport and processor that 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. 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, I found that the Meridian pair was clearly superior in these regards—not just to my reference components, but to any other CD front ends that I've auditioned or reviewed.

For those who want this equipment purely for stereo listening, the 800 can be fitted with inputs and configured to provide variable output in two-channel mode—i.e., it can be used as a combined player and stereo preamp for use with either conventional power amps and speakers or with a pair of Meridian's DSP loudspeakers. This lowers 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 cards.) If you buy them for surround music and home theater, you'll of course need both units, but you get the delectable bonus of truly superb CD and stereo performance.

I prefer the combo for both two-channel and multichannel, because the Trifield digital-signal processing (DSP) mode in the 861 is the most convincing way I've 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. For the best performance, you'll need a first-rate center-channel speaker and multichannel amplification that's as good as your stereo amplification (I use a Theta

Dreadnaught II). Thus equipped, you'll immediately hear why the original experimenters who created stereo concluded that three speakers were a necessity. In fact, the improved soundstaging in the Trifield mode not only makes imaging more coherent, it increases apparent depth. No other signal-processing mode I've used has bettered good acoustic stereo recordings in soundstaging. But with the Meridian combination, most of my reference CDs with excellent stereo 'stages actually sounded *better* in the Trifield mode. In fact, the performance of the Meridian 800/861 with the best CDs is superior to the performance you get with the great majority of SACDs and DVD-As through *any* player.

The grim truth is that in sound quality and musical performance most SACD and DVD-A recordings range from over-priced junk to upper-echelon mediocrities. Almost all of them are hampered either by the technical limits of the recording equipment or by second-rate musical material or performance (sometimes both). In addition to the sometimes-poor quality of the source material, the sound of these new formats is also degraded by the built-in digital-to-analog output stages of consumer-level SACD and DVD-A players. The MHR Smart Link in the Meridian 800/861 (the high-resolution, multichannel digital interface) changes that, at least for DVD-As. For the first time, veils are stripped away from DVD-A, allowing audiophiles to hear the kind of sound reproduction that has, until now, been possible only with studio-level technology.

I'm not giving up on analog—I'll be keeping my VPI TNT table, HW Jr. arm, and van den Hul cartridge for years to come. 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 importantly, the Meridians reproduce top-quality DVD-A material with a musical integrity, realistic harmonic detail, dynamic contrast, and upper-octave life and transparency missing in even

the finest reproduction of CDs or in any SACD setup I've heard, even the Sony SCD-XA777ES.

If you ignored its outstanding reproduction of stereo CD, the Meridian 800 would scarcely live by DVD-As alone, however, for the Version 3 has more DSP engines than you can shake a jewel box at 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, in turn, allows better use of the signal processing power in the Meridian 861 controller, which also has an improved DSP engine that does things like decode Dolby Digital with 48-bit precision.

The Meridian 861 can provide up to ten 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've heard, whether we are talking stereo, surround music, or soundtracks. If you want musical and dramatic life, rather than sheer power, this is as good as it gets.

Buying the Meridian 861 does *not* commit you to DVD-A. If you have a top SACD player, the Meridian 861 has optional six-channel analog inputs, which do a superb job sonically and provide bass management, to boot. 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 choose between different types of video switching—including component—and balanced, RCA, and digital outputs.

The Meridian 800 and 861 are equally great with video soundtracks. If you're into guilty pleasures—the first moments of *Saving Private Ryan*, the ambush sequence in *The Patriot*, and the chase sequences that almost excuse the infantile plotting and soulless acting and dialogue in the first two episodes of *Star Wars*—the soundfield, directionality, dynamic range, deep bass, and sheer excitement are truly superb. My reference

DREAM THEATER

Lexicon 12B is an excellent unit in its own right, and much easier to set up and adjust to a given room than the Meridian 861, but a properly-set-up Meridian 861 pulls everything together just that much better and seems (not unexpectedly) to develop a real synergy in combo with the 800.

The Meridian 800 and Meridian 861 immerse you in the soundtrack in ways that no other DVD player/controller combination I've heard can. You simply are less aware of the technical effects and more involved in the performance. And yes, this ability to create a coherent and convincing soundfield matters just as much with the few serious films that actually attempt to use the entire soundfield dramatically as it does with the sonic spectaculars.



For the first time, the Meridian components strip away the veils from DVD-A, allowing audiophiles to hear the kind of sound reproduction that has, until now, been possible only in a recording studio.

We still have a long, long way to go in making full use of the latest advances in home surround-sound reproduction. The video industry has been appallingly slow to realize that the soundtrack for DVDs should be reengineered to take advantage of a home system's soundfield resolution, which is now far better than that of a movie theater. In fact, there sometimes seems to be an inverse correlation between the quality of the movie and the willingness to take advantage of the new 6.1 and 7.1 options available from Dolby and DTS.

The Meridian 800 and 861, however, do a great job of getting the best out of Dolby and DTS. Performance with the Dolby EX and DTS 6.1 soundtrack in the special extended edition of the *Lord of the Rings* was superb in conveying the music, dialogue, and sound effects. The quality of the movie's musical score, and the skill with which low-level musical passages reinforced the dramatic effects, came through more clearly than with

the Lexicon MC-12B, and dynamics were truly exceptional.

The Meridian 800 and 861 also offer some of the best execution of Dolby Pro Logic II I've heard. Even quiet ambient passages like the forest scenes in an older film like *The Last of the Mohicans* are handled so well that they make a more significant contribution to enjoying the movie. (In passing, the video quality of the Meridian 800 and of video switching in the Meridian 861 seemed excellent on a calibrated 65" Mitsubishi, with both movies and test discs.)

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 and today's film soundtracks.

SPECIFICATIONS

861 Controller Version 3

Inputs: Up to twelve 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

Decoding formats: Pro Logic II, THX, THX EX, TV Logic, Dolby Digital (AC-3), DTS, MPEG Audio and MPEG Surround, Music, Trifield, Ambisonics, Super Stereo, Music Logic

Dimensions: 18.9" x 6.9" x 16.2"

Weight: 30 lbs. (typical configuration)

Price: \$13,745-\$19,000 (depending on configuration)

800 CD/DVD Player Version 3

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 twelve analog or digital inputs; digital inputs support 32kHz, 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, or 96kHz sampling, up to 24-bit precision

Outputs: Up to ten 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: 32 lbs. (typical configuration)

Price: \$19,440-\$20,735 (depending on configuration)

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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