

Meridian 808 Signature Reference CD Player

Sue Kraft

From the company that made the first-ever musical-sounding CD player—a new reference model to dream about



Talk about the mother of all dream assignments. Ten years ago, as an audiophile civilian, I had to literally beg the local hi-fi dealer for a brief, in-home audition of the now classic Meridian 508.24 CD player. The store owner cautioned he'd have to stand in my living room and wait for me to finish during the demo, but changed his mind when I (jokingly) mentioned how I sometimes preferred the uninhibited freedom of listening *au naturel*. (Trust me folks, this is a near foolproof tactic to discourage pesky hi-fi dealers and manufacturers from hanging around to watch while you listen.

Today, in a particularly delightful reversal of fortune, TAS Editor Wayne Garcia nonchalantly dropped me an e-bomb wondering if I might be interested in reviewing none other than the Meridian 808 Signature Reference, which just happens to be *the best* CD-only playback system ever offered by the world leader in digital technology. Could anyone with more than a single brain cell possibly say no?

The Meridian 808 couldn't be more perfect for someone like me, who has no need for a player with video capabilities and two decades worth of compact discs sardined into every nook and cranny of her house. I jumped on the SACD bandwagon early when the Sony SCD-1 was first introduced, only to be sorely disappointed a year or two later when there were still only a few hundred SACD titles available. Next time around, I'll keep a tighter grip on my wallet until there's sufficient music to go along with the new high-resolution formats.

At present, with SACD as well as DVD-Audio nearly defunct, the 808's only mission in life is to extract every last bit of information possible from the millions of titles that are

available now—and for many years to come—on CD. Celebrating its 20th anniversary as the inventor of the very first audiophile-quality CD player, Meridian has marketed the limited edition as the finest CD playback it presently has to offer. Every component of this precision-built dream-machine has been handpicked for its sonic merits, right down to the last capacitor and resistor.

For comparative purposes, it would've been nice had I been able to conduct a shootout of all the top-flight players currently available. But then in a perfect world, I'd be 30 years younger and in a bikini on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, instead of bent over a keyboard trying to describe the indescribable. (If you're going to dream, you might as well dream big.) I've had the opportunity to experience a number of upper-echelon CD players in recent years, and although I wouldn't complain if I had to live with any one of them, overall, I'd easily rate the 808 as the best I've heard to date.

The toughest part of this review has been trying to decide which of the 808's qualities impressed me the most. There were several that just plain skyrocketed off the charts. The first is a spaciousness and three-dimensionality that I can't imagine getting any better. The 808 has an eerily realistic soundspace that

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can fool you into thinking you're a fly on the wall in the recording studio. I say "fly on the wall" because, depending on the recording venue, you can hear the walls, including the oft-times elusive backwall. As far as depth of soundstage is concerned, you can't get any deeper than that. Spatial cues and boundaries are so clearly defined that you'll sense air and (in live recordings) bodies in front of you. It's rather uncanny at first, as I initially thought my listening abilities had finally become so well honed I could predict notes before they were played. What I was hear-

Inside Meridian's 808

As with Meridian's 800 CD/DVD player, the 808 starts with a specially selected triple-beam, multi-speed DVD-ROM drive. The drive makes multiple passes over sections of the disc where errors are detected, reportedly reducing the need for error correction by a hundredfold. The datastream from the disc is then buffered by the first of four FIFO (first-in, first-out) buffers. Data enter the buffer with imprecise timing and are clocked out with a low-jitter clock. These FIFO buffers are employed at various stages in the digital-processing chain. The output clock that controls the DACs is located on the analog-output card right next to the DACs. Because of these anti-jitter measures, Meridian claims the 808 has the lowest clock jitter of any CD player they've measured—less than 90 picoseconds, with the jitter frequency held below 0.1Hz. In most CD players and digital processors, the jitter is highly correlated with the audio signal, increasing the audibility of jitter-induced sonic artifacts.

The 808 is also special in its application of proprietary digital signal processing (DSP) to upsample the 44.1kHz, 16-bit data to 176.4kHz, 24-bit for conversion to analog. The DSPs also run Meridian's "Resolution Enhancement" algorithm. The player employs more powerful DSPs (three devices with a combined computing power of 150MIPS) than any previous player, which allows Meridian to run more sophisticated upsampling and resolution-enhancement algorithms. More powerful DSPs also provide greater precision in the intermediate calculations (in the 808's case, 72-bit), resulting in less requantizing error in the final 24-bit output signal.

The analog output stage is an all-new design, as is the power supply. The balanced output signal is created in the analog domain after the DACs. This means there's an additional active stage in the analog signal path for the balanced outputs compared with the unbalanced jacks.

The 808 is available with an optional built-in preamplifier (808i) for those who require the flexibility of additional analog and digital inputs. Both versions come with analog balanced and unbalanced outputs, which can be either fixed for connection to an outboard preamplifier or variable to connect directly to an amplifier. Either the 808 or 808i will output high-resolution upsampled digital audio for connection directly to Meridian's digital loudspeakers. **RH and SK**

ing was the 808's astonishing level of infinitesimal inner detail tipping me off with the slightest bit of air or body movement that a note was about to be played. I also thought I heard musical notes (some kind of percussive instrument) traveling down the side wall in my listening room. One time it was so distinct, I turned my head to follow it past where I was seated. Like I said, uncanny. (Or perhaps, I'm finally ready for the rubber room.)

Next, but no less impressive, is the startling speed and supremely powerful yet superbly effortless dynamics of the 808. In last issue's review of the Credo loudspeaker, I attributed nearly jumping out of my skin while listening to Stanton Moore's *Flyin' the Coop* [Blue Thumb] to the McCormack DNA-500 amplifier. Though 500W of power is certainly capable of turning your bass driver into a sledgehammer, the 808 deserves the credit for turning that sledgehammer into a wrecking ball. It isn't the loudness that makes you jump, but the lightning fast contrast between soft and loud. It's like someone sneaking up behind you in the dead of night and setting off a firecracker. These stunningly natural dynamic contrasts were also evident in the quietest passages—you didn't need to be blasting off cannons to hear the force, speed, and precision of every last note. (To clarify, the use of the word "force" here doesn't mean the music is forward or in your face. I am referring to the way a note is naturally propelled from an instrument.)

With all due respect to the Meridian G08, in comparison to the 808, the sound was rather crude, unrefined—and slow. I couldn't help but laugh the first time I did a side-by-side comparison. I wasn't laughing at the G08, but rather at the dramatic difference between the two players. What's scary is that the G08 is still better than a whole lot of other CD players out there. (It's been my reference source since I first wrote about the Meridian G Series system back in Issue 152.)

On track 17 of Andreas Vollenweider's *Cosmopoly* [Kin Kou] the flute sounded thin and shrill with the G08. Image outlines were somewhat blurred and indistinct, even overlapping at times. Funny thing, though: You'd actually think it sounded pretty good until you plugged in the 808. When listening to the same cut through the 808, I found myself wishing I knew more about the intricacies of woodwind instruments so I could better understand and describe what I was hearing. The identical notes were now full-bodied, clear, and distinct, while also notably faster and propelled with greater force and precision through the instrument. The comparison wasn't even close.

Along with vocals, piano has to be one of the most difficult instruments to accurately reproduce on a sound system. I can recall in the early days always bringing a solo piano recording along to auditions, as I believed if the piano was right, everything else would be right as well. I was almost always disappointed. Again, with all due respect to the G08, listening to Jeff Bjorck's *Pure Piano Panoramas* [BMI] I could hear notes, but there was no piano. Or at best, the piano itself was relatively indistinct. Through the 808, the front-to-back depth of the soundstage was so clear I could "see" exactly where the piano was positioned along with the performer playing it. I could follow hands mov-



ing along the keys. Each note had exceptional weight, clarity, body, and extension at both frequency extremes. It sounded as if the keys were attached to a massive instrument, instead of just floating around in space—pretty spectacular, actually.

The only downside to this player (if you can call it a downside) is that results will vary according to the quality of the recording as well as associated equipment. A bad recording is a bad recording. As my grandmother use to say, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. That said, I spent a fair amount of time listening to vintage rock with surprisingly good results. A body can only sit for so long like a statue in the sweet spot scribbling notes. This time around I stretched my legs with *The Best of Rare Earth* [Motown]. It felt good to relive a few moments from my youth, even if it meant walking hunched over for three days until I could straighten my back again.

Before concluding, I'd like to briefly mention (with a spot more detail) how the 808 compares to a few other players I've heard, like the Wadia 861se and Audio Aero Capitole. I have to rely on my aging memory here, so I can't be too specific. While the 861se is built like a tank and performs well in many respects, it has a rather pronounced sonic signature that in my view prevents it from being a contender. There's just too much coloration for my taste. (With a whole slew of new Wadia products on the horizon, it might be interesting to hear how those compare.) The Capitole, on the other hand, is extremely detailed and musical, but doesn't hold a candle to the impressive dynamics of the 808, at least not in the version that I auditioned. Without a direct comparison, it's tough to say whether or not the Capitole trumps the 808 when it comes to musicality, but I'd venture it's in the same league in that regard.

So, at \$12,995 does the Meridian 808 sound three times better than the G08 retailing for just under \$4k? I wish I could conclusively say it does, but how do we measure such things? Some may think it's *more* than three times better. I do know you'll have a tough time going back to the G08 after hearing the 808, and I'm not just saying that so you'll run out and re-finance your home to buy one. I'm saying that because *I'm* having a tough time going back to the G08, and I can't imagine any card-carrying audiophile or music lover who wouldn't.

High-resolution aside, I'm astonished by the amount of information still left to be extracted from a 20-year-old format, the compact disc. Based on two decades of listening almost exclusively to digital, I feel confident in saying there can't be a company more qualified to do the extracting than Meridian. For those who are wondering, I bought the 508.24 and never looked back. If I could afford it, I'd already own the 808 Signature Reference.

Robert Harley comments on the Meridian 808

I've had a Meridian 808 in my reference system for about three months and frankly, can't imagine my system without it. For starters the 808 has a wonderfully detailed and highly resolved presentation. I was simply floored by the 808's ability to present fine nuances of instrumental timbre, micro-dynamic shadings, and low-level spatial cues. No detail, no matter how small, escaped the 808's scrutiny. Instrumental timbre was presented with such a wealth of inner detail that the instrument sounded more lifelike and less like a synthetic recreation. In fact, the 808 makes many other digital front-ends sound coarse by comparison.

This extremely high resolution is also responsible, I believe, for the 808's spectacular sense of soundstage size, depth, air between images, and its vivid portrayal of the surrounding acoustic. The impression of clearly delineated instruments bathed in, but distinct from, hall reverberation was the best I've heard from digital. Moreover, depth was presented along a continuum from the soundstage front to the deepest recesses of the soundstage rear rather than along a few discrete steps. Quiet instruments at the back of the stage were audible even in the

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presence of louder instruments. The 808's spatial presentation must be heard to be believed—and this from Red Book CD.


One might infer from this description that the 808 is analytical and cold, sacrificing musicality for resolution. But in what is surely the 808's greatest triumph, the player delivers this vast amount of information to the listener in a totally natural, musical, graceful, and involving way. In fact, the 808 had a somewhat laid-back perspective, along with a tremendous sense of ease. There was absolutely no hint of the etch, forwardness, or hype that one often hears from digital that tries to be "high resolution." Real musical information is presented in the gentle way that one hears in live music, not as hi-fi fireworks. The 808's combination of ease and resolution is unprecedented in my experience. The result was an impression of physical relaxation on one hand and heightened intellectual and emotional stimulation (by the music) on the other.

I must also comment on the 808's extremely smooth, refined, and liquid midrange and treble. Timbres were free from grain and glare, and the top end lacked the metallic quality often heard from CD. Reproduction of upper-register piano notes is often marred by a glassy sheen on leading-edge transients; the 808 exhibited less of this phenomenon, allowing higher playback levels and a more involving experience.

Listening to the 808 and thinking about how it differs from other highly regarded digital front ends I've heard reminded me of the difference between hearing a microphone feed and then the playback of that feed from 1/2" analog tape. I had this experience often when I was a working recording engineer. The excitement of getting good sound from the microphones was inevitably tempered by the degradation imposed by the storage medium, even high-quality analog. The microphone feed had a certain life, presence, and realism—the result of its high resolution without exaggerated detail—that was lost after storage on tape. The recording process scrubbed off a bit of the low-level information and in the process, some of the music's magic. That's how I feel about the 808 in relation to many other digital sources—many of which cost more than the 808. It says much about the Meridian's combination of ease and resolution to invite the prodigious comparison with a microphone feed.

Many British products, including those from Meridian, could be described as polite and reserved, favoring refinement over big dynamics, deep bass extension, and the ability to rock. The 808 breaks free from this stereotype with an extremely big, robust, and viscerally thrilling sound on rock and large-scale orchestral music. The midbass leans toward articulation rather than warmth, but the extreme bottom-end is solid and punchy.

The 808 also exhibited a remarkable sense of ease during loud, dense passages; the music remained coherent rather than degenerating into a collection of sounds.

Finally, the 808 is an outstanding DVD-Audio player. Yes, the 808 plays most DVD-A discs, although you'd never know that from Meridian's literature or even from reading the front-panel logos. I tried more than a dozen DVD-A titles and every one played. In fact, it was a joy to play DVD-A titles without navigating a menu system on a video display. It was with DVD-A discs that truly revealed the extent of the 808's resolving power and musicality. As great as the 808 is on CD, DVD-A discs take the machine's sonic performance to the next level. 

MANUFACTURER/DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

MERIDIAN AMERICA INC.

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Price: \$12,995

SPECIFICATIONS

Formats: CD Audio, CD-R, CD-RW, MP3

Type of outputs: Analog balanced and unbalanced; digital S/PDIF, coax with MHR plus aux coax

Dimensions: 18.9" x 6.9" x 16.2"

Weight: 40 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Meridian G08 and Marantz PMD-320 CD players; AVA Ultra DAC; Meridian G02 control unit, Sonic Euphoria passive, and Van Alstine Ultra preamps; Meridian G57, Atma-Sphere Novacron OTL, and McCormack DNA-500 amps; Coincident Super Eclipse, Von Schweikert VR4jr, B&W 800D and 704 speakers; Coincident TRS, Paul Speltz anti-cable, and Harmonic Technology speaker cables; Harmonic Technology and Audio Magic interconnects; Cardas RCA to XLR adapters; Elrod, JPS power cords; Bright Star Audio and Symposium Svelte shelves; Chang Lightspeed Encounter; PS Audio Ultimate outlet; Echo Busters, ASC room treatment