

Meridian Sooloos 2.1 Music Server system



by Alan Sircom

Meridian Audio's commanding reputation for digital audio wasn't just built upon CD, but Meridian and CD are intrinsically linked. Back at the very start of Compact Disc, Meridian was among the very first companies to make a player. Prior to CD, the company was noted for amps and loudspeakers, and it still makes a broad range of equipment and even licenses key technologies like Meridian Lossless Packing, but in the public domain Meridian is known for its CD players.

The trouble with that perceived link is what happens next, when CD's significance as a prime source begins to fall away? Meridian cleverly recognised this a few years back, and acquired the Sooloos music server system. The first iteration was very Sooloos, but with the latest version 2.1, Meridian and Sooloos are beginning to look like a happy marriage. Given the changes in the market over the last year or two, the wedding happened at just the right time.

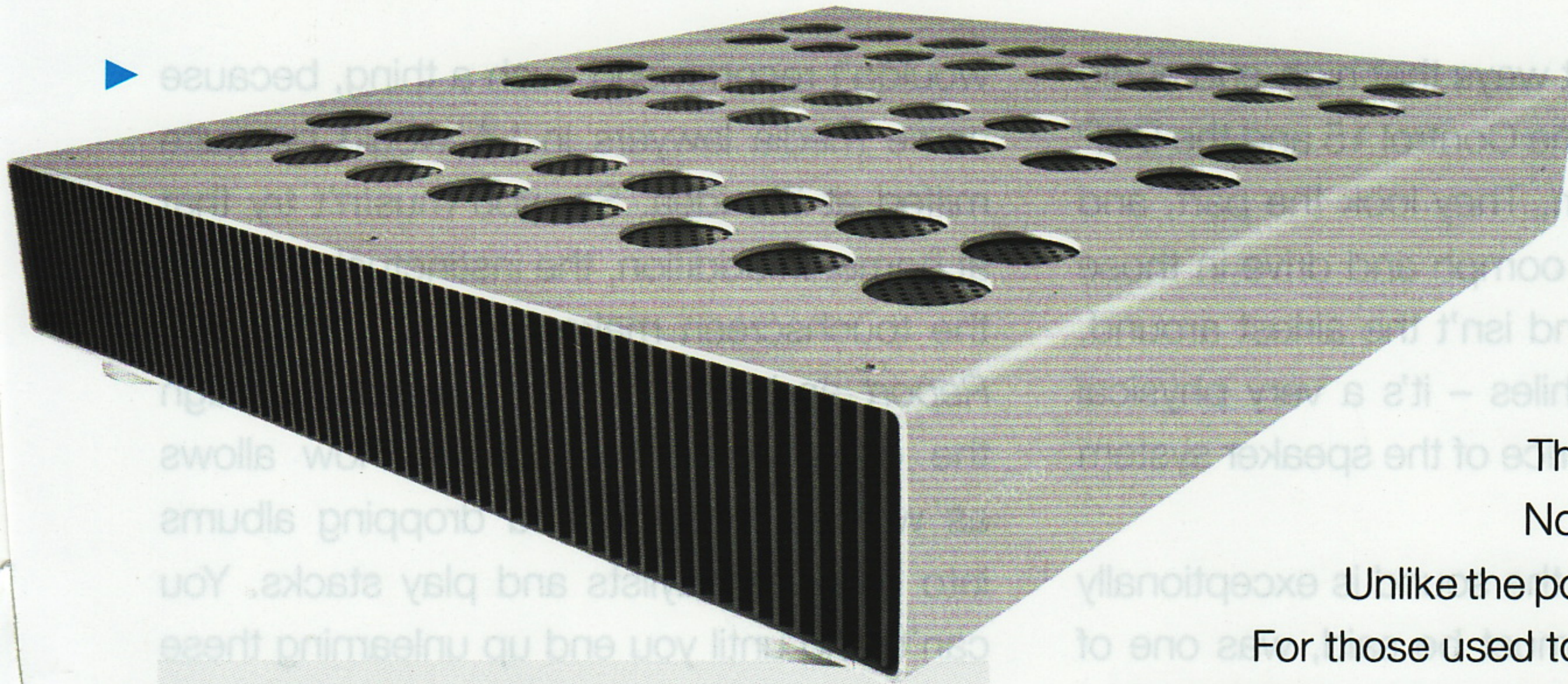
The difficulty with music servers are two fold. First, there's the task of explaining to existing audiophiles why storing your music on a hard drive is a good thing. Then, there's the Argument from Economy – why should I pay money for a music server when any PC or Mac can do the same for free? Both are hard questions to answer for any company, but the Meridian Sooloos comes with a surprisingly simple and identical answer for both – try it!

It breaks down into a range of component parts, as configurable and flexible as it's possible to be. The easy solution is to start with a Control 15. This is the most visible version of the Meridian Sooloos system.

This comprises a touchscreen that rests on a combination CD drive, hard disk drive and electronics to get you up and running. This would allow you to rip and store 1,000 discs losslessly and can either connect to your inevitably-expanding Meridian Sooloos system (and the interweb) through Ethernet, S/PDIF and Meridian active speakers through an Ethernet-like connection.

From there, expansion is key. You want more storage or backup? The Meridian Sooloos TwinStore with its two drive bays (one store, one mirrored backup) is the key. To add Sooloos to a system without digital audio inputs, the SourceOne will cover the bases, while an Ensemble will add up to four separate room 'zones'. Those after the best sound quality will plump for an ID40 card to fit into Meridian's 808.3 CD player. 'Finally' (no such thing – the system keeps evolving) comes the Media Source 600, which give the system greater flexibility, such as control from an iPhone, iPad or a custom install remote.

We're not finished. The Ensemble allows the user to specify two different storage standards at the same time. In other words, ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Meridian Sooloos 2.1 Music Server

Control 15

Touchscreen panel size: 17" diagonal, 1280x1024 pixels

Network connections: One Ethernet (RJ-45)

Audio connections: One SPDIF coaxial output on RCA jack, one Meridian SpeakerLink

Control connections: Meridian Comms, RS232

Disc drive: CD drive for importing CDs

Dimensions (WHD): 45.7x34.5x18.5cm

Weight: 10.75kg

Source: One one-zone system/net hub

TwinStore system storage

Ensemble zone player with storage

Network connections: Ethernet (RJ-45):

x1 for TwinStore and Ensemble, x4 for Source:One

Audio connections: RCA analogue

audio inputs (1x Ensemble, 4x

Source:One) One SPDIF coaxial

output on RCA jack (Ensemble and

Source:One)

Disc drive: 2x 1TB mirrored as standard (TwinStore and Ensemble only)

Dimensions (WHD): 43x7x36.4cm

Weight: 5.8kg

Prices: £4,750 (Control 15)

£2,995 (Ensemble, 1TB)

£2,300 (TwinStore, 1TB)

£2,735 (Source:One)

£1,750 (Media Source 600)

Manufacturer: Meridian Audio.

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lossless for good audio standards and MP3 for your iPod or similar. The standard configuration for Ensemble or TwinStore is a 1TB music storage space, but that can be scaled up to larger drives. Or you can add more TwinStores. You can even stream to or from a PC or Mac.

The possibilities are open-ended.

Not everything in the Sooloos garden is rosy, though.

Unlike the possibilities, the storage options are not without limits.

For those used to configuring their own systems, the inability for the Meridian Sooloos package to work from a NAS box seems a fatal flaw. It limits options to Meridian Sooloos-shaped ones. In the real world, though, this is not so much of a problem – those who invest in a Sooloos are looking for a plug-and-play solution installed by an expert, rather than a pick ‘n’ mix system designed by geeks for geeks.

Music server systems stand or fall on their interface. I know this is a hard thing for a magazine devoted to sound quality to say, but the reality is that the best sounding system with the worst interface will quickly end up an ex-product. This where the Meridian Sooloos shines out. Part of the reason why comes down to the way it populates its metadata. Normally, music servers run off to a music database like CDDB to find out about a disc. If this first pass is unsuccessful, it goes looking at Allmusic, and so on, until it finds details, or gives up. The Meridian Sooloos goes metadata hunting in a different manner. Data from each music database is used to populate a far more thorough set of categories. Better still, these are then uploaded to a special Meridian extranet of rich CD metadata. You can access this and correct details like a Wiki page, and the more users load up a wide range of discs, so the database expands organically. This doesn't just make Meridian's users have access to a special place, but it absolutely enhances the musical experience. No, really!

Meridian Sooloos calls it ‘swimming’. Say you play a piece of music, and the drumming sounds particularly good. So good in fact that you call up the database information on that drummer, get shown a list of albums you own that he plays on, pick a track, follow the recording engineer to the next album, the lyricist of which leads you to the next, and so on. You can make this into a playlist, place music into a stack to be played now or next or in a few tracks time. You can – at any time – abandon your swimming lesson and go back to the main list of albums, a filtered list according to a world of different parameters, a list dominated by your previous swim, then switch back and forward. Bear in mind that at all times, this process is largely intuitive and a one-finger control interface. Short of poaching Apple's distinctive and excellent Cover Flow system, it's hard to think of a more easy to drive system. That it translates so easily to the small display of the iPhone without losing large swathes of functionality in the process shows just how good the interface is. In fact, this is the sort of functionality that doesn't translate to the written word, because it would take you longer to read this sentence than it would to begin to intuitively ‘get’ the Meridian Sooloos screen.

Of course, the Meridian Sooloos system slots into a lot of other Meridian Audio equipment. A very fine, heavily ‘tomorrow’ system uses the Sooloos front end with Meridian Active DSP5200 loudspeakers, which is a useful way to assess the performance as a complete package. This is likely to be the way many new systems will attract new clientele, the other being using the digital or analogue audio outputs of different Sooloos components through other people's audio systems. The Meridian Active does show off how much you can do with digital today, and it's an impressive package.

▶ This has to represent one of the most coherent ways that high-end audio will reach new customers. The 17" touchscreen of the Control 15 and the DSP speakers can be the only components in the room. They look the part, and sound as impressive as they look. There's a lot of oomph and drive in those floorstanders and – while the Meridian Active sound isn't the airiest around, which may not appeal to more traditional audiophiles – it's a very physical approach to music, far more so than the size and price of the speaker system would suggest.

Both in and out of the context of that system, the sound is exceptionally good from the Meridian Sooloos system. This, it must be said, was one of the biggest criticisms laid at the door of the early iterations of the system – great interface, shame about the sound. This has been addressed by the digital engineers at Meridian, because it sounds, er, Meridian-y. It has that accurate, precise and detailed, if 'dark' sound. Like its CD players, this falls somewhere in between the exuberance, excitement and entertainment of a good Naim CD and the detailed, analytical sound of dCS. If that sounds like a compromise position, it's not meant to; instead the Meridian Sooloos treads a fine line between stark accuracy and sacrificing that accuracy for artificial entertainment.

Expensive source components often fall short into one of three broad camps: those that 'pimp up' the sound to make it seem slightly more exciting than it really is; those that deliver all the information you could ever need, but somewhere down the line forget that it's music; and those that try to skate between these two opposites, but end up making something bland in the process. Fortunately, not all products fall short; some come up sounding fantastic. The Meridian 808.3 player is one such example, it manages to make the sound detailed and entertaining at once.

The reason why I'm rolling out all these comparisons with CD players is two fold. Most of us are more familiar with players than music servers, so mentioning CD sound is a handy frame of reference. More importantly, as the Meridian Sooloos has the game-raising option of driving an 808.3, it's fair sport. It's also good to set the Meridian Sooloos sound in context; the Meridian Sooloos, played through its digital out or through a Meridian Active system is better than most CD players, barring the likes of the 808.3. When hooked to an 808.3, the CD transport mechanism is still the ultimately best way of making digital music, but the gap between CD and computer sound is much smaller than you might imagine.

Part of the reason why the lesser CD players fail to shine compared to the Sooloos system comes down to the ripping system. Using Exact Audio Copy, the Meridian Sooloos can take its time to extract the information that might otherwise get skipped over when played live. The Reed-Solomon error correction on the fly in a CD is very good, but it doesn't compare to EAC's ability to chew through a disc at a snail's pace to get the best sound.

This also serves to reinforce the concept that FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec – the lossless file format used by the Meridian Sooloos system) really is without loss for the music lover (if you are importing music from online sources, go for FLAC or ALAC if possible). There are still those who prefer to use AIFF or .WAV uncompressed audio files for their music, but if it takes the pinnacle of Meridian CD replay to find a player that can show up the Sooloos, you have to wonder if this is an argument on sonic grounds, or ideology.

The limits are few and far between. American users can hook up with Rhapsody, vastly extending their music collection with no loss of metadata or swimming capabilities. Unfortunately, the same option is not open to us damn foreigners, unless we know a way of getting a Rhapsody account. But we

wouldn't recommend such a thing, because some media lawyers in LA would be quite miffed at the idea. So, you mustn't try that at home. In addition, the instinctual nature of the touchscreen makes you go all *Minority Report* and assume you can spin through the discs like Apple's Cover Flow allows as well as dragging and dropping albums into different playlists and play stacks. You can't, and until you end up unlearning these actions, their non-appearance is somewhat frustrating. This shouldn't be overstated though – I'd like the elevators at the Empire State Building to go right to the observation deck from the lobby, and not have to change on the 80th floor, but that doesn't mean the view from that 86th floor deck isn't worth it. The same's true here – the benefits of the Meridian Sooloos system far outweigh the early knee of the learning curve.

Canny audio companies are coming up with complete audiophile replacements for the giveaway programs that dominate the modern music scene. In some cases, this action is questionable – too many companies seem to forget that when you pay for something, it has to do better than the thing you get for free. Sooloos sussed this long before it hooked up with Meridian, and now it gets the digital audio expertise to help make it sound as good as it works.

The big question that keeps getting asked in this time of transition, "is it for me?" In the case of the Meridian Sooloos, that depends on what you bring to the musical experience. If you have a small collection of discs that you play in a linear, logical manner, then a lot of what the Sooloos offers is of little more than academic interest. If your way of selecting what you listen to stays on the straight and narrow, and you never once have one of those "that reminds me..." moments where you start browsing your collection in search of that bass line or other works from the lead violinist, the Meridian Sooloos is overkill. But not all of us think that way. For some, the joy of music is as much exploring where it takes you; not just in terms of what that particular piece does for your emotions, but how you get from Mozart to Metallica and back again in an evening. The Meridian Sooloos not only facilitates such exploration, it positively revels in it. The fact it turns in a very good sound too is almost icing on the cake. +