

TONEAudio.

ISSUE 19. 2008

MERIDIAN DSP7200
DIGITAL SIGNAL PROCESSING LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM



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MERIDIAN

Style and Performance



**The Meridian DSP7200 Speakers
And 808.2i CD Player**

By Jeff Dorgay



Walking from room to room through the high-performance audio section of the Consumer Electronics show, you will see a plethora of monstrous power cables, speaker cables, isolation devices and other intricacies that help a great HiFi system sound its best.

However, when I walked into the Meridian room, things were different indeed. They had a pair of the DSP7200 speakers on display plugged into the wall with standard power cords, and a couple of RJ-45 cables between their 808.2 CD player and the two speakers. The 808.2 was not placed on top of a \$10,000 equipment rack, but on the spindly little table that was part of the room furniture.

Bob Stuart, the head of Meridan Audio, walked over and said, "How does it sound?" When I told him it sounded very good, he said,

**"Is that US good or UK good."
I enthusiastically replied, "UK good!"**

For those of you not getting the joke, the British tend to be a little more understated when they talk about their creations.

In keeping with my philosophy that there are plenty of people who want great sound but do not want to become audiophiles with racks of gear and large cables that resemble giant reptiles on their living room floors, Meridian offers nirvana in a rather tidy fashion. *(continued)*

Now You Can Have It All

That's right. The combination of Meridian's new 808.2 player and their DSP7200 powered speakers offer up some of the most musically satisfying sound I've ever lived with, and you can hook it up in five minutes. A quick trip to your local electronics store for a pair of RJ45 cables that one would normally use to hook up an ethernet router is all you will need. It was pretty exciting to spend \$30 on cable at Best Buy to outfit my entire system. The only other thing required is a strong back or a few strong friends to help with setup, as the DSP7200's weigh 121 pounds each.

My test pair of DSP7200's came in a gorgeous light-silver metallic that was the equal of anything I've seen from Wilson or any other premium loudspeaker manufacturer. You can order custom colors if the standard black, silver or wood finishes won't suffice, but I really appreciated the silver. With the black speaker grilles, they blended into my living room as well as a pair of 43-inch tall speakers can.

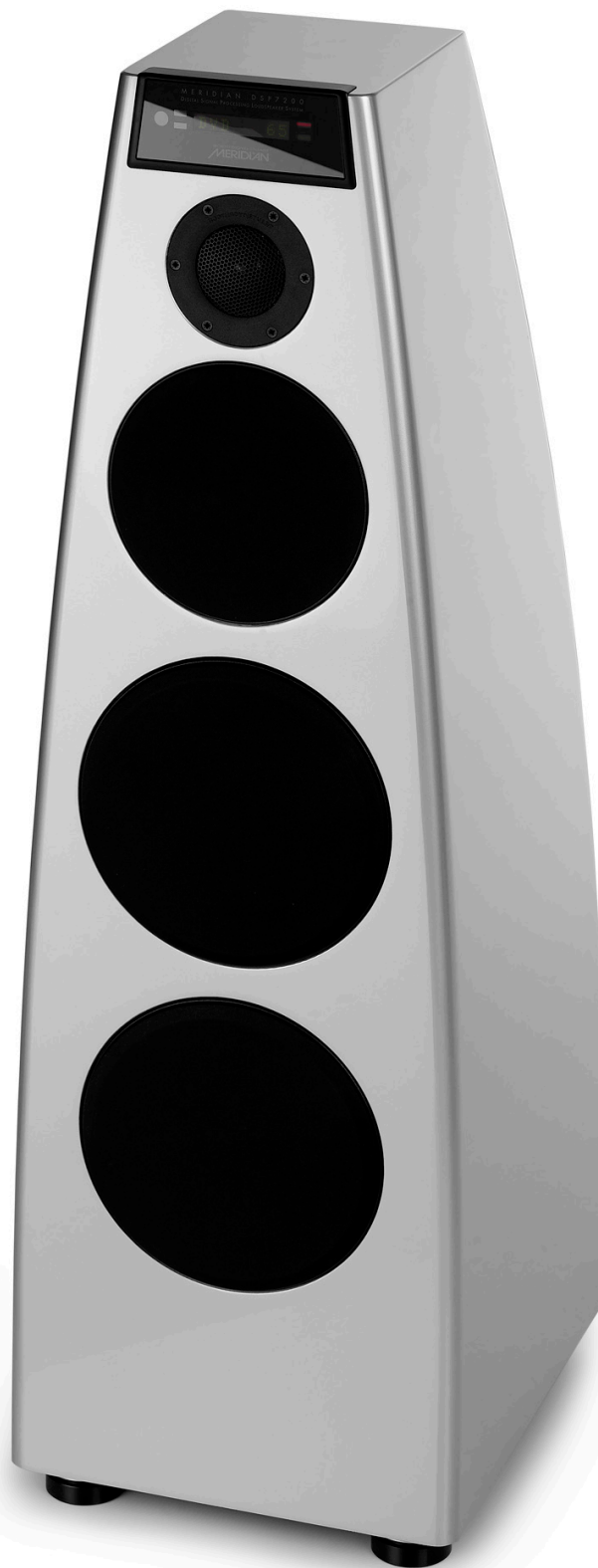
There are some sweeping heatsink fins on the rear face of the DSP7200's where the four individual 100-watt power amplifiers are located. These are traditional amplifiers, not ICE modules, class T, etc. and I'm sure that is a big part of what contributes to the sound (and weight) of the DSP 7200's, but the sound is worth it.

Way down on the bottom of the speakers is a small finned cover held on by Torx screws for accessing the IEC socket for the AC cords and the inputs. Meridian thoughtfully encloses a tool for you to accomplish this along with a comprehensive instruction manual and that great, backlit remote for which Meridian is famous.



Setup

This is the shortest setup section you will ever read in a TONEAudio review. Uncrate the speakers and remove the small, machined plates on the bottom of the speakers. Using Meridian's "Speaker Link" technology, new on the 7200 but easily retrofitted to past Meridian active speakers, you run the appropriate length of RJ-45 (standard Ethernet cable) between the speaker marked "master" and the other marked "left." Run one more cable from the 808.2 to the input of the master speaker. Power up the speakers and power up the 808.2. *(continued)*





Done. That's it. Grab the remote and start listening to music. You can probably spend another half hour fine-tuning the speaker position, but I'd wait about 50 hours or so until the electronics and speakers are fully broken in. If you place the DSP7200's about 2 feet from the rear wall and anywhere from 5-10 feet apart, you'll be in the ballpark.

To keep in the spirit of this product, I spent most of my time playing the DSP7200/808.2 combination with the stock power cables and no line conditioning of any kind, just the way I saw it demonstrated at CES. Because all of my reference gear plays through Running Springs Line conditioners and a mixture of Running Springs and Shunyata power cords, I did explore this option after I was thoroughly familiar with the system. As in any mega high-performance system, attention to this detail will result in wringing the last bit of performance the Meridian gear is capable of, but you will be 97 percent of the way there right out of the shipping cartons.

You can also set the electronic equivalent of adjusting the rake (or time alignment) of the speakers and, last but not least, there are bass, treble and balance controls. Which brings us to my only complaint about this system: The balance control is difficult to access. My only suggestion would be to reprogram the remote so that the balance control is right by the volume control. Ok, one more idea: perhaps a valet remote to access only basic functions (power on, volume, balance, source), as the system remote is somewhat daunting to casual users.

A Great Case For Active Speakers

That's the short version of the setup procedure. The DSP processing inside the 7200's allows you to custom tune the speakers to your environment. There are four settings that let you tailor the bass response to your room, depending on where the speakers are placed. There are options for close-to-the-wall placement, two for corner placement and one for the speakers being further out in the room. This worked wonders in my living room because I have limited placement options. The corner-placement setting worked like a charm. Every other floorstanding speaker that I have tried to use in my living room always has delivered too much bass.

Moving the speakers out into my main listening environment, with a fully treated room and the luxury of moving the speakers well into the room, only required resetting the DSP after initial placement. This feature makes the DSP7200's a great candidate for a long-term HiFi purchase because you will be able to adapt them to your next listening room as well. *(continued)*

Most of my friends who are accustomed to the mad-scientist lair in my studio, with all those giant cables, were astonished to find only two diminutive cables in my living room with the Meridian system. It usually took a few minutes for them to ask, "Where did all the cables go?" Quite a few wives commented that they would let their husbands buy a system like this, "with no wires." A few balked at the price tag, but keep in mind that Meridian does offer a number of active speakers ranging in price from about \$5,000 a pair, so this technology is within the reach of any music lover.

When you consider that you are getting speakers, amplifier, preamplifier and a DAC in one package, as well as eliminating a number of pricey interconnects, speaker cables and an expensive equipment rack, the DSP7200 actually is quite a bargain.

A Few More Thoughts on Setup

Remember the DSP7200's have a full 24 bit 128x upsampling DAC inside, so you don't have to have an 808.2 as a program source, although you will benefit from the additional digital filtering present in the 808.2. This combination offers the most for which the DSP7200's are capable. The other advantage to using an 808.2 as a control center is the flexibility that it gives your HiFi system, with six analog inputs and three more digital inputs.

While the 808.2 will give the highest quality digital reproduction mated with the DSP7200's, I had excellent luck with a few other digital sources. Both the Sooloos music server and the Wadia i170 dock were fantastic when used as source components, with the

Wadia providing the ultimate in a high-performance, low-profile music system. Note: As we were a week away from our publish date, Meridian announced that they have just acquired Sooloos. Bob Stuart was tight-lipped about future Sooloos products, though he did assure me that Sooloos and Meridian are an excellent fit for both parties and that we can expect even greater synergy between these two product lines.

Another great combination was using the digital output of the Meridian F80. This certainly got the nod from everyone that experienced it as the most fashionable implementation of a full Meridian system. Perhaps Meridian will introduce a version of the F80 that is a transport to be used specifically with their digital speakers?

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Should you still have a vinyl collection, you will not be disappointed with the 808.2 when using a turntable and proper phono stage. Thanks to the high-quality DSP's in the Meridian speakers and the fact that they use discrete power amplifiers instead of ICE modules (or other class D variants) the resulting sound is much more natural. While I did spend 95 percent of my time with just the 808.2 and the DSP 7200's, I had to spend a little time with my Rega P9 and Rega los phono stage along with a Lyra Skala cartridge, just to see how it would sound. The Meridian system is the *only* DSP-based active speakers with which I can use an analog front end and still be delighted. Suffice to say that if you purchase this system, you will not want to dispose of your analog media. *(continued)*



Dynamics and More

Once the Meridian system had a few days to warm up after being tucked away in shipping cartons, I was immediately struck by the dynamic presentation of these speakers. Lovers of classical or rock music will be pleased with how effortlessly these speakers will play your favorites. With such incredible sound in my living room, I was going out to the studio less and less.

The DSP7200's have a very wide dispersion pattern, which makes them easy to be enjoyed by all. Even when lying horizontal on the couch, the presentation is still excellent. When the speakers were in my listening room, the sweet spot was huge, allowing three people to easily get comfy and enjoy the show.

While these speakers will work incredibly well in the average living room, a feat that many other audiophile speakers cannot achieve, should you have the luxury of using them in a controlled acoustic environment, they will impress even further.

One of the benefits of an active speaker is the ability to match the amplification to the drivers more carefully and to implement somewhat more accurate and complex crossover designs in the digital domain, which may not be achievable with capacitors and inductors. Being a panel guy, this is one of my hot buttons, and the DSP7200 exhibits some of the most seamless driver integration I have ever heard with a cone speaker at any price.

Dynamics and coherence are worthless if tonality is not up to task. Again, these speakers passed with flying colors. Solo piano and violin are reproduced with uncanny accuracy, yet all of the acoustic music I played had the right amount of body and decay. The DSP7200's are the first speakers with DSP's inside that I have heard get this critical part of acoustic-instrument tonality and resonance correct on both ends of the frequency spectrum.

I was also impressed with the ability of these speakers to reproduce dynamic contrasts in large-scale classical music as well as fairly dense rock music, being a firm believer that if a system can handle this, it will do a smashing job with your favorite solo vocalist, string quartet or jazz group. When I played the DSP7200's loud, the image did not collapse and it was still easy to pick out minute details in the presentation. This made for many extended listening sessions that were fatigue free.

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While the DSP7200's were almost too much speaker for my small living room, out in the main listening room they were able to open up further and provide a wide and deep soundstage. Thanks to the DSP correction, I was able to move the speakers far enough out into the room (52 inches was the optimum from the rear wall) that I could take full advantage of the imaging capabilities without losing the bass response.

Meridian claims that these speakers extend to 30hz, and I have no reason to doubt that claim. The dual-powered 200mm (7.85-inch) woofers are powerful and well-controlled. Those having a bigger room and needing more bass output will have to step up to a pair of Meridian's flagship DSP8000 speakers. Most rooms and budgets will do just fine with the 7200's; they are definitely a full-range speaker system.

While the sound of this system probably will not be warm enough for the audiophile who craves an all-vacuum-tube system, it does not sound at all dry or thin and probably would not be mistaken for solid state on a casual listen. Neutral is the word here.

Criticism

Other than wanting the balance control more readily available, I have nothing but praise for the DSP7200/808.2 system. This combination from Meridian offers up everything I enjoy in a high-performance music system: freedom from tonal coloration, wide dynamic range and full frequency response.

If you want to be set free from audiophile nervosa once and for all, zoom down to your Meridian dealer and buy these components right now. It took me over a year to assemble the system I have in my dedicated listening room and only about an hour to completely dial in the Meridian system in either of my rooms, both with spectacular results.

Whether you are the true music lover who does not want to be bothered with becoming an audiophile, or the seasoned audiophile that has had enough of equipment swapping, the combination of the DSP7200 and 808.2 is the most exciting solution I've yet to hear.

This is why I am happy to award the Meridian DSP7200/808.2 system our Product of the Year award. It offers high-performance, engineering excellence and impeccable style from one of the industry's finest audio companies.

That Extra .2

The obvious question on the tip of many people's tongues is "just how much better is the new model?"
(continued)



This has to be the most difficult thing for any manufacturer because, while you want to sell your customer your latest work of audio art, you don't want to alienate the loyal customer that owns the current hardware. This agony only gets worse near a new product's launch date because the customer who bought within a year of the new product could get grumpy.

David Allen from MartinLogan put it best. "People don't get pissed at Lexus, wanting their money back when a new model comes out next year. Why do they get mad at us for trying to make our products better?" Much like MartinLogan or Porsche, Meridian has always been a company that follows a path of constant evolution.

The Showdown

Fortunately, with my own 808 on hand for a reference, I did not have to rely on what I thought it sounded like. We cued up both players and just switched between input one and two on my CJ ACT2/Series 2 preamplifier.

Identical conditions made it easy to compare the two players. Both were inserted in my reference system with identical RSA Mongoose power cords and 1-meter lengths of Cardas golden reference interconnects. Our friends at Mobile Fidelity provided us with duplicate copies of a number of their recent discs and I burned dual copies of a few of my favorite discs onto MoFi 24-carat gold blanks. *(continued)*



I let both players run for 24 hours on repeat so that the system would be well warmed-up and stable. Ken Forsythe at Meridian US told me that the differences between the two would be “readily apparent.” He feels that the 808.2 had substantial upgrades in the DSP circuitry as well as the digital filtering.

While it’s his job to tell me the new widget is much better than the old one, I must agree that I, too, could hear the difference right away. I could cite references forever, but chances are good, they aren’t the 20 CD’s you like to use for reference material.

Making a long story short, the 808.2 has a more open sound than the 808 from top to bottom. There is quite a bit more air and depth to the presentation, and you don’t realize the slight bit of cloudiness in the original 808 until you switch between the two players while listening to the exact same music.

Listening to spatial cues and reverb/hall decay, everything fades out with a finer gradation before it goes to black on the 808.2. The sound-stage appears somewhat bigger and wider, almost as if I moved the speakers another foot apart.

I hate to make the comparison for those of you that aren’t major automobile aficionados, but the difference between the 808 and the 808.2 is like the difference between the last year of the Porsche 996 and the new 997. I love the 996, but the 997 is more capable in every way and feels a bit more crisp overall. But the difference isn’t brought into focus until you climb out of one and jump right into the other.

And The Winner Is...

To answer your question, yes the 808.2 reveals more music than the 808. If you do not have a statement-level CD player, this one is well worth its asking price. I’ve lived with the last version 808 for two years and it remains a stellar performer. The only dilemma would be for anyone owning a large collection of DVD-a discs. The 808.2 will not play them.

The tough question is whether the happy 808 owners in the crowd are going to want to throw down their VISA cards to make the trade up. Only your own obsession can make that call, but if you do have the room in this year’s budget, you won’t be disappointed. ●

The Meridian 808.2i and DSP7200
MSRP: \$34,995 - DSP7200
\$16,995 - 808.2i

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PERIPHERALS

Additional Digital Sources:

Sooloos Music Server, Wadia i170

Analog Source: Rega P9/
RB1000 with Rega los phono stage
and Lyra Skala cartridge

Cable: Belden RG-45 cables,
Running Springs Mongoose
power cords

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year at tonepublications.com.