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CUSTOM INSTALLATION PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Meridian Sooloos Media system

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Music distribution in the home gets us exceedingly excited, whether it be a budget system using your PC, Mac or NAS drive as the file source, or a full-on server system — as here, with the amazing Sooloos. Prices start in five figures, so not everyone will buy one. But it surely points the way.

The extraordinary Sooloos system was created in the United States, but UK company Meridian liked it so much that they bought the company, and now runs Meridian Sooloos out of its original New York office.

What so impressed them? Well, Meridian makes highly-regarded CD players, but even hardened audiophiles are coming to the realisation that etching tiny holes in silver and then trying to read them accurately with a laser may not, in fact, be a particularly purist way to get a digital music file to your amp and speakers. Today's music is recorded on a computer. You might as well play it back from one.

Computer-type storage also allows massive music libraries — but don't think Sooloos will downgrade anything to MP3 quality. Well, actually it does, but only as a secondary set of files for iPod use. The main rip is a long indexed FLAC file — FLAC is a lossless format, so your music is replayed at its original quality. Sooloos has a stringent ripping system that will reanalyse data and reimport until it is happy it has eliminated any data errors. So a scratched disc may take some time to import, but Sooloos will make every effort to get a perfect copy.

It also analyses tracks as it imports, not only popping off to the All-Music Group (AMG, of which more below) to get artist and track information, but also identifying exactly



where tracks start and stop, identifying blank stretches at the ends of songs, so that when you're running that party shuffle, there'll be no embarrassing pauses when guests stare at each other over a vol-au-vent. It also checks the average volume of every song so you can (if you wish) invoke Volume Levelling to avoid the common level variations between early CDs and crazily-pumped modern releases.

The Sooloos' other key merit is that it brings fun back to your music browsing. The aforementioned AMG access gathers the usual artist, album, track and artwork, but also pretty much every item of information publicly available — backing musicians, producers, songwriters, the artist that designed the sleeve, detailed genre classification (which you can, thankfully, amend), it's all there. And it's all

cross-referenced. So if you're playing *Led Zeppelin II*, say, and tap 'Credits', you might find Eddie Kramer as engineer. Tap Eddie, and you can see what else from your collection he appears on — we were intrigued to find he played vibraphone on *Magical Mystery Tour*.

How unexpected. Let's listen to that.

The result is that you're led quickly away from the technology to a focus on the music.

Applause. That's what hi-fi is all about.

And we haven't even mentioned the glorious 17-inch high-resolution touchscreen — which is what immediately impresses most people as the Sooloos' particular 'killer app'. An even slimmer touchscreen design is on the way. In addition to some snazzy flipping around, it returns the user to an emphasis on music and artwork that we've rather lost since the days of vinyl.

We've put the Meridian Sooloos system in the custom installation category because we reckon that's how it will find its way into most homes — you could buy the different units and put it all together yourself, but good dealer support would seem a more sensible way to go, particularly at these price levels, to ensure you get the full joy from this superb top-end system for organising and playing all your music.

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