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The Masterpiece

A perfect luxury product where really everything is right – especially the sound: we're talking about the Burmester 089 CD player which represents a design that was elaborated in a rare manner. Therefore it's correct to call it a technical masterpiece.



Oh boy, did I flatten my nose on the display windows of the hifi dealers. Whenever I spotted one of the shiny chrome bolides from Burmester in a shop window, I froze. On some fine day, and rather by coincidence than purposefully planned, I came to listen to a full Burmester system: I was actually in the market for new loudspeakers, and in the demo equipment of my dealer a small Burmester Rondo was playing the CDs. Within a few seconds I developed a greater interest in the player than in the speakers – something the salesman quickly became aware of and enticed me with the question »You wanna hear this in real?«. I wanted, we went into another room, I was listening to a complete reference chain by Burmester and was over the moon. This was exactly how it was supposed to sound! Just as direct and palpable, so unvarnished real.

A step into resistance

In the following years I was recalculating my prospects time and again, which certainly made my student account guffaw about my plans. So after I had been suspiring at the onset of my music studies and my prayers had remained unanswered for long, the usual reaction ensued in the subsequent semesters: the step into resistance. Those appliances just couldn't sound good, they were only looking cool. Authentic sound was only to be achieved with freaky machines deriding every safety regulation and also the faintest wish for user friendliness. Because – this quickly became obvious – for the best sound you didn't need cash, but knowledge! Inside information at best!



Pure, attractive luxury

You know all that, right? To me, this is not surprising. Most of us have probably undergone a similar transformation process. Meanwhile I'm cured and I know that certain things simply cost money. Sure, one could build a Burmester amplifier or player for less, e.g. by fitting them with mat anodised and thin-gauge housings instead of massive, solid ones, and maybe they would not even sound worse that way. But the Berlin company is a luxury manufacture, where such a fine technology must of course be complemented by a posh coat. After all, you don't want to make yourself comfy in a Porsche on leatherette seats either.

A source of joy

True, CD players like the Burmester 089 are still not my financial cup of tea, but I'm calmer and wiser now: today I can appreciate such components for all their abilities, I'm delighted for everybody who can afford them and leave my »combat dress« in the closet. Furthermore a prosaic consideration of the whole matter gives me relaxation, since like I already wrote in my report about the Arcam A38 and P38 amplifiers, one can also get consummate music listening for less – which, however, does by no means curtail the thrill of such a luxury device, but might give you some sleepless nights, though. For besides the pure music listening, those machines themselves have already become part of the hobby.



Tidy command centre: besides the required outputs the Burmester 089 CD player has several inputs, too. It offers USB and RCA and of course XLR inputs. Since it is equipped with high-class preamp, this player may also double as the heart of a small, but very fine high-end system.



In those wakeful nights spent with lots of ruminations, one has enough time to create rational reasons for purchasing a Burmester 089. And what will help you more in this matter than solid and substantial facts?

Harmony between form and content

Here the 089 will give you the best possible support, for its technology is more than just impressive. Of course, the belt drive of the CD drive acts as a unique selling point – a technology which, due to its complexity, was seized on by only a few manufacturers. After all, it's much easier to simply screw a supplied drive into a prefab base. No, the belt drive requires the disassembly and complete reconstruction of the unit, and most manufacturers shy away from this effort. According to Burmester, the laser and servo board are the only ingredients that remain of the original Philips CDM2 drive, the rest must give way to better parts. For instance, take the handwound motors from Swiss specialist Faulhaber, indeed a renowned and certainly not cheap address. The whole thing is mounted on the reassuringly solid

base of a massive aluminium block. If you have already learned from this detail when taking a look at the 069 reference player of the same company, you needn't wonder: the 089 has inherited a lot from its bigger brother. Not only regarding its drive, but also with the design of the integrated preamp.

Get your (belt) act together

Well, the benefits of having a belt drive in a CD player didn't reveal themselves to me right away, for we are dealing here with a data reading process whose speed must be changed frequently and fast. Since this is happening at a high basic tempo, I always thought that the direct drive was the perfect choice for this purpose and that in the end Burmester's belt was a technical deadlock – albeit a promotionally effective one. This assessment, however, dates back from my »anti period« and so I'm gladly open to conviction this time: the Burmester team has spotted the »vibrating« of any motor as one of the major sound killers. Those vibrations are supposed to deprive the data readout of a good deal of its potential precision and in the end spoil the digital signal with unwanted jitter (time axis offsets). But if the spindle is driven by a belt, the vibrations from the belt will be transformed into heat and become inefficient. You know that from record players, hence an absolutely proven design. The Burmester people regard a solid turntable base for CDs as the indispensable prerequisite for good sound. If things are not done right here, so the name of the Berliners' game, one might just as well do without the technical effort in the subsequent stages like D/A converter and output stages; after all, only errors would be amplified then. This sounds exciting and above all logical – I'm already looking forward to the listening session!



Another essential prerequisite for the perfect reading process is an undisturbed environment, which is why the laser unit sits in a dedicated, low-resonance chamber. And this, although the housing of the CD player with its solid aluminium walls naturally leaves barely a chance for vibrations. Here the homemade carbon fibre spring feet fit perfectly into the concept, which by the way proved to be superior in

terms of their overall acoustic effects, compared with all other alternatives I have tested (Ceraball, Antispikes, Myrtle Pucks, SSC feet). Congrats, for me this has been a unique experience so far!

From digital memory to music

The conversion of the readout digital data happens in a balanced form and with an upsampling to either 96 or 192 kilohertz. Switching is done comfortably via the remote control so that we can make an optimal assessment of the sonic effect during the following listening checks.

Concerning the output stages the Berliners rely on their proven X-Amp2 technology, which until now has also been reserved for the Reference Series, here of course in a customised version. Since the circuit features a totally balanced design, the favoured location of the XLR connectors on the rear panel of the player may indeed be seen as a recommendation: with the 089 the maximum sound potential is not to be had over the RCA sockets.

Another exciting option is to use the CD player at the same time as the command centre of a – rather puristic – setup, because it offers an analogue input selectable via a frontpanel pushbutton plus a volume control which may be activated as needed and with its 60 steps is detented more than finely enough. The latter has been derived from the 088 preamp, which in turn shares some relevant genes with the 077 reference preamp – obviously this function is not just a nice gimmick, but a serious opportunity to plan a slim and good system.

The Burmester 089 will not concede you many chances for individual improvement, for living it up the audiophile way, because the Berlin designers did a damned good job. I have already depicted the fruitless attempts with various feet, so now the Burmester stands on its own feet in the Phonosophie rack. An HMS Gran Finale power cord gives the lower octaves still a little bit more punch, the acoustic colours are burgeoning somewhat more intensely without blurring the player's phenomenal contour sharpness.

Fortunately, the puck also allows to install my highly esteemed Millennium CD mat. This piece of accessory does come in handy, but not every CD player is transparent enough to work out the increase in atmospheric details. Let me anticipate it: with the 089 there is never any doubt as to whether the mat is being used or not. And while the puck is already fun, the lid of the CD drive is truly a source of joy. Made from a thick aluminium block and slipways of sliding plastic in a conceivably simple and failsafe manner, it is a haptic dream.

This feature alone – if you have the slightest affinity for fine mechanical quality – makes it worthwhile to deal with this device. Now let's get back to the music, I'm eager to know how »my« first Burmester CD player sounds.



The boss is already an instrumentalist

Dieter Burmester loves to be photographed with one of his guitars and thus implies a particular affinity for music. After the first notes of the »Festa, riso, gioco e gioia« by Pietro Antonio Girmao, played by Thomas Hengelbrock and the Balthasar Neumann Ensemble, I'm convinced that this man indeed knows a thing or two about music. For every instrument is standing so palpable and 3D in the room as I know it from my occupational closeness to the orchestra. And I'm not talking here about a put-on drive, a bogus fun attack. No, the 089 sounds much too balanced, uncompressed and in the best sense analogue for that. It's rather the clarity, physicality and three-dimensionality which make me fall for it and which impart to the music a wonderful truthfulness.

This is especially striking in the lower registers: when the violone – the predecessor of the upright bass – and the chest organ take over the 16' bass, this happens with a perfect symbiosis of power and elegance. Rarely have I heard those lower octaves sound so full and opulent, yet at the same time unemotionally clear and tight in their articulation. Hats off! To me, such a finetuning is artistry and shows that Burmester's decision makers know real instruments not only from Riemann's Music Encyclopedia. For this authenticity goes far beyond a mere edging of each note's initial phase and a hefty midrange punch.

Even a load of distortion is not enough to produce the closeness to the original. The presentation of the instruments which are perpetuated on this recording and which I know very well, once again demonstrates that this blissfulness of immediate proximity arises from the fusion of clarity, body and pressure-free facility. And the Burmester handles those three parameters with ease.

As another banana skin that forces many a digital player to surrender, I'm picking the seasonally appropriate »Christmas Oratorio« by Johann Sebastian Bach in the recording of René Jacobs. Large choral parts, sung with proper vehemence and an orchestra that really gets down to it as well, especially in the brass and the lower registers, are alternating with delicate recitatives and gentle choirs. In most cases players can either do this thing better or the other: when the mighty overture choir believably emerges before me, the subsequent tracks usually lack finesse and atmosphere, simply the trustworthiness which distinguishes the felicitous appearance of an evangelist. The 089 clears this hurdle. The introductory »Jauchzet, frohlocket« lets you perceive all the greatness of this message; choir and orchestra are pulsating with power and verve. In the following recitative comes the majestic moment: the Burmester retains the suspense, delving into the emotional layers of the Evangelist's interpretation with sublime tranquility and a filigree brush. Where many other players suddenly sound flat and small after the preceding greatness, it gets every note blooming here as well, taking care of subtle nuances now with the same meticulousness.

It's difficult for me to describe this moment: many players still leave the melody line of the tenor intact here and also communicate the words. But with the player from Berlin this man is standing before me, uttering a true concern. I'm listening, dreaming and I am enthralled – simply gorgeous.

Punch and attack

A test with a tougher diet is actually no longer needed, since the 089 has already proven its rhythmical talents: if a player can outline a harpsichord effortlessly with complex music, then a band is nothing more than a finger exercise. However, Al Jarreau is giving me a private performance. He and his group are playing so straight and life-like as I had assumed after the last CDs. And this time the bass drum thrills me with pleasant fatness, punch and attack. I can hardly say anything more, except to point out that this is exactly how it's supposed to sound.

I still owe you an evaluation of the preamp section. Let's put it this way: if you have only one additional source, e.g. a turntable, which can also be linked with a balanced connection, the 089 can make you happy. Because if you wanted to top its pure preamp qualities – I was trying them on active Geithain studio monitors –, you would have to shell out several thousand euros. And then the system would no longer be so beautifully slim, either.

Which frequency are you listening on?

Finally a note on the switching option between 96 and 192 kilohertz: with some CDs nothing happens soundwise, with others quite a lot. Any changes take place on the ethereal level then: the room widens minimally, the contours are drawn more finely and thus seem to be softer at the first moment. The high resolution just lacks quite a few artefacts which we have got used to – and which we often enough misinterpret as dynamics.

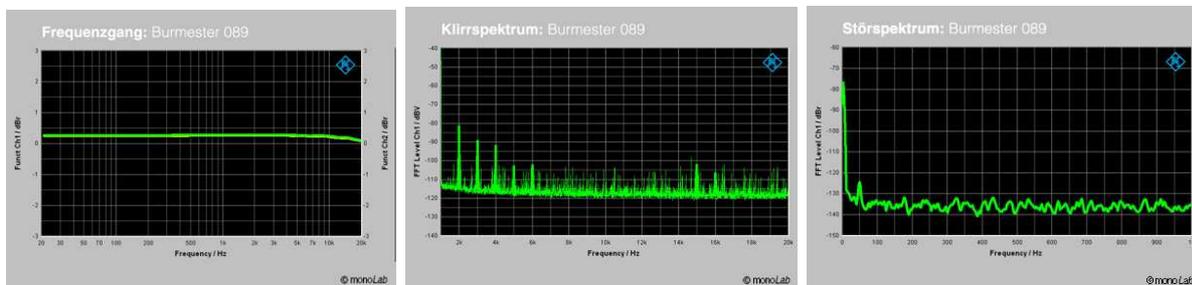
I'm checking this with Biber's »Rosary Sonatas« on the magnificent recording with John Holloway. Whereas the lower resolution appears to be more spectacular, at 192 kilohertz the music develops a noticeably better flow. The aura of the instrument in the reverberant ambience spreads a little bit more naturally and plausibly around the violin. Ultimately this is an option which, during my time with the Burmester 089, I turn off with pop and on with jazz and classical music. And so I can apportion delicacy or fun factor respectively at my own discretion.



Proven concept: Although the 089 is also receptive for RCA connections, the greatest sound potential lies at the balanced outputs.

Lab report

Measured data Burmester 089 CD player



Distortion:

Distortion (THD+N): 0.0028 %
IM distortion (SMPTE): 0.0075 %
IM distortion (CCIF): 0.0009 %

SNR specifications:

Unweighted S/N ratio (20 kHz): -95.5 dBr
Unweighted S/N ratio (250 kHz): -82.8 dBr
S/N ratio (A-weighted): -97.8 dBr

Converter linearity:

-50 dB: 0.01 dB
-60 dB: 0.01 dB
-70 dB: 0.01 dB
-80 dB: 0.015 dB
-90 dB: 0.027 dB

Additional data:

Output voltage: 4.1 V
Channel deviation: 0.035 dB
Output resistance: 256 Ω
DC output offset: < 0.5 mV

Power consumption:

Off: 0 W
Standby: 2.4 W
Idle: 23 W

Dimensions (W x H x D): 48.2 x 11.5 x 31 cm

Weight: 13 kg

Connections:

Analogue outputs: 1 x XLR, 1 x RCA fixed level, 1 x RCA variable
Analogue inputs: 1 x XLR

Digital outputs: 1 x LWL, 1 x coaxial
Digital inputs: 1 x LWL, 1 x coaxial

Additional connectors: Burlink for RS232 control and USB, Remote In/Out for remote activation of other Burmester components

Body finishes:

Standard version with chrome front and chrome rails, silver anodised housing
Custom models on request.
A remote control is included.

Test result

The Burmester 089 is a true luxury product. However, it doesn't rest on its beautiful appearance, but masterfully plays its role as a competently and sensually acting music broker. On a not overly large, but accurately subdivided virtual stage it gives the music every chance to unfold in a soundful, precise, free and true-to-life manner. The fact that it is able to impart the blissful power of the live experience without the slightest trace of clumsy pummeling is one of its remarkable capabilities. And maybe it's even due to the belt drive that the 089's performance feels so utterly nonchalant and free, so marvellously analogue and yet without mechanical faults. Yes, the Burmester 089 costs a pretty penny, but it will put this into another perspective not least with the precise preamp you get as a nice bonus. A true highlight player!

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