

Otherworldly Power

Burmester 909 MK5 Power Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay



Just as mega sports cars all offer different approaches to performance, giving the Aston Martin driver a completely different experience than the Ferrari, Porsche or Corvette driver, so do mega power amplifiers. I've spent a lot of time these last few months with some of the world's top amplifiers and it's amazing how different from one another they sound. But each amp, in its own way, defines state-of-the-art audio performance.

Burmester's smaller 911 MK3 has been a reference amplifier here for almost four years. Surviving a fall from the FedEx truck in the middle of a busy intersection, the 911 has played nonstop for the duration, rarely being powered down, always providing fantastic performance.

But even considering the 911's prowess as an amplifier, more power changes the game. Beyond the obvious ability of bigger amplifiers to achieve higher sound-pressure levels, they also offer more control at all power levels. Most, if not all, speakers present a treacherous load to an amplifier's output terminals, changing impedance with frequency and generating back EMF—some speakers are even highly capacitive to boot. The dynamic load a speaker presents does not adversely affect a mas-

sive amplifier like the 909 MK5, with substantial power reserves and a high-damping factor, in the same way it does a small amplifier. The end result? A spacious sound, free of fatigue.

Big Power, Big Price Tag

Merely swapping out the 911 for the 909 provides an immediately noticeable and revelatory improvement—which it should for \$73,495. The German Physiks speakers I've been auditioning for the last month appear to grow in stature, feeling like someone snuck in overnight and moved them about 4 feet farther apart; the effect is not at all subtle. And that's *starting* with the amazing Burmester 911 as a baseline! The instant Alex Van Halen's drum stick hits the opening cymbal in "You're No Good," there's more decay, more weight and more meat on the bone. Right from the first power cord, the guitar has a much fatter sound, feeling more like a wall of amplifiers at a live performance, with a feeling of unlimited power.

The bass line underneath Radiohead's "In Limbo" not only has more texture, but there's also more space between everything—said bass line, the ethereal guitars, keyboards and dreamy, over-processed vocals. *(continued)*



This tune can sound compressed, as if the musicians are too close together and crowded, but the 909 opens it right up, giving the music room to breathe and keeping the pace of the rhythm section solidly anchored while everything else floats around the room.

Burmester's 911 MK3 produces 350 watts per channel into 4 ohms; the 909 MK5 pumps out 600 watts per channel. With 20 precision-matched outputs per channel and an enormous 3.5-kV power transformer, the 909 doesn't have much empty space inside its mammoth enclosure, which measures 19 by 19 by 20 inches and weighs in at 170 pounds. Fortunately, it comes in a padded road case with wheels—another sign of the care that goes into its production. It's worth noting that all Burmester power amplifiers are burned in at full power for seven days *continuously* before they are released to customers. Though Burmester suggests that the 909 sounds its best after 200 hours, it's damn good straight out of the (aluminum) box.*(continued)*

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The Loud and Quiet of it All

Playing Rachel Macfarlane's *Hayley Sings* through the 909 MK5 provides a perfect example of the silky smoothness that the amp presents. It's not all about brute force. Backed by a Sinatra-esque big band, her lead vocals deliver a strong timbre that the 909 effortlessly renders. As her voice goes quickly from loud to soft, it never gets lost in the blaze of horns accompanying her. Equally delicate is the opening bass line in Rage Against the Machine's "Calm Like a Bomb." The 909 captures every bit of texture, until the song goes full tilt, with distorted guitars bombarding the listener from every angle. Again, this monster amplifier handles it all in perfect stride.

Switching speakers to the GamuT S9s and giving the volume control a twist towards the maximum, on Fear's "New York's Alright if You Like Saxophones," sheds new light on this classic punk cut. The 909 provides an otherworldly, out-of-body experience, transporting me right back to when I followed the band in 1981. It's as if the 909 reproduces the sound *and* the sweat. There's an extra dimension at work here.

With the volume up to brain-damage levels, it just wouldn't be a proper Burmester review without a few Scorpions tracks, so out comes the 45-rpm maxi singles. Tracking through "Rock You Like a Hurricane" has those present for the audition reaching for lighters and brings the police to our front door—the ultimate testament to the 909's brute force.

Those of you in the audience who are more proper audiophiles will be pleased to know that the 909 MK5 does a smashing job on your favorite acoustic tracks, female vocal pieces and, of course, large-scale orchestral recordings. The cannon shots at the end of *1812 Overture* really come to life with this much power on tap, and if that's not enough, you can bridge the 909 to produce a monoblock capable of 1,250 watts per channel.



You'll probably need an electrical-supply upgrade to a pair of 20-amp dedicated lines; Burmester makes note that your power must be up to the task in order to achieve this high output. Bridging can be done via external adaptors, as with the 911, or your 909s can be ordered directly from the factory this way.

Unshakable

While it's just so much fun to explore an amplifier that has no real dynamic limits (at least in the context of my room and system), the true magic of Burmester's power amplifier is twofold: It has an almost silky sonic texture that is unique, nestled right between the "just-the-facts" sonic signature of the Boulder 3050 or the Simaudio MOON 880M, as well as the slightly warm and inviting, almost tube-like sound of the Pass XA200.5. Heavily biased, but not fully Class A, the 909 generates precious little heat, even after a long listening session.

Anyone attending Burmester's after-hours party at last year's New York Hi-Fi Show witnessed a pair of these mighty amplifiers playing to a crowded room that was easily the size of a small club with a 30-foot ceiling. By the end of the night, the 909s remained barely warm to the touch, and were not damaged by the DJ plugging and unplugging things with the volume turned up, making a hateful sound through the enormous Burmester speakers in the process.

Exquisite Build

This brute force is packaged in a stunning box. From the extrusions on its heat sinks, to its subtle bits of chrome plating, to the Burmester logo machined in script on its top cover, the 909 goes to show that no one produces better casework than Burmester. I spend a lot of time removing the last few dust specs in post-production and can't help but be blown away with the quality work of Burmester's machine shop. Even with the images blown up 1000 percent on screen, there are no machining, engraving or plating flaws to be seen anywhere. *(continued)*

This is truly a luxury product that delivers the goods sonically and is also a joy to look at, even when turned off. The 909 MK5 is built to a standard that should allow you to leave it for the next generation—a true value in a society where so many products are easily discarded.

The back panel has two large carrying handles, and the speaker binding posts have large winged knobs, making it easy to attach any type of speaker cable you might be considering. Even though there are banana plugs in these gigantic twist terminals, Dieter Burmester himself suggests spade-lug termination on your speaker cables for the best connection and transference of such high power. *(continued)*



Product: I22 Integrated Amplifier

P R I M A R E

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The only problem with the Burmester 909 MK5 is that once you have the experience, it's tough to go back. As we spend more time with this remarkable amplifier, we will do a proper head-to-head comparison between it and the 911 MK3 with a wide range of program material, and will report back in the Comparo section of our website, so please check back shortly.

For now, suffice it to say the Burmester 909 MK5 will handle any challenge. ●

Burmester 909 MK5
Power Amplifier
MSRP: \$73,495

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