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Burmester 151 Musiccenter media player

by Alan Sircom

You know exactly where you are with Burmester. There is no artifice. It's unashamed German luxury for wealthy people. It's why Burmester audio systems spring up in the best Mercedes Benz and Porsche cars. It's why Burmester is one of the most recognised German brands among the cognoscenti. Those elements converge, too; German luxury goods are made with the ideals of German engineering culture. They are built up to a standard, not down to a price, and this gives them longevity, even when dealing with something as ever-changing as a media player. The 151 Musiccenter is built to last.

Followers of the brand will note this is not Burmester's first go at a media player. That was the 111 Musiccenter, announced in 2011. As an aside, Burmester nomenclature is extremely logical; the first two numbers in the model name denote the year the product was launched, the last is simply the order in which that product was released that year, so the 151 is the first model to be released by Burmester in 2015. It shows just how 'built to last' is intrinsic to the company ethos that there are still models in the range that begin with the number '9' and even the 808 preamplifier, which first saw the light of day in 1980.

The original 111 Musiccenter is part of Burmester's Reference Line, a *sans pareil* range of products that are designed without compromise and are priced accordingly. The 111 is designed as a complete digital front-end, replacing source component and preamplifier in one, and includes a full colour 7" display on its front panel. This might be a step too far for many people, and not simply in terms of price tag; all of the screen functions can be replicated on a tablet (Burmester supplies an Apple iPad Mini with the 151, preloaded with a dedicated app as an optional part of the package), and in many systems, a music player is best considered an additional source, rather than a hub, because there is already a preamplifier or integrated amp in place. In many respects, the 151 Musiccenter, from Burmester's Top Line, fits those requirements better than the 111.

It's also a later development than the 111, although this is seen more in intellectual musing than investigation of the product per se. The screen of the 111 is excellent, but shows the product was in development in a time before tablets

became so ubiquitous. Its function was vital in a product where a front panel would be the primary way of accessing the 111's music catalogue, but that task is neatly and largely handed over to the iPad. By eliminating the front panel screen, the 151 represents a post-iPad development, and one that has been replicated by many media playing brands who were in the market as or before the iPad happened (for example, Naim's first HDX hard disk player has a touchscreen for navigating its music library, but subsequent players have relied on a tablet to provide that functionality). Of course, the 111 has undergone several firmware updates along the way as part of Burmester's 'leave no man behind' ethos of continuous development. However, I suspect in reality the 111's screen spends a lot of time not being stared at, because 'we have an App for that'. The 151 replaces that 7" screen with a green dot matrix display, which means the newer music streamer can fit into the standard Top Line form factor, with its thick chrome plated front panel, and solid brushed aluminium panels. This is not simply shiny bling; it's designed to retain the timeless styling for decades without tarnish or damage.

In fact, there's more 111 DNA in the 151 than might first be noticed. Although it is not a preamplifier in the fullest sense, the 151 does have an analogue level control, so you can use it as a one-source system with a power amp, without bit chopping digital volume attenuation. Like its older brother, the 151 can both stream music from connected UPnP devices, or stream online radio services direct from the Internet, all through its Ethernet port. USB sticks can also be played. It can even either play a CD or rip CDs to its two mirrored 2TB hard disks.

Ripping on a Burmester media player has two settings; thorough or extremely thorough. It takes about 10–15 minutes to rip and finalise a CD on a good day. If you have a scratched CD and go for the most thorough method of ripping, you could double or treble that time. But, as suggested, it's thorough, and it rarely gets things wrong; we loaded up several discs known to outwit many media ripping systems and it got them all right first time. And it has a very clever level analogue normalisation system that only applies when creating playlist, as it manages to normalise levels across the playlist without compromising dynamic range. When a single album is played in and of itself, this level normalisation doesn't kick in. This possibly comes

down to Burmester hiring some of the sharpest tools in the digital box to design the 151, with rumours of ex-Apple software engineers at work on the coding.

The 151 operates largely in the way people who listen to CDs would like their media players to operate. The default setting for the Burmester app is a variant on what used to be known as 'Cover Flow' – you scroll through the album covers until you happen upon the one you want to play, then either play it or add it to a rolling playlist. This is great for small to medium sized music collections, but those of us with thousands of albums in the list might find this default screen slow to navigate, compared with a wall of small icons. Navigation and search by genre are possible, however, and the two-way feedback between App and 151 is extremely quick and seamless. The result is a responsive and largely intuitive way of interacting with your 151, to the point where you'll quickly rely on the app almost totally.

The 151 supports gapless playback, and will support high-resolution audio files up to 24bit/192kHz precision: it also upsamples 16-bit/44.1kHz CD to the user's choice of 24/96 or 24/192 playback. Normally, I'm not convinced by 'enforced' sample-rate conversion, but like the 113 DAC, the 111 media player and its CD players before it, the 151 makes such a good sound as a result of that upsampling, you just ►

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▶ don't care. Whether people will afford the 151 the same luxury for it not supporting DSD is another matter – personally, I'd go with the nicer sounding player than the one that supports the most file formats, but some regard support for DSD as a must-have feature.

The good – make that great – news is where the 151 is most like the 111 is in its sound quality. It's clear that the same engine is in use across the two devices, because the performance is equally as good from both. I'm pretty sure Burmester would prefer I say that the 151 is good, but not as outstanding as the 111, but in truth, although I didn't have them side by side, I think they are almost identical in character and performance.

That typically Burmester rich, inviting, 'creamy' sound – entirely at odds with what gets called 'digital' in a pejorative manner – is rare enough on CD, and is almost impossible to find in streamed music. However, the 151 has that presentation sewn up. There is a vast amount of deep, precise, and engaging bass on offer – not in a constantly thrumming away manner, just there when you need it. Shelby Lynne's 'Just a Little Lovin' from the album of the same name [Lost Highway/Mercury] has that deep kick drum pounding away, but on some rips from the CD this gets almost pushed to the back of the mix somehow, lost behind the left hand of the Fender Rhodes. That doesn't happen at all with the 151,

and instead that solid underpinning beat delivers the goods precisely and with the correct use of force.

That track also highlights the benefits of the 151 across the board. Although it's highly praised as a fantastic recording, I think Lynne vocals leave something to be desired and the whole mix can sound over-produced at times. The 151's ability to both tease out the detail and the refinement in any mix manages to highlight both how good the recording is... and how good it is at covering its tracks. This rip and replay chain doesn't leave you with a nasty taste, but when listening to Shelby Lynne, it makes you think how good a singer Dusty Springfield was!

The 151's strength is an ability to make music listenable, even to those who think all music should be supplied on vinyl. Naturally, with easy to live with albums, this is not a big problem, because the music would sound good on a clock radio, but when it comes to something with a little more meat, or a little more beat, the Burmester shows what it's capable of. Witness Sir Colin Davis and the LSO's 2001 rendition of Elgar's Symphony No. 2 [LSO Live, CD]. Recorded at the Barbican, a notoriously poor concert hall, the symphony is played in sympathy with the themes of the movements, but is 'darker' than usual and the piece has less of a unified tempo. This makes it at times bold, at times sinister, and at times just the right side of grandiose. However, the dry acoustic and ▶

► Davis chatting along with the score can undermine the overall sound. Here though, the way the sound just hangs together so well and bestows that Burmester smoothness and richness across the board makes the recording more integrated and less troublesome. You can hear 'through' the concert hall, as much as its possible to overcome the fundamental limitations of the recorded acoustic. It's still a function of the recording, but not a troubling function.

A similarly positive result came from playing a 'best of' Faithless CD, designed to check the integrity of its ripping and look-up tables. This is a polite way of saying, "it's a disc that has been kicked around the footwells of a few too many cars, and long since parted company with its cover." What I expected was a big, beaty sound, but possibly one that sacrificed a good beat for all that expanse and warmth. Instead, what you get is expanse, warmth, and a good beat. I have to admit to something of an Orwellian existential crisis here. On the one hand, I tend to think 'all good rips are equal', and yet on the other, devices like the 151 support the notion, 'but some are more equal than others!' In short, this Faithless recording shouldn't sound this good!

Internet radio was also well-executed, although this was more variable depending on the quality of the source material. It didn't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but it did make the better stations stand out from the rest. Despite that extra functionality, I don't expect a great many owners of Burmester CD players to start trading them in for 151s just yet. Good as the 151 is as a CD player, it doesn't have that effortless, flowing, and expansive sound of the company's Top Line 089 belt drive player. That being said, if you listen to the sound of the 151 playing a ripped CD, as opposed to playing the music 'live' from the CD itself, it does bring many of those qualities back to the overall sound. And, in fairness, when comparing the 151 to the 089, you are dealing with an extremely high standard of CD replay. If I were comparing the 151 to a more down-to-earth player, the 151 would prove a better all-round proposition.

We end where we started. Burmester equipment is never going to be in the 'bargain' stakes, but that is not what Burmester stands for. Instead, the 151 shows Burmester is trickling down technology from its Reference Line to a more approachable price tag, and not sacrificing anything in the process. Highly Recommended. +

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

DLNA/UPnP music server

Connections: Analogue outputs: 1x XLR stereo, 1x RCA stereo. Digital outputs: 1x RCA, 1x TOSLINK, USB input, wireless LAN

Audio formats: FLAC/wav/mp3/AIFF/OGG/AAC/ALAC (m4a); Stereo 16 and 24 Bit, up to 192 KHz, Gapless play by track analysis and intelligent caching

Sampling rate: for D/A conversion can be selected from either 24 bit/96 kHz or 24bit/192 kHz

Storage: SSD drive for system storage, 2x 2 TB hard drive capacity for music data storage, Raid 1 system (security with two mirrored hard drives, 2 TB usable)

Play functions: Audio CD, Internet radio services, Music-Player, USB-stick

USB: Music playback, playlist export

Analogue compensation of level jumps between individual tracks

Integration of Highresaudio®

Web-Browser Interface on HTML5

High End rip-function

Exclusive music dat abase containing over 3.500.000 titles for matching file data from ripped CDs

Dimensions (WxHxD): 482 x 95 x 345mm

Weight: 8.5 kg

Price: £12,500

Manufactured by: Burmester

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