

Burmester 099 preamplifier

by Alan Sircom

There are two current schools of thought when it comes to high-end audio. The first is a series of regular changes to the line (the Mk I becomes the Mk II and so on), and the other is the Burmester way. This 099 preamplifier is a perfect example of that Burmester way of thinking, as the preamp has remained virtually unchanged since its launch in 2009, although refinements to the built-in DAC have filtered through.

The 099 is one of five preamplifiers in the Burmester range, and one of two in the company's core Classic Line. It's very much the first product in the new generation of Burmester designs, marking a shift in the tectonic plates of audio as we collectively move toward a more integrated digital approach. That doesn't mean the company has abandoned CD replay or even vinyl replay, but that the 099 includes coaxial and Toslink digital inputs and a USB connection alongside its range of balanced analogue inputs. Single-ended users are not left out in the cold, because there are four input adaptors supplied (enough for two inputs).

Burmester is a company with an eye firmly set to longevity rather than 'future-proofing'. As a result, the specification

sheet can seem conservative, and on the 099 the lack of options like DSD, higher rate PCM, or even something like MQA might seem too conservative to some enthusiasts. But those enthusiasts also have a habit of flitting from product to product at regular intervals and have constant demands for novelty: Burmester, on the other hand, makes products that people keep for decades, and a device that supports 24-bit, 192kHz PCM files will still be useful and called for long after less well supported formats have come and gone. It would be nice to have something like DSD or MQA support on the Burmester 099, but whether it's a deal-breaker or not largely depends on the end user: I think most people who are potential 099 owners wouldn't care either way.

Back in 2009, this was an extremely complex proposition, and such is the relatively slow-moving preamplifier market that a design with built-in DAC is still rare, even if they are becoming more commonplace in the integrated amplifier world. Regardless, what I think Burmester got so right about the 099 from the outset is the lack of fuss to the overall design: viewed from the front from left to right, just an input selector, a volume control and an on/off/standby toggle switch. There are ▶



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- ▶ two arrays of LEDs accompanying the big chromed knobs; one set to indicate source with a single green LED, the other an array of green LEDs to denote volume level. Between these is a remote eye and a pair of LEDs to mark 192kHz replay and to highlight phase status (0° or 180°).

The phase inversion option is an interesting one. The 099 is not the first preamp to allow the listener to invert phase, but it shows the quality of the product in that absolute phase remains both preserved and audible when adjusted. As there is no benchmark for absolute phase in recordings, and it's a bit of a lottery whether the files you receive (however you receive them) are in absolute phase, adjusting it on the fly can make a small, but significant, difference to the end result. It's often subtle – subtle enough that many have proclaimed it to be a non-issue – but in a truly well-optimised system, it's just a subtle re-aligning of the whole recording that makes it seem just slightly more integrated. As I've used the words 'small', 'subtle', and 'slightly' a lot in this paragraph as absolute phase adjustments rarely bring a monumental change to the sound, but if you are attuned to phase and the rest of your system is resolving enough to catch this difference, the 099 makes this an easy adjustment, that comes free with the preamp.

Perhaps more than ever today, the 099 is the gateway into

Burmester's long-standing ethos. This is the single device that might be introduced as an upgrade for a pre/power system or even an add-on to turn a good integrated amplifier into a pre/power system in its own right. And, once someone gets just how intrinsically 'right' the 099 really is, the next steps will likely all be Burmester-flavoured.

There are also a series of adjustments that can be made to the 099 (start-up volume, input level trimming, output gain, etc.) and these can all be controlled by pressing the Setup button on the remote. You don't need to do anything in most cases, but it's good to have the option. You can also control it through RS232 in a custom install setting.

The 099 is a refined performer, capable of being sat in front of for hours on end without fatigue. This is not code for 'dull'; it's detailed and dynamic, and – coupled to the right power amplifier – can handle the loud end of the volume control without introducing any kind of compression or distortion. In fact, were it not for the refinement, the effortless ability for this preamp to push any amplifier to its limits could make it a brute force design. As it is, the 099 is the archetypal 'mail'd fist in a velvet glove' design, with that combination of beefy grip over the rest of the system coupled with a sense of grace and charm as it stays in complete control. ▶

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► This is a whisper-quiet preamp, to the point where you’ll struggle to hear a background noise from the 099, over and above noise further along the chain. This comes through in surprising places, like the ‘spaces’ between the notes when Brendel is playing the ‘Pathétique’ [Alfred Brendel, *Beethoven: Favourite Piano Sonatas*, Philips]. And, this, coupled with a coherent and cogent portrayal of instrument tone from every key on the keyboard, and a sense of authority that borders on the stentorian (yet, never once seems too imposing), makes for a preamp with huge staying power.

Above all, however, there is a sense of grace and deportment that the Burmester 099 imposes on music, as if it went to finishing school. This doesn’t act in a heavy handed manner, so if you were to play ‘Basket Case’ from Green Day’s *Dookie* album [Reprise], you’ll still end up bouncing round the room, but if you then move over to something more cool and level headed – ‘Shhh/Peaceful’ from Miles Davis’ *In A Silent Way* [Columbia] for example – that deportment gives the sound a gravitas and sophistication it so deserves. Everything here is rooted in the back line; the slow rhythm of the Fender Rhodes and double bass, that insistent hi-hat percussion, with Joe Zawinul’s organ and Miles Davis’ trumpet rising out of that subtle, clever riffing. All of which is played with consummate detail and effortless dynamic shading, but more importantly, as a cogent piece of music hanging together despite the copious amount of drugs being taken during the recording.

The only critical concern regarding the 099, and possibly the one that most points to its first decade of the 21st Century design, is the headphone socket. The 099 has an extremely competent, noise-free, and dynamic headphone amplifier, one that will comfortably drive anything in current production (that isn’t an electrostatic, of course) and even make a fair fist of driving impossible headphone loads. But, for no particular reason, the ¼” headphone jack is mounted at the back of the preamp. We’d prefer it up-front, but it allows permanent attachment of headphones, switching the 099 from ‘preamp’ to ‘headphone amp’ via remote.

Judging the brand by the 099, it’s little wonder Burmester got the account for adding in-car entertainment systems for Bugatti, Porsche, and Mercedes Benz. Actually, you could say that of any of Burmester’s products, but the 099 stands out as a design of sophistication, elegance, and fundamental

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Balanced preamplifier with built-in DAC

Analogue inputs: 3x XLR balanced stereo pair (single-ended RCA adaptors supplied)

Digital inputs: 2x Coaxial RCA, 3x optical, 1x USB

Analogue outputs: 1x RCA single-ended stereo pair, 1x XLR balanced stereo pair, 1x ¼” TRS headphone jack

Digital outputs: 1x Coaxial RCA (via SRC to 96kHz/192kHz)

1x optical: (direct to 96kHz)

Frequency response: not stated

Signal to noise ratio: not stated

THD+N: not stated

Dimensions (WxHxD): 48.2x9.5x34.5cm

Weight: 8.5kg

Price: \$15,000

Manufactured by: Burmester GmbH

URL: www.burmester.de

reliability that acts like a magnet for top car marques. The 099 is not the preamp for those still in their ‘hungry ghost’ phase, who seem to burn through a product every few months. The Burmester 099 is a preamp for people who think that buying more than one product per decade is moving at break-neck speed, for people who know that ‘you buy cheap, you buy twice’ and understand that the best is worth paying for, and for people who appreciate the finer things in life and all the rewards those things bestow upon the owner. These are elements found in Bugatti, Porsche, and Mercedes Benz automobiles, and they are elements that Burmester’s 099 expresses perfectly.

The Burmester 099 is a recommendation I could have made eight years ago when the 099 first hit the streets, and it is a recommendation I could still make in eight years time when the 099 will still be a preamp worth considering. In other words, this is a preamp for keeps! +