

EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Burmester CD 089 CD Player

by Chris Thomas

In some quarters Burmester has gained an unfair reputation in the UK for being expensive German audio bling, due partly to its highly polished chrome fascias no doubt. The company designs and manufactures, largely in-house, an extensive range of equipment spanning several performance levels from CD players, pre, power and integrated amplifiers, speakers, cables, mains conditioners and support racks and each bears the unmistakable visual identity of the company. Burmester is also heavily involved with high-end in-car installations in joint partnerships with Bugatti and Porsche. One could almost think of it as Germany's equivalent to our own Naim Audio. Representation in the UK has been problematic over recent years, as distributors have inevitably found it difficult to promote the entire Burmester range in a price-driven market and have understandably wanted to cherry-pick those components that they consider the most competitive. I confess to a lack of experience of their full systems, but a decent knowledge of three of their CD players. If you expect the Burmester CD sound to be one of cliché – an uber-cool tonal balance coupled with forensic Teutonic clarity – then you would be very wrong. The 10 year-old belt-driven CD 001 remains a classy performer. It is certainly smooth, has good resolution and is, for me, characterised with a rhythmic flow and sense of musical movement that, even today, a decade after its introduction, few other players can match. For several months this year I have been living with the CD 089, another belt-driven player, virtually indistinguishable in appearance from the 001 but internally the two are very, very different.

The CD 089 has benefited from the kind of trickle-down technology that we've come to expect from companies with tiered ranges. In this case, Burmester's Reference Line sits at the top of the pile and quite obviously gets the benefits of their most advanced design thinking. The 089 is a Top Line product, just below the Reference series, but has benefited enormously in this way. This is no 001 with a dash of contemporary electronics grafted on. In fact they share virtually no components at all despite looking virtually identical. At its heart it has Dieter Burmester's belt-driven adaptation of a Phillips transport, also found in the Reference Line 069 two-box player and the 001, but here it is mounted in a separate, high-mass, low-resonance 'room' for superior isolation. The design aim is that decoupling the laser from the drive motor reduces jitter. I have often wondered just how much the belt-drive technology contributes to the Burmester CD sound and it's outstanding realisation of tempo and timing and I have a feeling that its influence is more than considerable.

The 089 features selectable sample rates of 96kHz/24bit or 192kHz/24 bit and these can also be applied to the external digital sources that can be connected through the rear panel. The only connection ▶

▶ that is missing is a USB input, but as Burmester currently support this with its preamplifiers, which can be ordered with USB and internal DAC, I have little doubt that future CD players will incorporate such a connection. This player can also be configured as a preamplifier as it has a switchable 60-increment analog volume control. I have tried the 001, 089 and other manufacturers players in this mode by connecting them straight to power amplifiers. The results have never convinced or tempted to me shelve my preamp but I think that, to make a more informed judgement, I would need to hear it through a Burmester power amplifier or perhaps a pair of active loudspeakers.

Considering the price, perhaps the one notable omission is the lack of processing for SACDs. This doesn't bother me, but if you have an extensive SACD collection it just might dissuade you from considering the Burmester. It shouldn't, but it might. Rear panel output connections are both single-ended and balanced, and internally the 089 is designed with balanced circuit technology. It's an old debate as to which is the best method of connection and needs to take into account the rest of the system and some comparative listening. If this was a full-blown Burmester system I might have ended up with balanced connections but I chose to use the RCA connections with my home system although Burmester themselves, like many high-end companies are firmly in the balanced camp. I have always generally preferred the single-ended option. The player even has a pair of XLR analog inputs to connect a non-digital source component. The analog output stages are equipped with more technology from the 069 in the shape of the X-amp2 output modules and it is these that Burmester are especially proud of, citing them as a major reason for the sound quality the 089 achieves.

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The player is certainly a joy to use with an excellent display, adjustable through four brightness levels plus an off function and a very large but clear remote control that has been thankfully lightened from the potentially lethal device that came with the 001. Drop that thing on your foot at the wrong angle and you'd spend an afternoon in casualty. Obviously the first thing to come to decide is whether to upsample to 192kHz and the answer is a resounding 'yes'. After a bit of experimentation I left the machine at this setting and never turned it off again. The rest is classic Burmester with a beautifully weighted sliding door and their disc clamp system. The sound too was immediately recognisable to me but with a huge leap in quality over the 001. It became apparent after only a few minutes listening, even with an ice-cold machine that this was going to be a hugely enjoyable experience and over the next few months I realised that musically the 089 bordered on the extraordinary.

As high-end CD players have improved over the years there have been hugely important strides made in their ability to convey a musical performance. There never seemed that much problem in extracting high levels of information, but I have heard a number of players that, while impressive number crunchers, were never comfortable to listen to for any period of time. The description of a sound being 'digital' became an insult, but I understood the roots of it.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Single-box CD player

Transport: Phillips with belt drive

Sampling rates: 96kHz/24 bit – 192kHz/24 bit

Connections

Digital Inputs: 1 x optical (TOSLINK)
1 x RCA

Digital Outputs: 1 x optical (TOSLINK)
1 x RCA

Analog Inputs: 1 x XLR

Analog Outputs: 1 x XLR (balanced)
1 x RCA (Unbalanced)
1 x RCA (TAPE) (Unbalanced) with preset volume.

Dimensions (WxHxD): 48.3x11.4x33.5cm

Weight: 13 kg

Price: Approx £13,500, depending on currency exchange rates

Manufacturer: Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH

URL: www.burmester.de

The 089 is as far from that as it is possible to get from a digital source and the roots of its musical performance lie squarely with its abilities to portray musical movement. Call it tempo, call it timing, the way that a hi fi system portrays the development of music through time is nothing short of critical and even extracting the maximum amount of miniscule detail is completely irrelevant if it is rhythmically stunted. When we sit and listen we all have that timing element beating inside us. It is not metronomic, it lives as pure feeling and you don't need to sit there counting out loud to judge whether a system either does or doesn't have it. I agree that some people are more 'tuned into' this aspect of performance and that matters more to them than others but for me, if it doesn't have that feeling of rhythmic liquidity then I won't enjoy it. Listening to the 089 is quite unlike any CD player I have heard and that includes several that are much more expensive and some which are lauded as being the best available. The 089 is like a flowing river of music whether it is showing you the pure pace and speed of impact of a rock band or

▶ playing a deliciously considered piece that hardly moves at all. It is sinuous and completely elastic where time is concerned and this provides an eloquent and reassuring base for everything else that it does so well.

It has superb bandwidth, a great sense of space with wide and deep views of the musical soundstage and simply stunning resolution. Not the chilly needlepoint variety of tiny background sounds that is often cited as musical detail but a more organic version that is unerring in solidity and stability. And if you are a fan of tonal colour and find the digital view of instruments and vocals is inevitably too monochromatic then the 089 will change your mind about that. Tonal nuance and contrast is beautifully realised and this helps no end if you are excited by the pure performance of the musicians. Because when you factor in the Burmester's wonderfully natural realisation of dynamics you will hear the relationship between the musician and his instrument in a way that very few CD players manage to capture. Let me try and illustrate this with a couple of examples. Luciana Souza's twin offerings *The New Bossa Nova* and *Tide* are certainly my two albums of the year and seldom does a listening session pass without one or even both of them getting a listen. What I love about them, apart from her sublime phrasing and vocal control is the impeccable quality of the playing. Everything is seriously understated on these albums, withdrawn to leave only that which is necessary for the song. For me it is the art of great musicianship and production. But the music still remains dense and incredibly textural. On 'Bossa' she sings other peoples songs, adapted to a bossa nova rhythm that is often suggested rather than stated. Played through the 089 this becomes stunningly obvious. On the Randy Newman song 'Living Without You' she gives it a quite obviously romantic slant. After the introduction of a conversation between piano and guitar the shimmering rivet cymbals and brushed snare provide a waterfall-like backwash against which the guitar pushes a simmering hint of a South American time signature and the piano plays what initially seems like a simple series of tonal droplets. The beauty and balance that the 089 brings is that it is so good at showing such small dynamic shifts and movements. The tonal expression of the piano lights the way through the piece with a sense of shape and colour that brings accents in time and space. I have never heard a CD player hold all these delicacies together quite like the Burmester before. But, on other systems, I have heard the close washing cymbals swamping the piano and guitar and I've felt the song drift by without that captivating feeling of intensity that it should have. Likewise with the Becker/Fagen song 'Were You Blind That Day'. I love the way this player really gets the message of the song across as she sings just behind the beat,

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almost as if to make the lyrical point that much more succinct. It is easier to get this level of coherence wrong and I must point out that the CD089 positively demands that the amplifier, speakers and indeed the whole of the system be up to the job. It will ask a great deal of the installation if the music is to stay perched on the point of intensity.

Low-level and ambient detail is striking and is usually the domain of more expensive two box players. But few of those that I have heard achieve that delicate balance this well. If I had to describe the actual overall tonal balance of the CD 089 I would say that it leans very, very slightly towards warmth but don't think that it is in any way slow or remotely retiring. Listen to Jeff Beck ripping it up at Ronnie Scott's and you'll be in no doubt that this is a machine that responds with boundless energy regardless of what the music demands of it. It is as happy punching out Kai Wilkenfeld and Vinnie Colaiuta's low-end bass and drum work out as it is in caressing the delicate sweetness of *The Lark Ascending*.

It is a real shame that Burmester don't have a current UK outlet where you could hear the CD 089 but that will hopefully change very soon. I would happily buy one direct from Germany myself and for a purchase this important might even be tempted to nip over for the day for an audition. This is one of the very best and most complete CD players I have heard to date and certainly the best single-box design. It is, unfortunately, also one of UK audio's best-kept secrets. +

