

Burmester 111 music server

By Alan Sircom

One of the big problems facing any music server maker is how do you get past iTunes? Apple's free elephant in the computer audio room is free, ubiquitous, free, robust, free and free. It's not perfect however. If I were working up a music server, I'd want something that defaults to being a CD player, but can easily rip discs, something that allows me to edit the metadata about the recording (including cover art) before I rip it, not after, something that allows me to adjust the rip process to suit pristine or trashed discs on the fly and a unit so essentially fit and forget that I could drive it from my iPad.

Meet the Burmester 111 musicserver. It does all those things. And more. It even comes with an iPad!

The 111 is a big, heavy and shiny box, as befitting a product in Burmester's Reference Line. Also as befitting Burmester – and especially Burmester's Reference Line – it is extremely well built. Nothing is left to chance, everything is made with the sort of engineering standards that don't happen in the home that often today. Or anywhere else for that matter; if Boeing hired some of Burmester's production team, there would be a lot more Dreamliners in the air. OK, so they might weigh 32x more, but they'd be capable of flying through a meteor storm without the least complaint. In fact, the front panel display is taken from an over-engineered, mission critical device used in the cockpits of aircraft, and is designed for ultra-reliability. Such is the way of Dieter Burmester.



How this relates to the audio world of servers and such is while other companies make recommendations about things like back-up and uninterruptable power supplies in server-side systems, Burmester just builds them into the unit. When you open the box, the three layers of packaging include the aforementioned iPad (and the slab-fronted sea-of-buttons Burmester remote), a pair of wifi aerials (and a custom made extender panel, if their reception is hampered by in close proximity to the 111) and a strange black plastic box with wires hanging out. This is the UPS battery, and must be loaded in the back (alongside the pre-configured two mirrored 3TB hard drives) before use. There is also an internal SSD that holds the 111's operating system.

UPS battery installation aside, the only noteworthy part of the set-up process is you need to put the 111 on your network. Because it uses the network simply for metadata population, finding music elsewhere on your system and iPad control, it doesn't need to be a belt-and-braces network install, but if you have your IP address handy or are capable of hard-wiring this into a network, you can be up and running in under half an hour. It's not a network player though; there are two digital outputs so you could run the signal into two separate rooms, but you cannot run multiple musical threads from each room. For that, you need something more DLNA friendly. There is a Samba share server, allowing music on the network to be pulled into the 111 and digital radio is supported.

Operation is a little odd, as it's divided between front panel and iPad (which is why the iPad is provided), especially as the on-screen display relies on hard-buttons on the sides of the screen and dial pressing on the two large chrome knobs. The oddness begins to resolve itself when you discover the 111 is potentially a dual or even triple role device, as it can be used as both a DAC and preamplifier in its own right, the latter in particular being very close in performance terms to devices like Burmester's own 077 preamp, thanks to its DC coupled, free from coupling capacitor output stage. You can configure the 111 as either a digital hub, a central digital/an analogue nexus or 'just' a music server. Whichever way you pick, the iPad application needs to be used to rip CDs to disc – otherwise it simply plays them. As a CD player in its own right, it's no slouch; although it's comfortably bested by



a player in the company's own Top Line and beyond, that still puts it in exalted audio company. But it's a telling indictment of today's audio world that the CD performance of this multi-option device must be considered in afterthought, even if Burmester did no such thing in development.

Rumour has it the design team involved in the 111's digital control platform were also previously involved in the creation of the look and feel of iTunes, and it's great to happen on something that operates in a way you'd expect it to operate. The manuals supplied with the 111 are perhaps not so immediately instructive, however.

We are still just scratching the surface of the objective performance of the 111, and could spend thousands of words continuing to do just that. But that's not the way prospective ►

► Burmester buyers think. The minutiae of product design is academic, because the name bestows a certain level of quality above and beyond the name on the chips. The DAC circuit in this is very similar to that in the 113 DAC and a range of reference players; it auto-upsamples to 24/96 or 24/192 throughout. Curiously, it also has a volume normalisation system, but this only applies on playlists and works in the analogue domain; so its output volume dependent, instead of using digital compression.

But, how well does it work? In a word, brilliantly! It rips to FLAC by default (WAV if you want to lose track of your metadata, MP3 and the rest if you want small file sizes) and if it detects a badly made or scratched disc – or you set it to slow-burn – it will take forever to rip it, but it will rip it right. I'm not entirely won over by the 'Animal Farm' argument ("All rips are equal, but some are more equal than others") on disc ripping, but the 111 does make those rips sound very good indeed. I don't want to say the 111 produces an 'analogue-y' sound, because that summons up images of smoke and mirrors, but the sound of the 111's rips are more like you'd want the music to sound were it not encumbered by the recording process itself.

This means that legendary early 1960s version of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring – conducted by Stravinsky himself – gets past the almost metronomic precision of the composer's timing and goes for the passion and fire. This is never something that could be lost on a recording, but it can be undermined slightly and here it's conveyed with passion and energy. This is music that should sizzle and sparkle, and it does just that here.

Moving to Lady Day's 'I'm a Fool to Love You' on *Lady in Satin*, that sound of a broken voice and a broken individual behind the voice is almost too much to bear through the 111. You can almost hear her impending death rise out of that distinctive, yet by this time fractured vocal. Image separation and soundstaging were particularly impressive here, too, but as we moved over to some live soul from some dead guys (Donny Hathaway), that sense of both good stereo separation and cohesive overall sound became uppermost.

As with most Burmester CD sources, the 111 leans slightly to the side of tonal warmth and richness, rather than a cool delivery. It's full of energy and is possessed of a great deal of frequency extension at either end of the spectrum, but it's principally that enticing sound that its CD players do so well that works here.

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Reference Line equipment starts expensive and goes up from there. But such is the loyalty engendered by Burmester, there will be people who would never even dream of anything apart from a 111 to fill their music server needs. Fabulous rips, built like a tank made out of expensive watches, an interface that even Apple would approve of and a build quality that will last forever – the 111 proves quality doesn't come cheap. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Min. 2 x 1 TB hard drive capacity for music data storage/data storage with two mirrored hard drives)
configured in RAID 1
SSD drive for system storage
Supported audio formats: FLAC / wav / mp3 etc.
Sampling rate for D/A conversion can be selected from either 96 kHz/24 bit or 192 kHz/24 bit
7" display
UPnP server
Uninterruptible power supply (UPS)
Analog inputs: 3x XLR
Digital inputs: 3x RCA, 3x TOSLINK
Analogue outputs: 1x XLR stereo 1x RCA stereo 1x RCA tape out (fixed) 1x headphone jack
Digital outputs: 1x RCA 1x TOSLINK
Dimensions (WxHxD): 46x22x41cm
Weight: Approx. 28 kg (depending on configuration)
Supplied with Apple iPad (preconfigured)
Price: £26,000

Manufactured by: Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH
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