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Burmester Audiosysteme 175 turntable system

by Alan Sircom

It took 41 years for Burmester to make its first turntable, so the 175 had to be something really special. The company showed the world the 175 in prototype form in Munich 2017, with a mind to get the integrated turntable, arm, cartridge, and phono stage system out to interested parties a few months later. Now, just after Munich 2018, it's finally ready... and it was worth the wait.

Since the reboot of vinyl, there has been an almost undisclosed and undiscussed part of the story; the high-end turnkey turntable replay system. If you are buying a low-cost turntable, you might very well buy a complete system, comprising timetable, arm, cartridge, and phono stage—all in the same box. Clearaudio, Pro-Ject, and Rega have all had successes with turnkey turntables. Once you get beyond a

certain price, however, the turnkey system is replaced by a parts bin of different components from different manufacturers. It is then incumbent upon you or your dealer to put together a great sounding turntable.

Burmester is the first high-end brand to challenge this concept head-on with its new 175 model; it won't be the last, as SME just announced its own turnkey turntable. To some, the very notion of a turnkey turntable is something of an abomination – fine for the lower orders, but not the sort of thing a 'true audiophile' would use. Instead, the 'true audiophile' way demands a separate turntable, arm, cartridge, and phono stage – chosen by means of a lengthy series of auditions – and either setting up the resultant package yourself or placing it in the hands of an expert.



“The platter is extraordinarily heavy; if it were any massier, light would not escape its clutches.”

► Scratch the surface in this and you begin to see why this is not the only game in town. First, there's the whole 'true audiophile' fallacy of equivocation. By shifting the goalposts, you can exclude practically anyone from the club. More importantly, some of the concepts of customisation of a turntable system are quite hard to parse today. Those 'lengthy series of auditions' are functionally limited by how many components dealers have in their possession, are willing to assemble to demonstrate, or are willing to loan out to even their most trusted customers. Let's say you are able to put together a good deck, arm, cartridge, and phono stage by listening to three examples of each; that might mean anything from three to 12 separate demonstration turntables to find the best mix. Far better perhaps, to let someone else do the legwork for you?

Then there's the set-up and installation. Yes, there are experts in the field who specialise in putting together high-performance turntable systems and in the process extract more from vinyl than you ever thought possible – we've even interviewed one of them (Stirling Trayle) at length. But it's also worth noting that there was more than a decade hiatus in significant vinyl sales where those skills were being eroded in both store and listener. Which means a fully turnkey high-end turntable should not be discounted as some kind of soft option. For many, it's the only way to get good vinyl performance.

Of course, this becomes idle philosophical noodling if the turntable system itself isn't up to the mark, but the 175 more than fits that bill. It joins the company's new Reference Line products, putting it at the top of the Burmester Home Audio line-up, keeping company with some of the greats of the audio business, including the 069 CD player, the 111 Musiccenter, and the evergreen 808 Mk5 preamp. As discussed earlier, it's also Burmester's first turntable in its 41 year-long history. Conspiracy theorists will doubtless jump to conclusions about the first ever turntable happening after Dieter Burmester's death, but the 175 was already a design project at the time of his passing.

The first thing to note is the 175 is deceptively heavy. Rogue osteopaths and physiotherapists could use one to drum up business (“Could you just lift that up?” and thinking it weighs about 20kg, the almost 60kg of the complete package will leave bits of you bulging in places they really should not bulge). A good part of that is the platter itself, which consists

of two layers of aluminium with a layer of solid brass in a sandwich construction. This was designed from the outset to deliver optimal damping and less resultant resonance in the process. The bitumen coating on the reverse of the platter and the three-leathers mat increase the damping properties even further. The platter is extraordinarily heavy; if it were any massier, light would not escape its clutches. And that kind of high mass puts strain on the sub-platter and bearing unless it is of a suitably high grade of engineering excellence. Of course this is Burmester we're talking about so that 'high grade of engineering excellence' comes as standard, so the conical sub-platter is equally substantial (its conical shape allows easy mounting, precise centring and excellent concentricity... it's funny how the ability to be good at being 'round' might come in handy for a record platter) and the bearing is designed to be maintenance-free for life.

The 175 turntable is driven by four motors located in the outer square around the sub-platter. This is similar to the layout deployed by the Kuzma XL4 before the company went to DC motors. In this case, however, the belt arrangement is hidden from view. The reason for four motors (aside from providing the torque needed to turn a massive platter) is to prevent any kind of irregular tension on the bearing. This tension won't shorten the life of the bearing (OK, it might have meant some far off future race – like the Morlocks or the Eloi from HG Wells' *The Time Machine* – could have found the bearing was running a bit 'ticky' but in reality the bearing will probably outlive the great-great-grandchildren of anyone reading this) but might have some influence on ultimate speed stability. Multiple belts and motors shortens the ramp-up time and improves synchronisation, too. This simultaneously results in an improved sound and a fast starting time for the drive.

The 175's four AC synchronous motors are driven by digital motor electronics in the turntable itself under the motors, which use a high-precision oscillator to deliver high-quality sine voltages. The electronics are therefore both immune to fluctuations in the mains voltage frequency, and away from the delicate signals of the cartridge and the equally delicate electronics in the phono stage. Due to the seemingly high level of efficiency of the electronics, driver stages, and motors, the entire unit remains cool and free from heat-related impairments. ►



“It took some in-head processing cycles to acclimate to the bottom-end energy and drive, which is an extremely good sign.”

► Moving across to the arm, this is no off-the-shelf affair. Instead, it's a nine-inch, cardanic mounted tone-arm with a carbon-aluminium composite armtube, with a gimbal bearing in the form of a hybrid of steel and ceramic. Although the arm uses the a conventional counterweight, the anti-skating is gradually adjustable via control knob. This is all preset as standard to match the supplied cartridge. This moving coil design is tightly specified by Burmester, is housed in aluminium, which also helps match the rest of the design, and is supplied installed.

The 175 is designed as a turnkey table, which Burmester calls an “active” turntable, which means it has a built-in phono stage. At the outset, in early prototype form, that inserted phono stage was a Model 100. The one in the production model is more of a distillation of what's best on a Model 100 for the typical user. This means the very small signals from the pick-up to be gently amplified after the shortest possible path. We're talking a little less than 30cm from cartridge tag to phono stage. This phono stage contains all ‘the good bits’ from the Model 100 (i.e., almost everything except the on-board MM phono circuit, A-D converter, and the VU meter) and these have been optimised for use inside the 175 and allow external voltage values at a superior level. If you decide to move away from the supplied cartridge, the phono stage is designed for moving coil only and is adjustable for load (this is one of the few immediately visible changes to the production model from the prototype shown at Munich ‘17 – the phono stage controls were on the front panel and are now moved to the rear of the deck).

Great care has been taken in making sure the Model 175 is of a similar height to Reference Class products like the 069 CD player or 077 preamplifier, and that includes the baseplate. Although appearances can be deceptive here, because that baseplate is in fact a form of magnetic suspension, and the whole enormo-mass of the 175's upper slopes float on a trio of magnets (all other relevant Burmester Home Audio products have four feet that sit in a conventional plinth/baseplate). This also allows a degree of levelling on less than level surfaces, but no-one in their right mind puts a £30,000 turntable on an uneven surface, would they? I guess that might be a test of the turnkey nature of the turntable, but somehow I think that misses the point.

That point is it's an excellent turntable package that fits beautifully into the Burmester ‘ecosystem’ (and beyond) in looks but most importantly in sound. There's an interesting aspect to the performance here; play something with a good, infectious beat like ‘Wake Up and Make Love with Me’ by Ian Dury and the Blockheads [*New Boots and Panties!!* Stiff/Speakers Corner] as an opening gambit and it almost sounds slow. Come back to it two or three tracks later, and it's bouncy and rhythmic and deep. This highlights the sophistication of the turntable because that depth of rhythm and sheer low-end retrieval takes a time for your brain to process. If I came back to the track after a couple of pieces of music and it still sounded slow, I'd conclude it was because the deck sounded slow. Instead, it took some in-head processing cycles to acclimate to the bottom end energy and drive, which is an extremely good sign.

The overall character of the turntable is extremely easy to sit in front of. There's a lot of high-frequency and low-frequency energy to be had; there's a lot of mid-band detail, too, and yet none of this is thrown at you in a hard or aggressive manner, to the point where it almost sounds laid back at first. Like the bass performance, this takes some acclimatisation time, but this hurdle is overcome faster if you compare it to one of its digital stablemates in the Burmester Reference Line. It's the effortlessness and naturalness of the products that seems to be a common design feature. Whether this is the way Burmester ‘voices’ its Reference Line, or it's simply that the products are all designed to be the best they can be and that's how the best sounds, I'll leave up to you. For my part I think it's a bit of both. That might not fit so snugly outside of the Burmester ecosystem, where bright and forward is the order of the day, but this effortless character does make for more comfortable listening than happens with the more pinched and forward designs.

What the Burmester 175 does extremely well is atmospheric, room filling swells, because it seems to play these with absolute precision and fidelity. ‘Rakim’ by the Dead Can Dance live album *Toward The Within* [4AD] is a perfect example of this; it's a mini-maelstrom of sound, and should envelop the listener in a range of deep and impressive sounds from the musicians. Often, it just sounds like a overproduced, pretentious mess, but not here. That's difficult to reproduce. ►

“You’d be forgiven for thinking this a direct drive deck, and the precision of the speed control helps reinforce that thinking.”

► The Burmester’s ability with such tracks seems to come from a combination of two factors; the almost totally noise free phono signal chain (you could turn the amp up to 11 and use the cartridge as a microphone and still barely get above baseline electronics hiss - it’s that quiet) and its outstanding pitch stability. With the hidden belts and the rapid start-up, you’d be forgiven for thinking this a direct drive deck, and the precision of the speed control helps reinforce that thinking.

It also has the rare ability to not be musically troubled by surface noise, even the sort of surface noise that borders on track damage. Pops and clicks are still noticeable and unfortunate, but not as musically intrusive as some. I noticed this with a copy of Faure’s ‘Requiem’ [EMI] that I have and that has seen better days. The choir begins to get almost raspy due to track collapse, but this is masked in most turntables by the sound of bacon frying in the foreground from all the pops and crackles. The frying bacon sound hasn’t gone away, and neither has the raspy choir sound, but you can here ‘through’ them better. This perhaps does dovetail with the more effortless and relaxed upper midband of the 175, but whether this is ‘character’ or ‘accuracy’ remains difficult to say definitively. Certainly if you associate ‘accuracy’ with ‘clinical coolness’ this isn’t the turntable for you, but if you like a sound that is overly lush or rich, then the 175 is not the deck for you either.

There are so many aspects that this turntable does right, but perhaps what makes it most immediately recognisable as a top-notch turntable is its ability to force the listener to drink deep. Turning a piece of music off during play is not quite the travesty it can be with some systems, but you are perfectly happy to let one track drift into a whole side, and maybe reach for more. Don’t go to audition this with *Yessongs*!

Because this is a Burmester product there is one aspect of the design that some outside of the Burmester ecosystem might find an annoyance. It is a balanced-only output. This is actually an inherently ‘right’ idea on two fronts; Burmester products are designed as balanced products (they supply XLR-phono downmixing connectors for those with single-ended RCA products), and cartridges are an inherently balanced source. But there will be those almost militantly opposed to balanced connections and they will strike this from their list of options. More fool them!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Belt-driven, non-suspended turntable, with tonearm, cartridge, and phono stage

Chassis: sandwiched aluminium/brass plate

Isolation: Three adjustable magnetic corner feet

Motor: 4x AC synchronous motors

Platter: sandwiched aluminium/brass plate

Arm type: gimbaled bearing

Arm length: 9 inches

Cartridge type: moving coil

Phono-stage: MC only, load-variable, based on Model 100

Weight: 60kg

Price (including cartridge): £29,800

Manufacturer: Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH

URL: www.burmester.de

Tel: +49 (0)30 78 79 68-0

There is another albeit very mild concern for those within the Burmester ecosystem; the 175 replaces the 100 you bought just a few short years ago. There will be a good trade in second hand model 100s and the phono stage remains on Burmester’s books, but those wanting the finest in Burmester turntable replay just got a new toy in the 175, and the model 100 can’t play there.

The Burmester 175 has to be right because of its position in the line. The first ‘headline’ audio product launched after the passing of Dieter Burmester himself, the company’s first ever turntable, the most expensive turnkey turntable ever, and is part of the company’s Reference Line... if it took a wrong turn anywhere, there would be blood! Fortunately, everyone can rest easy and no blood has been spilled in the making of this review. This is just a damn good turntable, more than you might ever expect as a first shot across the vinyl bows from the brand. Its price and position puts it in among the best of the best, and it stands with them on build and sonic terms. If you are interested in those things (and let’s face it who isn’t?), you just got your first turnkey turntable. +