



Burmester Top Line System

Top Line, Indeed

Alan Taffel

Most of us walk into an audio dealer knowing that, with rare exceptions, we will not be able to purchase a system composed entirely of one manufacturer's products. If we could, we would have the benefit of a suite of components designed to work well together aesthetically, operationally, and sonically. Not only would these separates be compatible—that is, not only would they sound good with each other—they would also be consistent, delivering a “house sound” that, if we liked it, we could simply buy.

But most high-end suppliers are specialists. Many analog front-end manufacturers wouldn't dream of making digital sources, and vice versa. Electronics and speaker manufacturers infrequently encroach on each other's turf, and cable-makers occupy a world unto themselves. All of which makes buying the typical audio system a mix-and-match proposition. We attempt to find either synergy or a modicum of consistency among a smorgasbord of distinct sounds, hoping to achieve a pleasing and integrated whole. With good ears and good guidance, it can be done. The payoff of using all that specialized gear is that it tends to sound great. Nonetheless, the process is far from ideal.

But a select few brands claim to offer their customers complete soup-to-nuts audio. One such firm is Burmester. Excepting turntables and cartridges, this German outfit makes a highly coveted line of pretty much everything: phonostages, CD players, preamplifiers, amplifiers, and speakers. Indeed, so committed is Burmester to delivering a particular set of sonic attributes that it also supplies power cords, power conditioners, cables, and even

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the racks on which the aforementioned pieces are meant to sit.

What, then, is the sound Burmester is so intent on assuring? How would we characterize it? A whole-system review was clearly the best way to find out. The timing for such a project was fortuitous, since the company has recently released a slew of new products in its Top Line series (which, ironically, is not its top-of-the-line). The two pallets I received held a new 089 CD player, an equally fresh 088 preamplifier, the holdover 911 Mk III stereo power amplifier, and a pair of the B30 floorstanding speakers introduced at CES 2010. Burmester also supplied me with all the ancillary gear I'd need: cables, cords, a 948 power conditioner, and an equipment rack whose wood and metal hues perfectly matched those of the speakers.

Before turning to this system's sound, a few words about its price are in order. Say "Burmester" to an audiophile and the response is likely not to be a specific sonic attribute or technology; rather, if there is one thing this company's products are known for, it is their cost. The CD player, amp, and preamp in my review system run around \$30,000—*each*. The only remotely value-priced elements are the speakers, which list for a surprising \$16,000 the pair. Despite that, the complete review system, including accessories, totaled up to \$135,000. A Reference Line version of this assemblage, which *would* be the top of the line, costs twice that amount.

What, then, does Burmester deliver at these exalted levels? Part of the answer is an endearing set of non-sonic attributes. I noticed, for example, that the company tends to build an unusually high level of flexibility into its components. For instance, though the 089 can be used as a pure CD player, the unit features a built-in linestage—in fact, the very one contained within the standalone 088—a volume control, plus a digital *and* an analog input. As a result, this player can serve as both the source and the nerve center of a serious audio system; just add a power amp and speakers. Similarly, the 088 can be purchased as a pure linestage, or with optional modules that add a DAC or a phono stage. My 088 had the DAC.

Aesthetically, Burmester products are on a plane that exceeds even the extremely high standards of our industry. The most visible flourish is the polished chrome faceplates, which are striking, unique, and elegant in a way that eludes most of the high end. Each piece of electronics is as much a work of art as an audio component. Meanwhile, the B30 speakers are stylishly proportioned, with exquisitely finished wood and metal surfaces. Coordinating as they do with the equipment rack, the ensemble

forms an integrated whole.

Yet another apparent Burmester trademark is intuitive operation. In contrast to the unorthodox Goldmund system I reviewed several years ago, which maintained the sound in the digital domain all the way *into* the speakers, Burmester components all function traditionally. This makes them a snap to set up and, in spite of their flexibility, immediately familiar to operate.

Finally, as befits their price range, Burmester products positively ooze quality. Switches clunk authoritatively; sliding parts, such as the CD player's drawer, do so with unimaginable smoothness; and speaker cables come in Anvil cases. Internally, the story is much the same. Though simple in operation, these components are sophisticated in design (e.g., DC-coupled, Class A, discrete and fully balanced circuitry), unimpeachable in construction, and unstinting in parts quality. Cutting corners is simply anathema to this company.

Now that I understood the non-sonic half of the Burmester proposition, the time had come to find out if the system delivered similarly impressive sonic attributes. But moving a carefully tuned and locked-in reference system out of its space in order to make way for an entirely different system is a daunting and unnerving proposition. I confess that I could not immediately muster the requisite will. So, initially, I let the Burmester gear warm up and break in off to the side of my listening room. Before long, though, I grew antsy with curiosity. I wanted at least a taste of the Burmester sound, yet I still hadn't come to terms with dismantling everything. The solution, which turned out to be the first in a series of baby steps toward complete system substitution, was to insert the 089 CD player into my reference rig.

Although I was initially put off by a somewhat dark tonality, I quickly became focused on what I felt were far more significant factors. (In any case, as you will see, I was later able to eliminate the dark tonal color.) One thing that hit me in the face was the complete absence of distortion. The 089 has the quietest background of any digital component I have heard. This lack of grunge had the effect of giving free rein to what I can only describe as an intense musicality.

A revealing example was the second movement of the Ralph Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony* [Telarc]. "On the Beach at Night Alone" builds from spare instrumentation and a solo voice to a full-on orchestra and massive chorus, then quiets back down. The listener takes a corresponding emotional journey,



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from the solitude of one man's innermost thoughts to the "vast similitude" of the cosmos. The 089 exquisitely rendered these dynamic and emotional shadings. Equally compelling was this player's ability to provide an uncanny sense of an "inevitable" pace, something I have never before heard from a digital source. To amplify, the slow sections of this movement have always sounded rhythmically amorphous. Until now, I believed this was intentional. However, the 089 revealed an understated but unmistakable pulse. I could feel—indeed I could almost *see*—the maestro's baton silently maintaining the musical meter. The effect was mesmerizing, lending the piece a propulsion and engagement that never wavered.

Once having tasted the Burmester sound, like a crack addict I wanted more. My next step was to connect the Burmester stack—CD player, preamp, amp and, importantly, the 948 power conditioner—to my reference speakers. I felt this arrangement would provide a sense of the electronics' sound through a known transducer, without the added variable of matching the B30 speakers to the room.

I mention the importance of the power conditioner because at first I listened to this configuration without that unit in the circuit. Again I heard the dark tonality I had observed in the 089. However, when I routed power for the stack through the 948, the sound immediately jumped toward neutral, ending up just a shade on the warm side. The 948 produced other benefits as well, including a wider soundstage, tightened bass, and a generally

greater sense of openness. If I were buying a Burmester system, I would unquestionably spring for this \$7995 power conditioner. Heck, in for a penny, in for eight thousand.

With the Burmester stack now in full swing, the sound on the Vaughan Williams track was fabulous in every dimension: hold-your-breath dynamics during both the crashing climaxes and the whispering reposes; biting bales from the brass choir; every detail of long draws of bows along thick bass strings; precise yet natural placement of the soloist; an unusually airy chorus; a deep soundstage; and, once again, that remarkable sense of inevitable pace.

Sonically, the Burmester stack compared mostly favorably to that of my comparably-priced Goldmund reference gear. The Burmester is purer, less congested when the going gets tough, and more relaxed overall. And though I have always considered the Goldmund unassailable in speed and dynamics, the Burmester bests it in those categories in the bass and midrange (though not in the upper frequencies). On the other hand, the Goldmund is ever-so-slightly better at retrieving deeply buried information.

But the real business of the Burmester is the music. Here, in addition to the pace and drama I have already described, the German electronics demonstrated a rare ability to bring out details and lines without letting them trip over each other. Instead, they melded and interacted exactly as the composer and musicians intended. The effect was, to quote a highly discriminating audiophile friend, "So satisfying, I could use a cigarette."



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At last I was ready to insert the last link in the chain: the B30 speakers. They immediately impressed me with their tremendous stage width—they actually prefer to be very widely spaced—and depth. However, because they are less adept at producing stage height, the B30s cannot conjure the grand scale that larger speakers achieve. (For that, Burmester makes the B50.) Ultra-wide spacing notwithstanding, the B30's imaging proved solid, precise, and completely convincing. Nor, despite their slim profile, were these speakers bass-limited in any way. The lows I heard on Dead Can Dance's *Into the Labyrinth* [4ad] were deep and profuse. Further, in yet another example of flexibility, bass response could be tuned to the room by inserting or removing a felt plug fitted to the rear-firing port. In my room, taking the plugs out not only established the optimum bass level, it opened up the entire presentation.

Yet perhaps the most important characteristic of the B30 speakers is that they do nothing to compromise the Burmester experience. For some reason, I expected them to do just that, given their relatively low price and the fact that building speakers is very different from building electronics. But to my surprise, the speakers merely extended the Burmester virtues through to the end of the system. They proved to be not only internally “of a piece” but wholly coherent with the sources and electronics driving them. Indeed, I was amazed at the consistency of sound and musicality among all these components.

As previously mentioned, one can save a few (OK, thirty thousand) bucks by using the 089 CD player as a linestage. I wondered how its internal module would compare to the 088 standalone unit. The two turned out to be very close indeed. The 089 gives up the last tenth of the 088's purity and is a little (and I do mean a little) thick in the lower midrange. But these are nits in the context of undeniably excellent sound. I have heard *many* dedicated linestages that would be put to shame by this CD player.

I also tested the DAC module within both this 088 and the 089 by connecting my reference Goldmund transport to each. I even experimented with using the 089 as a transport into the 088's DAC. Not surprisingly, none of these scenarios yielded sound as good as that of the 089 by itself. A really great integrated CD player is tough to beat with separates. In particular, the 089 was fuller and airier. Take, for example, “Western Wall” from the highly revealing Roseanne Cash chestnut *10 Song Demo* [Capitol]. Separate out the DAC and the loss of air is noticeable, placing poor Roseanne in a deader, less dynamic acoustic space. And though no one in his right mind would use the 089 as a transport, I am bound to report that it stomped my Goldmund Mimesis 36, brandishing a far purer midrange and more well-behaved highs. Given that the 36 is no slouch, I think Burmester is really on to something with the belt-drive technology incorporated in this player.

Despite the losses of the 089/088's DAC compared to the 089 as an integrated unit, the DAC still preserves ninety percent of what the CD player does, which makes it pretty darn good. Were it to be used as intended, with a DVD player or a cable box, this DAC would be more than up to the task.

So, does Burmester allow a would-be purchaser to stick with one brand, gaining the benefits of an audio chain designed as a system without losing the advantages of specialization? Based

on this system, the answer is manifestly yes—but getting the best of both worlds will cost you. How, then, to describe the sound that all that money buys? As I discovered, the answer has less to do with any particular sonic characteristic and more to do with delivering a captivating musical experience. At the end of my time with this system, I asked Dieter Burmester how *he* would describe his company's “house sound.” He unhesitatingly replied: “The ability to capture the power, variety, and surprise of music.” I couldn't have summed it up better myself. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

911 Mk III Stereo Power Amplifier

Power output: 350Wpc into 4 ohms

Inputs: Balanced stereo analog

Dimensions: 19" x 7.5" x 19"

Weight: 68 lbs.

Price: \$29,995

088 Preamplifier

Inputs: Six balanced stereo analog, one single-ended stereo ended analog, one RCA stereo phono (optional), one coax S/PDIF digital

Outputs: One balanced stereo analog

Dimensions: 19" x 3.75" x 13.5"

Weight: 27 lbs.

Price: \$28,995

B30 Speaker

Frequency response: 35Hz-45kHz

Power rating: 180 watts

Loading: Bass-reflex

Drive units: One AMT tweeter, one Kevlar 6.3" midrange, one 11.8" x 8.3" woofer

Dimensions: 9.6" x 43.3" x 16.1"

Weight: 59.5 lbs. each

Price: \$15,995/pr.

089 CD Player

Outputs: Stereo balanced analog

Other connections: Coax digital input

Dimensions: 19" x 4.4" x 13.5"

Weight: 25.4 lbs.

Price: \$28,995

948 Power Conditioner

Dimensions: 19" x 6.1" x 14.5"

Weight: 37 lbs.

Price: \$7995

V5 Rack

Shelves: Three

Dimensions: 27.5" x 21.65" x 17.5"

Weight: 75 lbs.

Price: \$3995

Cables

Speaker cables: \$3995, 10'

XLR interconnects: \$1295, 1 meter

Power cords: \$695, 1.5 meters

BURMESTER

AUDIOSYSTEME GMBH

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burmester.de

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Goldmund Mimesis 36 CD

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Bryston BDA-1 DAC

dCS Debussy DAC

Goldmund Mimesis 22

Preamplifier

Goldmund Mimesis 8 Power

Amplifier

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Empirical Design cables and

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