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Burmester 069 Reference  
Line CD player

Anthony H. Cordesman  
Photography by Adam Voorhes





First, if there is any compatibility problem with other equipment, I did not hear it. I was working through a number of system changes—if not convulsions—during what was an unusually long review period. I was going through changes in interconnects, and exploring some superb new products from Audioquest (the Colorado and Niagara interconnects and the K2 speaker cables) and some virtually hand-made products from Stealth—a small specialty manufacturer in Maryland that deserves attention from any audiophile who can afford a *ne plus ultra* approach to interconnects and speaker cables.

I was also listening to comparisons of different tube (Cayin and Primaluna) and solid-state (Boulder and Pass) electronics, and focusing on two different speakers—the Hansen Princes and the Vandersteen 5As. I also moved the 069 to try out two other systems—one with Thiel CS7.2s and another in a friend's house using Quad 989 electrostatics. I did not encounter any hint of a compatibility problem, nor did I find anyone who did not regard the 069 as being of reference quality during the various system permutations.

Second, this is a CD player for people who truly love music and have a large collection of CDs, not just for audiophiles. I worked

my way through a very broad range of my own CD collection during my auditioning of the 069, and “worked” is a synonym for “enjoyed” in this particular case. My children brought in their music. (Sadly, they actually listen to music written after 1900. Another sign of the declining moral standards of our era and the coming apocalypse!) I listened to both private CD master recordings made by friends, and to the “music” demos of a number of manufacturers and their reps who visited during the review period.

The 069 did an outstanding job with all this material, and this is a far more important aspect of sound quality to me than the ability to “reveal” some special aspect in a particular recording. I have never been happy with CD players that only work well with the best audiophile recordings. Quite aside from the fact that the music and performance should be more important than sound quality, when a player favors only the best recordings it usually means that its processing is not good enough to handle mediocre digital media. This is not a sign of superiority; it is a sign of inferior design.

The 069 is not forgiving or romantic. It also, however, is not “cruel.” Some CD players slightly (or more) exaggerate the upper midrange to provide artificial “detail.” The Burmester has an almost perfect timbre, and it does not harden the upper octaves in any way. It doesn't alter dynamics to provide an artificial sense of life or reverse the emphasis to mask problems in handling musical changes and dynamics. The soundstage is three-dimensional, rather than forward, and depending on the recording, capable of excellent depth, image stability, and realistic width.

Both low-level and massive dynamic contrasts were consistently as good as I've heard from given CDs. The entire bass range was excellent, and it provided exceptional definition of the full range of the organ and of percussion detail on recordings like Kodo drummers. The 069 is also one of the few CD players that can reproduce all of the complex mix of bass information in the “Baba Yaga” track of Jean Gillou's transcription of Mussorgsky's *Pictures of an Exhibition* for organ [Dorian]. I was also impressed with the ability of the 069 to get the best out of soprano voice, upper strings, flute, clarinet, cymbals, and upper brasses without either softening or rolling off the sound or adding a touch of hardness.

The balance of sound quality between a unit like the Burmester 069 and the best analog LP systems is also much more competitive. The downside of the speed and stability problems in LP, the limits in frequency response and dynamic range, tape and record surface noise, and cartridge/turntable arm/turntable colorations is much more striking when you hear really good digital sound.

Don't get me wrong. No device is ever truly neutral, but any aspects of sound character that I could describe as imperfections in the Burmester 069 were sufficiently masked by the limits of CD recordings, and to a lesser degree by the colorations of associated components, so there were no clear flaws to point to.

## Sound Quality

As I'll get to shortly, I've heard competitive mixes of sound quality with different nuances, but I've heard no CD player I can credibly describe as “better” than the 069. Moreover, one reason that the sound quality of the Burmester 069 is hard to describe is that it is so well balanced. The 069 does not make one or two aspects of sound quality better; it does everything well.

Burmester claims that the DAC has a modular design that will allow upgrading to any digital formats to come, and that if higher sample rates are ever adopted, a new DAC module can be inserted. There also are three digital inputs: Two RCA and an optical/TORC input. (There is no XLR digital input.)

Somewhat unusually for a CD player, the analog circuitry includes an analog volume control, and an additional analog input (RCA or balanced XLR). You can select between fixed and variable outputs (also RCA or balanced XLR), and when you use the analog input and the volume control, it is completely analog. As a result, the 069 does not lose resolution either in controlling the output level from the DAC or from the analog input. (Digital volume controls can lose a significant amount of sound quality at low output levels.) [Digital volume controls throw away one bit of resolution for every 6dB of attenuation.—RH] This means that the 069 can be used as a preamp in a basic system that has only one analog input (hopefully from a phono preamp). I tried this with a number of phono preamps, a competing CD unit, and a tuner. You don't have a balance control and the switching features are scarcely convenient, but it is a tribute to the Burmester's analog circuitry that sound quality proved to be excellent.

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GMHB

Kolonenstr. 30q

10829 Berlin, Germany

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## The Problem of Nuance and Synergy

This, however, brings me back to the issue of just how important the more subtle sonic benefits of the Burmester 069 are, and the difficulty or near-impossibility of predicting whether its overall sound qualities will operate in synergy with those of your other components.

## Burmester 069 Reference Line CD player

Every piece of equipment ever made sounds at least slightly different, and there seems to be a peculiar fashion in today's high end for musically unrealistic upper-octave energy and detail. Falling in love with the new sonic emphasis in a given unit, or seeking steadily more arcane sound qualities that never occur in live performances, abuses music and is an expensive waste of money. The good news about the Burmester 069 is that its superiority emerges with the kind of acoustic chamber music, small jazz group, and solo instrumental recordings where it is easy to detect whether the resulting illusion is musically credible rather than sonically "interesting." It doesn't suddenly reveal some detail in a particular recording; it is consistently musical.

At the same time, we do come back to the question of cost-benefits and the relative value of given nuances in top-quality equipment. I spent a great deal of time comparing the Burmester 069 to my own reference: the Meitner CDSA player. There is a major difference in price: The 069 costs \$65k and the Meitner costs about \$10,000. There are also important differences in features. The 069 can be used as a preamp and has a much wider range of features. The Meitner is both a CD and SACD player. The 069 can't fix what is an increasingly obsolete digital media. The Red Book standard for CD doesn't age in dog years; it ages in digital years. The ability to store and process 96kHz/24-bit, 192kHz/24-bit, and truly dense bitstream recordings has shown just how much better more advanced digital recordings can be, even if far too few DVD-As or SACDs do this in commercial practice.

The key issue, however, is CD sound quality and I had the same general problem in comparing the Burmester 069 and the Meitner CDSA units that I have had with other reference-quality digital front ends. They both provide outstanding sound and they both do more to reveal the problems in CD recordings than their own limits. The different mix of nuances between the two units was musically realistic in both cases, and the relative merit of each player varied according to system components and musical taste.

I found that the relative merits and nuances of the Burmester and Meitner depended heavily on the equipment I used to listen to it with. The Meitner was consistently slightly more forward sounding in soundstage perspective, detail, dynamics, and upper-octave energy than the Burmester. This mix of nuances often sounded better with Pass electronics and the Vandersteen 5As using Audioquest interconnects, although much depended on the recording. The Burmester had more depth, a slightly sweeter upper midrange, and a soundstage perspective more to the rear. This mix of nuances sounded better using Boulder electronics, the Hansen Prince speakers, and Stealth interconnects—even when I mixed different models of the Stealth to get the best sound out of the Meitner player.

The fact that nuance was so room-, setup-, recording-, and equipment-specific—and the importance of synergy between different components—should be no secret to experienced audiophiles. I also should point out that Burmester makes a full range of audio equipment from front end to speaker and the ultimate test of its nuances would be on a full, all-Burmester reference system.

As reviewers, we are almost forced to review most equip-

ment as if system synergy did not matter and we all had systems capable of providing universal insights into the relative merit of given sonic nuances. In practice, this isn't true, and in any case there no one "truth" in high-end audio, although some equipment is clearly better than most of the competition in all good setups. All any of us can ever do is search for the best possible synergy between components and the most realistic illusion of live music—or the sound quality a given audiophile is seeking.

If you pressed me for a summary judgment in spite of these caveats, I would opt for the Burmester 069 over the Meitner for most CD listening—if I could afford to ignore its far higher price. At the same time, my caveats are a critical reason why no one should ever use reviews as a substitute for actual listening. I cannot conceivably tell you how the 069's nuances will sound in your system, room, and listening position, or with your music. I can't conceivably tell you whether such a large difference in price is "worth it" relative to spending the same money on some other component or buying more music. I also have scarcely had the opportunity to make one-on-one comparisons of every reference-quality CD player. All I can tell you is that the Burmester is a superb unit.

### The Problem of Technology

Finally, there is the problem of technology. If you are heavily into SACDs—which increasingly means classical music—the SACD layer of really good dual discs will sound consistently cleaner on the Meitner than the CD layer will on the Burmester. The Burmester is upgradeable to more advanced digital formats, but these are not going to be available on CD, and the future of advanced digital media is clearly shifting from DVD to Blu-ray and downloadable material. The 069 is also stereo, and the merits of most existing DVD-As (such as they are) lie in surround sound, as does the future of the new Dolby and DTS high-definition formats.

The Burmester is, therefore, clearly for the audiophile who has a very large collection of CDs. Here, however, we come to the uncertainty surrounding the transfer of a CD collection to a computer or other form of digital storage. This already is possible for audiophiles with advanced computer skills, although I have not been impressed by the ergonomics (and sometimes sound) of the dedicated music "servers" I have had the opportunity to audition. The Burmester would certainly be the ideal deck for transferring your CD collection to hard drive, but this again comes down to the matter of price.

### Summing Up

I guess the good and bad news for most of us is that all we can hope to do is hear the Burmester in someone else's system, or in a dealer demonstration, and use that experience to get a clearer idea of what ideal to pursue in upgrading systems we can really afford. The good news for someone who can afford the 069 is that he can buy the very best right now, choose the nuances he wants without regard to price, and forget about the future of digital sound. To paraphrase the old cliché about yachts: If you don't have to worry about the cost, you can afford it. **TAS**