

# Burmester B38 floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

**B**urmester has, for most of its forty-plus years, been widely acknowledged as one of the pure-bred members of the High-Fidelity Royal Family. This reputation has helped gain its enviable position and brand recognition – lest we forget, it's the top tier audio option in automobiles manufactured by fellow Teutonic Titans, Porsche and Mercedes-Benz. However, there is far too much commitment to its home audio roots and the original vision of the late company founder, Dieter Burmester (1946–2015) for its concentration to veer too wide of the goalposts. Indeed, it remains probably the only audio company of its stature to be 100% privately owned by the family of the founder.

This solid and untarnished reputation has been firmly established largely on the grounds of their impeccably designed, robustly built and muscular sounding audio electronics. Despite this somewhat (in) accurate perception, throughout much of the company's tenure at the top of the audio game it has consistently designed, manufactured and introduced loudspeakers – many examples of which were/are very fine indeed, as a profusion of customers around the globe will testify.

However, like many who have been around the block a bit in the audio game, I am loaded with preconceptions that were perhaps cemented in place years ago, and – in reality – deserve to stay in the past. So it is with Burmester loudspeakers; I couldn't help feeling that every Burmester loudspeaker will have a treble, midrange, and bass that are impressive but unconnected. Every



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► time I hear one, I realise that prejudice is (was) rooted in the listener (me), not the loudspeaker. There’s a salutary lesson worth learning here, and not just in evaluating loudspeakers. And there’s no better example of this lesson than the brand-newest design from Burmester Audiosysteme, Berlin in the form of the B38.

The latest loudspeaker in the ‘B’ range (there exists the smaller B18 floorstander and B10 standmount), this is one of those products that when seen in the flesh bears little resemblance to the impression given on paper. What first strikes you about this design is the significant presence of it, yet its ability to almost ‘hide’ in the room once you’re in front of it. This is due to the combination of a relatively slim profile hiding a speaker of physical depth and substance with a simplistic yet highly attractive physical appearance. There are deliberately no monster-neck bolts or screws visible whatsoever and the dark contrast finish of our pair results in both a classy and decidedly inoffensive exterior. You know immediately by the robust build quality, depth and height that it’s firmly in the ‘serious loudspeaker’ category yet remains understated and room-friendly – as long as the room is medium-to-large, of course. It may not be the ideal choice for your average shoebox central London studio dwelling, for example. Although not huge in stature (in high-end terms), each one weighs in at 51kg, with a depth of 460mm, a slim width of 210mm and a not-insignificant looking height of 1165mm.

This height brings into focus one of the contributing technological factors of the B38. When sitting in a listening position, you notice that the height is somewhat taller than expected. This, again, is, of course, a deliberate decision and results in that

impressive, highly desired ‘height’ of sound scale reminiscent of larger high-end speakers. To avoid it being disproportionately high, the AMT (Air-Motion Transformer) tweeter, favoured by Burmester’s top-end ‘speakers for many years, in this case, deploys a lower horizontal directivity to compensate for the overall cabinet height and to result in a wide (impressively so) sound stage. Also, in another first, this AMT unit was designed in collaboration with Burmester to employ a folded diaphragm in the centre of a very strong magnetic field. This conception was created to result in increased detail and transparency to combine with the wide staging of the directivity.

Further down the frequency range, we find a front-firing low/midrange unit that was again explicitly designed for – and with – Burmester. This is a 170mm unit with a fibre-glass membrane conceived for very fast attack and decay times and sonic clarity. This is partnered in each cabinet by an impressively sized 320mm side-firing bass drive unit, designed to be inward-facing. This is a long-throw but rigid woofer with a paper sandwich construction utilising a very large neodymium magnet.

Round the back, there is the option of bi-amping or bi-wiring with two sets of terminals, supplied with high quality bridging links for single amp/wire adaptation. Less familiar is a switch located at the bottom rear featuring ‘+’ and ‘-’ symbols. This constitutes part of the speaker’s ‘tuning’ system that can be utilised to compensate for room influence and/or resonance. I found it could also be used to tailor the sound to certain recordings’ failings or particular genres (such as smaller-scale string music) – switching over to the ‘+’ setting on thinner acoustic or classical recordings gave the sound a tad more breadth and body without affecting the overall tonal balance. In addition, two rather significant ‘bunges’ are provided for tuning the substantial rear-firing ports according to room ‘liveliness’ or proximity to a rear wall, for example. Overall this makes the listening experience pleasingly flexible and tuneable without altering the sonic stamp of the B38.

The very sturdy cabinet employs, like its smaller brother the B18, a complex vibration damping system and FEM (Finite Elements Method) technology in an extremely solid cabinet with a double-layered sidewall with an integrated stainless steel ring for increased stability. The B38 also features the precise spring-mass damping system for decoupling from the floor that is also found in the B18. Standard finish colour variants are Black Matt, White Matt, American Walnut and Mid Grey.

Two traits have long identified the performance of a Burmester loudspeaker: The clean and extended treble from that excellent Air-Motion Transformer high-frequency drive unit (I can’t bring myself to call it a ‘tweeter’ as it does so much more than simply ‘tweet’), and the powerful, dynamic bass. The latter is perhaps the most immediately obvious ‘signature’ to a Burmester sound; understandably so because Dieter Burmester was at his heart a bass ►



▶ player, and anything that didn't 'nail' the bottom end in a tuneful yet 'meaty' way didn't get his seal of approval. He would approve of the B38; 'King Tubby Meets The Rockers' by Ernest Ranglin [Below The Bassline, Island] is a mid-1990s slice of jazzed-up dub with – as the album title suggests – a fine reggae bassline. Some loudspeakers fumble this, either absorbing the bass into the mix a little or presenting it as a one-note thrumming sound, where it should be gutsy and deep, with each note taking on its own distinct 'shape' and tonality. And the B38 does just that, so you always get the feeling of a master bass player at work. Moving across to electronica and my pet 'port-torturer' recording ['Chameleon' from The Last Resort by Trentemøller on Poker Flat records], it's clear there is some very clever engineering inside this cabinet because although there is a slight touch of port congestion when played

very loud and without the foam bungs, it's minimal (those deep bass notes are almost low-frequency square waves and arrive fast enough for one beat to be exiting the port while the next is wagging the bass driver). Tuning with the bungs neutralised this effect in our listening room. At normal listening levels, even without the foam bungs still, the bass exhibits little to no noticeable port 'activity'; it's simply there to give the bass more dynamism and energy in the room. One important factor to mention regarding the bass response is to note that – as in all the best high-end loudspeakers – it represents bass naturally. I'll give an example of that sweeping and overused statement: in a good recording using a large orchestra employed by that of Mahler or Stravinsky, when a bass drum is hit, be it fortissimo or piano, it sounds right. That is, not overblown or an 'event' but strikingly impressive and visceral in scale and part of the overall picture. This sense of real low bass only when it is genuinely present always sorts the men from the boys in loudspeaker design.

Similarly, that effortlessly free sounding, natural and extended treble that has long been a Burmester trait shines through, too. The easiest way of highlighting this is to play a well-recorded, pure-sounding, articulate mezzo-soprano, and there are few examples better than Joyce DiDonato singing the 'Tu sola, o mia Giulietta...' from Act 2 of Bellini's I Capuleti e I Montecchi [Stella de Napoli, Erato]. In fairness, the beauty of her voice shines through on laptop loudspeakers, but here it simply takes flight. Her voice retains the articulation ▶

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- ▶ and precision she is rightfully lauded for, with that remarkable range and clarity she manages to impart. And, through the B38, all of that comes through with little or no attenuation; toward the end of the aria, the orchestra fades until it is just her and a French horn, and through the B38 this comes across as part accompaniment, part conversation, where most simply make this ‘singer + horn’ with no great capacity for understanding the musical intent. The upper echelon of loudspeakers can get past the surface ‘reading’ of the aria and get to that aforementioned musical interplay, and the B38 joins that select and illustrious few. With all types of recordings and genres, the overall imaging of the B38 really shines through. As I tend to find in most speakers with inward firing drive units the bass (when centred in the mix) is impressively solid and central. Vocals and midrange information from higher frequency percussion is exceptional in both detail and imaging, too with real jaw-dropping precision to the performance.

I feel I am almost unconsciously slipping back into describing the B38 in terms of frequencies – and the qualities of individual drive units rather than as a gestalt, where one of the most striking things about the Burmester B38 is the way it ties everything together. There is a fine sense of musical integration and coherence across the musical spectrum; both in terms of frequency response and when moving from genre to genre. That’s not simply matching drive units, although, in sheer frequency response terms, that is an important consideration. It’s more about the loudspeaker’s overall coherency; if you move from Albinoni to Zappa in one clunky gear-shift, you need a loudspeaker that is capable of detail, refinement, and – depending on the Zappa album – unbridled dynamic range and energy. It helps too that the B38 has that aforementioned excellent sense of ‘out of the box’ imaging (which presented a wide sound in front of the loudspeakers and gradually grew deeper behind the speaker as they ‘burnt-in’ after prolonged listening) and truly exceptional solidity. And, if that Zappa album is the three-album *Joe’s Garage* [Zappa Records], it also needs to be entertaining. Under the gaze of the Central Scrutinizer, it’s clear the B38 takes its job seriously... but not too seriously. Listening is a genuinely enveloping and exciting event.

To summarise in one phrase: this is an excellent loudspeaker for high-end performance in real-world listening rooms – but size and partnering electronics should be considered. The ‘Goldilocks’ room sizes are anything from about 4x6m to 6x8m (with ‘appropriate’ ceiling heights); while there is some tailoring available in the rear control, put the B38 in a significantly smaller room and it could overpower it, and in a considerably larger room, you may need some reinforcement and an opening of the sound by disposing of the foam port tuning bungs and flicking that rear switch over to ‘+’. However, this is true of every loudspeaker, and the B38 never tries to bend physics by breaking the sound. Similarly, amplification is crucial, both in terms of power delivery and reserve.

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 3-way bass reflex

Drive Units: 1x Burmester/AMT folded diaphragm, 1x 170 mm fibreglass midrange, 1x 320mm paper sandwich construction woofer

Crossover: 150Hz/2400Hz

Frequency Response: 37 Hz–33000 Hz

Nominal Impedance: 4 Ω

Sensitivity: 86dB @2.83 V/ 1m

Dimensions: (WxDxH) 210 x 460 x 1165

Weight: 51.5kg

Finishes: Black Matt, White Matt, American Walnut, Mid Grey

Price: £16,800

Manufacturer: Burmester Home Audio GmbH

URL: [burmester.de](http://burmester.de)

This is not a loudspeaker that can be ‘grown into’ with a relatively ho-hum integrated amp and the promise of future upgrades. Drive it appropriately, and the B38 is exciting and impressive (we utilised Burmester’s own, of course perfectly matched, 032 integrated amplifier which has plenty of juice and a powerful, smooth sound); take a couple of steps down the amplifier ladder and this will not be the case. (Of course, this madness would be akin to donning a pair of John Lobb’s finest with a supermarket suit!)

Ultimately, the sound of the Burmester B38 is exciting, dynamic, impressive and involving, but it is also coherent, effortless and has a seriously kick-ass bass line. It’s a stark reminder that the company can – and does – make involving sounding loudspeakers that match (and better) specialist designs from dedicated manufacturers. It does need some driving, and those who like that soft, warm sound often (mis)attributed to valve amplification may not enjoy that presentation, but most others will find an awful lot to love about the B38. +