

Burmester Phase 3 system

by Alan Sircom

Most of the systems we have assembled for this issue are from multiple brands. The logic behind this goes as follows: no one manufacturer excels in every department. Burmester is the loyal opposition to that concept. The company's new Phase 3 system is designed from the outset as a high-end plug and play system, combining all-in-one electronics unit, stand mounted loudspeakers, cables, stands, tables... the lot. And it does this in a very distinctive and classy style. Everything you need for the Phase 3, right down to the power cord, come supplied in the crates. There is even an optional Apple iPad Mini with the Burmester app already preloaded. All you need to do is unpack the two crates, place the loudspeakers and system on the floor, and plug it altogether. For full functionality, you need to connect the Phase 3 to a wired or wireless Ethernet router, and if you go wired you will need to buy your own Ethernet cable. But that's it. Phase 3 is that comprehensive.

The name itself is significant. Burmester's first phase was the manufacture of high-end separates audio components; its second was bringing the Burmester name to new markets, most notably in the cabins of Porsche and Mercedes-Benz cars. Phase 3 is a move towards more integrated systems, a turnkey hi-fi for a turnkey world. Phase 3 is also the first phase in Burmester's company history without Dieter Burmester at the helm, although the product itself was already well in development at the end of his life.

Essentially Phase 3 draws upon several existing Burmester products, combining them into one system designed for everyday use and not limited to audiophile specialists. It's not too far from the truth to view the Phase 3 as a Burmester 151 Musiccenter, combined with the company's 101 integrated amplifier, and a wholly new standmount loudspeaker called the B15, all decked out in one of several colour schemes and finishes. We went for classic chrome (Retro-style in Burmesterese), with contrasting red cabinets for the sides and rear of the loudspeakers. A Loft-style look made from solid steel is also available, for those who like their brightwork a little less bright. Both stand types are heavily acoustically decoupled, but the use of steel does add to size and weight of the end product slightly. Although this system – built by hand in Burmester's Berlin factory – is as German as they come, I can't help but be reminded of some classic Brit-fi: the stands are very Gale 401 from the 1970s.

The two electronics components conjoined in the Phase 3 are both great (we've tested and liked both in the last two years), perfect partners, and represent a system that could not have existed until very recently. The 151 itself draws its technology from the company's top 111 Musiccenter, but the intervening years of development saw the rise of devices like the iPad, obviating the need for a large touchscreen in the middle of the design, and the Class D 101 allows a 120W amplifier to nestle alongside the music server and disc player in a single unit without even a hint of overheat problems.

The system itself looks as if there are two boxes, but in fact all the electronics are housed in the main unit at the top. The box beneath this main unit is simply a sealed shelf with a door. Phase 3 is designed specifically to fit into a more multimedia lifestyle, so that shelf is designed for housing satellite and terrestrial TV decoders. A few years ago, such a concept would be unthinkable twice over: from the TV side, that flip down door would always be open to gain access to the DVD or Blu-ray drawer, while on the audiophile side the idea of integrating audio and video was abhorrent. How times have changed. However, placing this shelf in the



package does mean that the Phase 3 can connect to the outside world, thanks to a pair of XLR connectors in the analogue domain, front and rear USBs, and a coaxial and optical S/PDIF connection. Personally, given the Phase 3 lends itself so heavily to video systems, I would have hoped for an HDMI socket or possibly RCA line inputs, but most decoders also sport optical (Toslink) S/PDIF.

The loudspeakers are new, and only supplied with Phase 3. Again, they draw upon existing Burmester intellectual property, combining the fibreglass paper woofer cone of the B10 standmount and the Air Motion Transformer tweeter found in the company's

floorstanders. Like combining the 151 and 101, this is easy to write and hard to do in reality. The loudspeaker went through extensive listening tests and a range of crossovers until Burmester was truly happy with the end result. Like other speakers in the Burmester range, the drive units are computer selected for compatibility and burned in at the factory. As a consequence, there is no real running in required for the Phase 3 system, although the amplifier itself needs a few hours to come to life.

Any system that sets itself up as being convenient needs to be, well, convenient to set up. And it is here that Burmester shines because set up and installation is extraordinarily easy for a system of the Phase 3's calibre. The loudspeakers are already supplied on their bent chrome tube stands and while these can be adjusted for height, in most cases 'out of the box' is more than good enough. Similarly, the main electronics also come supplied on a bent chrome tube stand. Installation is essentially as long as it takes you to move products out of the crates. Setup is slightly more long winded, because you ▶





▶ need to connect to the Internet and that requires pressing four buttons on the supplied remote control. At most with all components unpacked, Phase 3 will be up and running inside of 15 minutes. Factor in another 15 minutes for fine-tuning speaker position (10 of which involve deciding whether or not to use the supplied foam bungs in the rear ports), and you have a legitimate high-end audio system that can be playing, and playing well, in the time it takes to get a pizza delivered. Coming from systems that are still considered ‘bedding in’ three months after you install them, this ease of installation is heavenly.

Don’t think, however, that Burmester has sacrificed performance at the altar of convenience in the Phase 3. It might be easy-to-use and easy to set up (and the iPad app makes ripping and handling stored digital audio a breeze), but the compromises you might expect simply aren’t there. It has all the sonic elements of the 151 and 101 mixed together. This means clean and precise digital replay coupled with a warm almost tube-like sound from the amplifier stage. That combo doesn’t come with much of a downside.

Let’s not downplay the convenience factor, however. There is something really great about a system that’s the size of a CD player coupled with a small pair of speakers, which can be a CD player, a ripping CD player, an internet radio, a media server, a music streamer, and a sound system for a TV, all controlled from an iPad that comes preconfigured and ready to rock. That it does it all and does it with great sound is not to be sniffed at.

This is not a system that needs analysis. It’s entertaining, refined, and very easy to live with. It can rock when called upon (very well in fact, Phase 3 goes pleasantly and dynamically loud indeed), but can set aside its party animal demeanour at a moments notice. I comfortably flipped between ‘Chameleon’ by Trentemøller [*The Last Resort*, Poker Flat] and Rachmaninov’s ‘Symphonic Dances’ [Telarc], both as a measure of how efficient the iPad app was and

as suitable contrasts in musical performance. Even though it’s app is designed for creating playlists on-the-fly, Phase 3 switched between the two tracks instantaneously and effortlessly. The tonal quality also moved between the two, suggesting a system that is extremely evenhanded with all kinds of musical genre. Typically, Burmester is demonstrated with (and plays perfectly) well recorded rock. It’s almost unheard of to go through a Burmester demo without hearing Chris Jones’ ‘No Sanctuary Here’. The track came preloaded on five different Stockfisch and Burmester discs on the Phase 3’s internal 2TB RAID array, so it’s almost inescapable. But it must be said that this particular track sounded amazing through the system. It sounds pretty good through everything, but here Jones’ voice was crystal clear, projected well into the room, and was clearly delineated from the guitar, chorus, and the rest of the band. I don’t agree with the idea of ‘made for rock’ systems, but given how successful Phase 3 was at playing Chris Jones’ music, I do find it hard not to recommend this system to lovers of blues-rock, blues, and well recorded rock and pop.

In comparing the system to bigger separates, Phase 3 covers its tracks well. There are systems with greater inner detail, more transient attack and speed, and occasionally more midband clarity. At similar prices, however, you lose as much as you gain in other aspects. More transient attack at this level comes with a more aggressive, less enjoyable sound. More midband clarity often comes at the expense of a dynamic and powerful bassline (Dieter’s legacy as a bassist will always resonate through the Burmester line). In short, what Phase 3 offers is a sense of balance. It creates a system that most people would be more than happy to live with for the longest time. Audiophile box swappers, who are never content with anything audio related, need not apply.

They need not apply because Phase 3’s only real weakness is a lack of upgradability. This system does not lend itself toward ▶

▶ adding separate preamplifiers or power amplifiers, and neither is the amplifier open-ended enough to form the basis of an upgradable system. Whether this is a problem or not comes down to the listener. If you view an audio system in terms of future audio systems, Phase 3 is not for you. If you are done with all of that, and simply want a good sounding system with no eye toward future changes, then Phase 3 is ideal. Personally, I think Phase 3 represents a significant part of audio's future, as people move away from multiple boxes and toward simpler, uncompromised solutions.

I can't help thinking that Phase 3 is Burmester's way of leveraging those new potential customers driving round in Porsche and Mercedes-Benz cars with Burmester systems inside. Such people are unlikely to become full-blown users of Burmester's Top or Classic Line separates, but they might buy Phase 3. This is very much a lifestyle product, and it's a lifestyle that comes with a price. There's nothing to be ashamed of in that. In fact, Burmester should find Phase 3 fits well into this market; it would fit into this market without its automotive division, but it will find it a lot easier thanks to those high-end drivers staring at a Burmester logo every time they sit in the driving seat. It's not the only company to do this—Bowers and Wilkins works with Jaguar, Meridian allies itself to Land Rover, Naim runs with Bentley, Mark Levinson works with Lexus, and Bose works with just about everyone else. Many of these audio brands have seen an uptick in both sales and market presence as a result of these automotive hook ups. Burmester is no different, and the Phase 3 will capitalise on this.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my time with the Burmester Phase 3. It needs no excuses made for its performance, because it's a true high-end system in a box (well, two crates actually). A lot of systems with similar intent trade performance for convenience, but Phase 3 gives you both. Is this the future of high-end? Very possibly, and for that Phase 3 comes highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Main System

Analogue Inputs: 1x pair balanced XLR

Digital Inputs: 1x RCA, 1x Toslink S/PDIF, 1x Ethernet RJ45, 3x USB 2.0, 1x USB 3.0 Type A (rear), 1x USB 2.0 Type A (front)

Analogue outputs: 1x pair balanced XLR, 1x pair single-ended RCA

Digital outputs: 1x RCA, 1x Toslink S/PDIF

Antenna: 2x coax connectors

Remote connections: 1x RS232, 2x 2.5mm jacks

Headphone output: 1x 6.3mm jack

CD drive: CD-DA

Hard disk: 2x 2TB (RAID)

Display: Green point matrix, 8 character

Audio formats: FLAC/wav/mp3/AIFF/OGG/AAC/ALAC (m4a)/DSD;

Stereo 16 and 24 Bit, up to 192 kHz, gapless play by track analysis and intelligent caching

Sampling rate: selected from either 24 bit/96 kHz or 24bit/192 kHz

Storage: SSD drive for system storage, 2x 2 TB hard drive capacity for music data storage, RAID 1 system (security with two mirrored hard drives, 2 TB usable)

Play functions: Audio CD, Internet radio services, Music-Player, USB-stick

USB: Music playback, playlist export

Analogue compensation of level jumps between individual tracks

Integration of TIDAL streaming service and Highresaudio service

Web-Browser Interface on HTML5

High End rip-function

Exclusive music database containing over 3,500,000 titles for matching file data from ripped CDs

Power output: 120W per channel (four ohms)

Frequency Response: 5Hz-60kHz (-3dB)

Distortion (THD+N): 0.015%

Signal/Noise ratio: >74dB

Damping factor: >250

Loudspeakers: two-way rear ported design

Drive units: AMT tweeter, 170mm glassfibre woofer cone

System Dimensions (WxDxH): 573x628x420mm (loft style),

632x633x48mm (Retro Style)

Weight: 39kg (loft), 30kg (Retro)

Price: £23,800

Manufactured by: Burmester

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