

# Burmester BA31 floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

**R**eviewers sometimes pride themselves on their 'firsts'. I was the first UK reviewer to review a DVD player and the first to test plasma TV technology, for example. Occasionally, however, these 'firsts' are not something to be happy about – and this assay of the BA31 floorstanding loudspeaker will likely be the first review of a Burmester product not seen by Dieter Burmester, who died in mid-August this year.

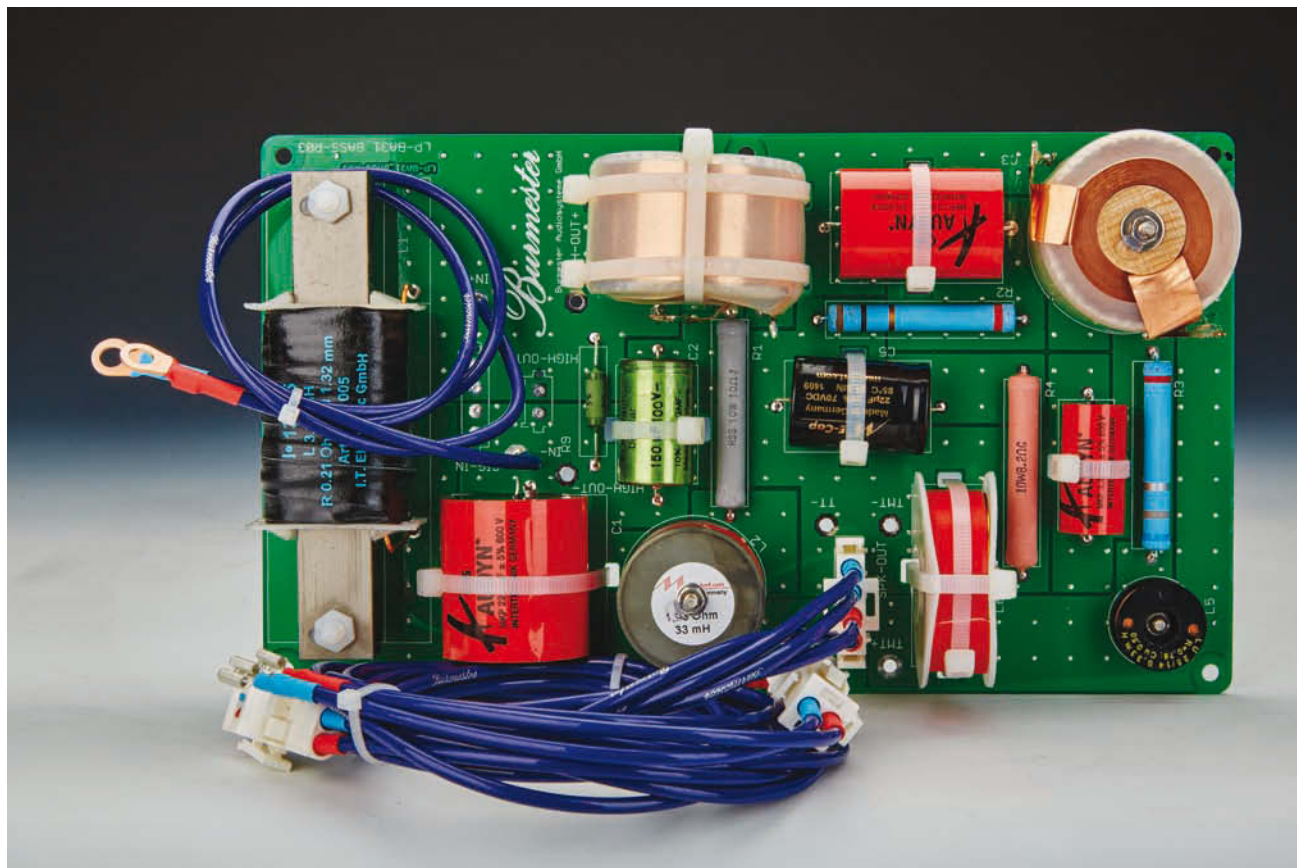
When someone so strongly associated with a company passes away, there is a tendency for people to think the company dies with that leader. Witness the 'Apple is lost!' panic following the death of Steve Jobs. The reality is that a good leader creates a good team; a team that will be defined, but not hide-bound, by the legacy that good leader created, and a company that can and will survive after that leader has gone. In a way, such a pessimistic vision of a company's outlook is disrespectful to both the good leader and the team they created: Apple didn't disappear after Jobs died, and neither will Burmester in the years following Dieter's passing.

Part of the reason Burmester's future is assured is products like the new BA31, the second device in the company's new Ambience line of loudspeakers. The term Ambience is more than just marketing speak – at the back of the BA31 (and the original, larger BA71) is a second rear-firing Air Motion Transformer (AMT) folded ribbon tweeter, with a large level control, designed to introduce an extra degree of ambience into the system.

This is a radical departure for Burmester, in more ways than one. For some time, Burmester has been creating a range of smaller, slightly less uncompromising looking loudspeakers; less like the imposing B100 and more like, well, loudspeakers non-Burmester fans might buy. Speakers like the BA31 have one-piece front baffles that don't have a chrome insert shining back at you, and braced, curved MDF cabinets finished in domestically-chummy veneers and glosses.

Back-mounted AMT tweeter aside, the rest of the design is a two-and-a-half way, with a newly-developed version of the AMT tweeter, coupled with a pair of 170mm GRP-treated paper cone mid-bass units. It sits on a heavy, integrated plinth and four spikes, and there is a large rear-firing port, which comes with foam bungs that are a 'get out of jail free' card for close-to-wall locations. Well, almost free... if it's at all possible, get the loudspeakers at least half a metre from rear and side walls and between 2.5m and 4m apart. The manual is very clear and comprehensive on this: it also has a quaint throwback to past times, because the loudspeakers are not magnetically shielded. This means that anyone still using a cathode-ray tube television needs to keep ►





- ▶ the loudspeakers at least 50cm from the loudspeakers to prevent magnetic field interaction. Presumably, that will undermine your viewing of upcoming episodes of *Beverley Hills 90210*, *Dynasty*, and *SeaQuest DSV*.

The loudspeaker is a diminutive floorstander by Burmester standards, but is still over a metre tall. However it is claimed to deliver -3dB points at 38Hz and at 45kHz, meaning a flat frequency response from about 40Hz on up, and this is realistic in a medium sized listening room. Moreover, although Burmester is known for its power-house amplifiers, its 87dB efficiency and benign impedance (nominally four ohms) means the BA31 could be driven by products from other brands (we used it very successfully with a Hegel H160 integrated amp, and there was no sense of unbalance or struggle). That being said, the advantage of more power and more current delivery means improved performance and integration at low listening levels, but the H160 was suitably 'grippy' to drive the speakers well at high volumes and low.

The rear connection panel is a little confusing, but actually extremely logical. It allows the BA31 to be bi-wired or bi-amped (the manual shows three different methods of bi-amping: 'vertical', 'horizontal' and dual-mono), but there is twice the number of terminals expected for such an arrangement. In fact, the explanation is simple; the outer WBT connectors are designed specifically for spade connectors, while the inner set are designed for 4mm banana plugs. There are jumpers designed to connect the HF and LF terminal blocks.

Although the 'ambience' rear-firing tweeter does what it says it does, and introduces a variable degree of ambience into the room, I think this is selling the BA31's rear tweeter short. Carefully (and individually) adjusted, these rear tweeters act as universal room insertion devices. You can effectively dial the treble and even the midrange of the loudspeaker 'into' the room (sub-200Hz bass still requires its own passive or active treatment... or, if you are an audiophile purist, your own ability to listen past the room). Its benefits are immediately apparent, too. Dial the room in correctly and the soundstage just unfolds out into the room. Burmester itself suggests the speaker develops omnidirectional or dipole-like properties of soundstaging and this isn't far from the truth. Correctly implemented in room, the ambience setting makes the 'sweet spot' in the listening position really, really sweet. ▶

*“These are speakers that can play softly in the background, yet let slip the musical dogs of war when needed.”*

► This ambience control makes reviewing both easier and more difficult. Easier, because the results one hears in a listening room can be more readily translated to any other listening room, but more difficult because the degree of ambience can be adjusted to taste, making a definitive statement on the loudspeaker’s imaging properties dependent on how you like your dial tweaked. Ultimately, though, the BA31 is a loudspeaker that offers a neat take on creating good, personalised soundstaging in the room.

The BA31 does three very Burmester things very well indeed: it plays good, solid, and powerful bass lines (Dieter was, after all, a bass player), it plays at high levels without a problem (Dieter did, after all, like it loud), and it’s incredibly detailed (Dieter was, after all, an audiophile at heart). Sounds played on the BA31 rise out of a very solid foundation, with instruments rooted in place. Play something deep and powerful – whether that be Peter Hurford playing Bach on a church organ or Leftfield playing synthesisers in a studio – and you can raise merry hell. This also means you get to play menacing music that rarely sees the light of audio show day like ‘IM The Supervisor’ by Infected Mushroom on the BNE label (never, ever drive with this playing unless you like speeding tickets).

Burmester’s BA31 passes the ‘Just a Little Lovin’ test. Play the Shelby Lynn track, then follow it with Dusty Springfield’s version. Overly audiophile devices will point you in the direction of Lynn because of the recording quality, while more prosaic devices will make Dusty win out because of the integrity of the music. The BA31 showcases what is good about both versions of the track, without grace or favour to either. Similarly, on ‘Constant Craving’ from k d lang’s *Ingénue* [Sire] album, the overproduced, early 1990s mix is reproduced well, but doesn’t detract from the performance. A lot of audiophile loudspeaker systems accent the vibes on this track, while others just make this a bit of a syrupy mess. The BA31 helps bring out the chorus and the subtleties of the rhythm section in this softly-rolling – but deceptively ‘tight’ – country vibe.

Jazz and Classical are the speaker’s happy places, though. ‘Duke’s Mixture’ from Donald Byrd’s *The Cat Walk* (audio wave K2 disc) simply hangs together beautifully, the quintet perfectly ‘in the pocket’ and Byrd’s trumpet sonorous and sweet, yet extended. Pollini playing Beethoven late piano sonatas [DG] has similar class. The BA31 delivers a sublime sense of performance, more performance-stressed than impact oriented – it has that detail, but doesn’t over-stress this aspect.

I like to think of the Burmester BA31 as a Plantagenet king – simultaneously courteous and cultured, and capable of unleashing great power when it’s called for. These are speakers that can play softly in the background, yet let slip the musical dogs of war when needed. And it can be slotted into some difficult rooms with ease thanks to the Ambience system. If this is a part of Dieter’s legacy, it’s something to be proud of, and comes strongly recommended. +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Two and a half way ported floorstanding loudspeaker with rear-mounted ‘ambience’ drive unit

**Drivers:** rear: 1× AMT tweeter, front: 1× AMT tweeter, 2× 170mm cone mid-bass units

**Crossover frequencies:** 400Hz, 3kHz

**Frequency response:** 38Hz–45kHz (±3dB)

**Rated power:** 200W

**Efficiency:** 87dB (2.83V, 1m)

**Impedance:** 4–8Ω

**Nominal impedance:** 4Ω

**Finishes:** Macassar, light and dark walnut, solid white, solid black (all high gloss)

**Dimensions (W×D×H):** 25.3×105×37.5cm

**Weight:** 40.5kg

**Price:** £16,250 per pair

**Manufactured by:** Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH

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