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Issue 17 - May / June 2002
UK £3.95

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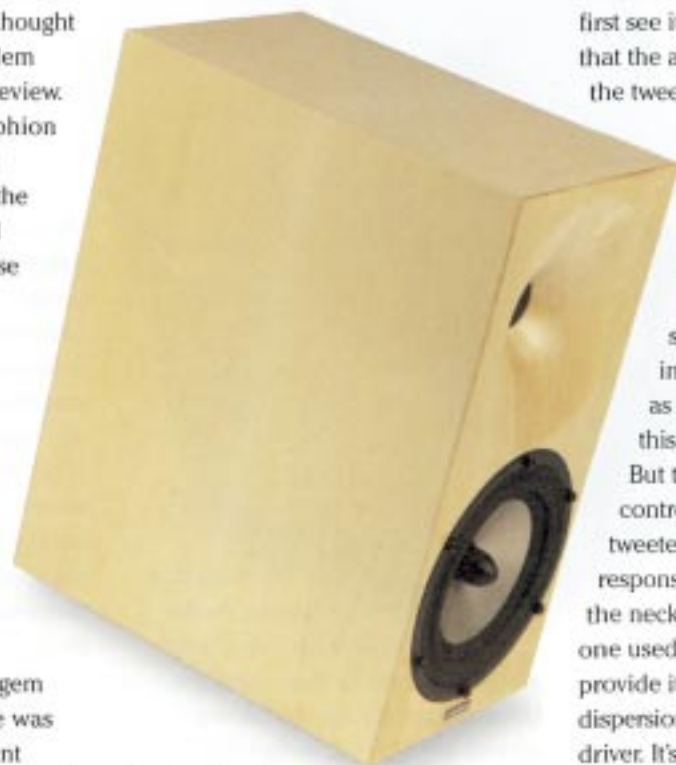


Amphion Argon 2 Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

As the copy date approached I was getting a bit worried. The sparkly new, unused speakers I had unpacked several short weeks before were not those that now sat before me. The promise they had showed was a distant memory. And I really thought that I was going to have a problem when it came to producing a review. Let me explain. When the Amphion Argon 2 first arrived it was a bit of a revelation. As mentioned, the review pair were totally unused and as with all new Hi-Fi it is wise not to make snap judgements until a break-in period has elapsed. But it was impossible not to be impressed by their performance over the first few days. Indeed, I was thinking that this might well be one of the very best sub £1000 speakers I had heard at home. Sitting atop my Revel stands they had all the hallmarks of a real little gem (if you'll excuse the pun). Here was a speaker that married excellent bandwidth, with a crisp, nicely etched sense of detail and an immediate sense of rhythmic and musical togetherness. But now, some weeks later they had curiously lost the edge that had made them seem special and were now soft, tonally flat and frankly boring. And where, despite their relative inefficiency, they had responded to the volume control with relish they now refused to awake from their slumbers, even under heavy power. I eliminated the

obvious, which was that something, somewhere was broken and was left wishing that the real Argon 11 would stand up and be counted. Fortunately, a few days later it started to.



Designed and manufactured by Amphion in Finland the Argon 2 is the entry model in a range of 4 loudspeakers. This is a two way, rear ported enclosure of compact dimensions necessitating a stand mount, more of which later. The most visually striking thing is the way in which the tweeter has been mounted in the throat of a deep baffle scoop, the size and shape of which mirrors the exact dimensions of the bass driver.

In fact it is not really deep enough to be called a horn and Amphion refer to it as a wave-guide. It is easy enough to see that this brings the acoustic centres of both drivers together and offers time alignment, but when you first see it you can't help but imagine that the amount of wood in front of the tweeter is going to introduce all sorts of reflective problems and possibly some phase anomalies too. Speaker designers have always told me that one of their primary concerns is that the tweeter should have as smooth an interface with the outside world as possible and, at first glance, this seemed to break that rule. But the aim of Amphion is to control the directionality of the tweeter to give a more even off-axis response. By placing the tweeter at the neck of an identical flare to the one used on the bass/mid driver, you provide it with similar coupling and dispersion characteristics to the bigger driver. It's one of the benefits that KEF cite for their Uni-Q drivers, and should make the crossover point harder to spot and thus less intrusive.

Both drivers are aluminium and made to Amphion's own specification by SEAS. The bass/mid driver measures 6.5 inches and the tweeter is a 1-inch dome design. The cabinets are superbly made. The review sample finished in a blonde birch looked great, particularly the way in which the veneer had been worked within the flare of the

▶ wave-guide. They can be single or bi-wired and the terminal quality looks excellent though you will need a spanner to adjust the connections, so tight are the threads.

Where the two arcs of the wave-guide and the bass driver are at their closest, which is right in the middle of the baffle, is the point source and the level at which you want your ear to be and this means a stand height of roughly between 60 and 70cm. Medium to high-mass stands with a large top plate seems to be the general recommendation as the speaker itself is no light-weight and is physically quite deep. Kudos work quite well, Atacama are better and the Target R4 is also a strong possibility. My own Gem stands are a little too tall to be totally ideal but the Amphions, sitting on 4 blobs and a thin line of Blotak seemed, eventually, to be quite happy there. Siting them is easy, depending on how much room you have. Pull them as far out into the room as you can is my recommendation if you want to hear them at their best. They have excellent low frequency extension and need no help from rear walls or corners but they are still quite tolerant of near-wall placement, though you will lose some of that open throated clarity they are so good at.

Amplification is an interesting one. Despite their humble price these speakers will not be at their most successful in a system with other similarly priced components. Their tonal balance could certainly be described as lean rather than rich but one thing it does do is to leave you in no doubt as to the nature of the driving amplifier. If you employ

a lean, high-resolution speed merchant, even one as good as the Spectral, you may find the Amphions tonally a touch on the chilly side. Their lowish 86dB efficiency necessitates an amplifier of considerable power, but it is more the nature of this power that is important. Put simply and ever so slightly crudely, it craves fat power rather than lean power and, though I unfortunately had to part with it recently, I cannot help



thinking that the Canary Audio CA 608 would have been a terrific partner for these speakers. Ultimately, valves may be the way to go with the Argon 2; budget Japanese integrated amps need not apply. Certainly, speaking to the designer in Finland and the importer I found they were both recommending several thousand pounds worth of amplification. And if you think that any sub £1000 speaker would sound good under these circumstances, think again. I see no problem in using these speakers with source and amplification costing many times their own value.

The dumb period that the Argon 2

went through lasted approximately two weeks yet still remains a mystery. Neither manufacturer nor importer had ever encountered such a wildly variable performance. There seem to be a couple of possible answers. Either this was a natural electro-mechanical break-in effect with crossover components and drivers behaving in a temporarily non-linear way. Or there were some external influences like an inconsistent mains supply. I am told that some Shahanian speakers are known to go through

such "off" periods during their lengthy run-in time.

But me, I've never known anything like this degree of variability, though I was mighty glad when they started to come back to showing the promise of the early listening. I'll put it down to experience.

Integrated musical clarity would be a good way to describe how the Argon 2 goes about its business. The speaker has a bandwidth that it seems comfortable with and in control of. If the wave-guide is an attempt to smooth the response of both drivers into one another around the crossover point, then it has succeeded and you are left with a virtually seamless musical performance that has the remarkable ability to detach itself from the speakers to give just about one of the most solid musical pictures I have heard from a small speaker. Every design has a different way of framing the sound and at these price levels you often find a strong left/right presence with a detached centre fill but the Argon 2 spreads the sound in a solid unbroken image right across the stage with plenty of vigour. Bass is very well extended, given the speaker's size and very tightly controlled. It stops and starts with commendable speed and has very little sense of the cabinet in its tonality. It flows smoothly into a lean but open midband which might sound a little mean with a conventional ▶

► tweeter installation. It certainly does not have an enormously extended feel about it, but the wave-guide does seem to bring a greater sense of presence (not forwardness) to the treble so, although the Argon 2 might not have as much "air" and sparkle as you might expect, it certainly has a great feeling of solidity and impact. This top end presence is quite unusual and has absolutely none of the possible side effects I was anticipating. Quite the opposite in fact as it is not remotely "phasey" and has great focus and projection though it never sounds artificial, constricted or unnatural.

The promised off-axis



response is excellent and you can sit way off the hot spot with a barely discernible drop in high-end response and even using the speakers on their side alters the shape of the sound very little.

Top quality Bluegrass musicians are some of the finest acoustic players on the planet blessed with a feel for time like few others and Tony Rice is one of their leading lights. This flatpicking wizard occasionally turns his attentions to other kinds of music as he did on *Backwaters* (Rounder 0617) where, with a band of 5 others he leaned ever

so slightly into the jazz arena. The CD has a rather unusual sound but the ensemble interplay is what has always drawn me back to it. Listening to it through the Argon 2 it was easy to see why. There is no drummer on this album so the musicians have no timekeeper other than themselves. Rice lights the way as he sets up a chordal highway that the bass player sits just underneath, subtly suggesting new harmonic possibilities by not always concentrating on the dominant notes of the chord. The twin violins and mandolin explore their way in and out of the structure, but the band are even more interesting when the chords stop. You can still hear the progression

in your head as small solos pull your emotions one way then the other. I loved the sheer clarity that the Amphions brought to the performances and the way that they allowed each player his own space and time. The subtlety of the mandolinists plectrum technique and the sheer variation of expression that vibrato holds for the master was all very well illuminated by the Argon 2's. I've heard this disc drift by almost unnoticed on many an expensive system but these little speakers gave it an air of poignancy that really made the experience worthwhile.

Rachelle Ferrell on the other hand demands a different set of strengths. *Individuality (Can I be me?)*, (Capital 94980 2 0) is a showcase for her talents and her vocal range and, especially on the up-tempo numbers, recording subtlety was sacrificed for impact. There has been a lot of production gone into this album most of it devoted to pushing the whole band into your living room so you just can't ignore it, or her. Listen to it on the little Amphions and you soon realise that the aim has been to capture the impact of a live gig on CD. There's quite a lot

going on and some of the tracks are quite dense but the "lightness" of the Argon 2's touch and its quick recovery from heavy transients meant it made comparatively easy work of it. Again, I was pretty amazed at the way they paint a full width picture of the music while still retaining that sense of control of both the big and the small aspects of the recording.

This is a very good all rounder with no notable weaknesses though there are a few things to bear in mind. The biggest consideration will be the driving amplifier, which should be chosen so as not to exaggerate the already lean balance of the speaker. It should also be of adequate power; the Argon 2's can soak up power like a sponge. But given that, I doubt you'll find too many speakers at this price with as much to offer. Oh, and make sure you audition a pair that have been well run-in.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Rear ported two-way
Drivers:	6.5 inch aluminium bass-mid 1 inch aluminium dome HF
Efficiency:	86dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Bandwidth:	40-20000Hz -3dB
Dimensions (HxWxD):	380x190x310mm
Finishes:	Cherry, Birch, painted black, painted silver
Prices:	£900 for cherry and birch £750 for black and silver

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