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Amphion Helium 2

by Alan Sircom

Does Finland count as Scandinavia? The Finnish Amphion Helium 2 – with its light birch wood veneer and light grey front baffle – looks so Scandinavian that if it were built cheaper and called something like Pjønkk, it could be something out of the Ikea catalogue. The £550 bookshelf (£500 in painted finish), effectively replaces the Helium+ and represents the entry-point to the Amphion range. And it comes in finishes like cherry with a black baffle, silver with a silver baffle and black with black, too.

There is a strong similarity between the Helium 2 and the Argon 2 tested in Issue 17, at least on the surface. Both are rear-ported two-way designs, although the Helium 2 is single-wired and the Argon 2 has bi-wire terminals. The aluminium drivers are gone in the Helium 2 (a small alloy bass driver was a feature of the Helium+, too), the speaker is smaller and delivers bass from a suggested 50Hz instead of the 40Hz claimed in the bigger speaker. Also, the front baffle isn't integrated into the veneer like the Argon 2. But, thanks to the front not-quite-horn-loaded tweeter wave-guide that remains the same size as the bass driver, the speaker could only be an Amphion design.

The Helium 2 features an entry-level 25mm titanium dome tweeter (found also in the Athene 2 and older Helium+) allied to the 135mm paper mid-range unit found in the Creon 2 floorstander. This gives a speaker that the manufacturer suggests has a frequency response from 50Hz-20kHz, with a nominal impedance of eight ohms and a comparatively low sensitivity of 86dB. They are fully magnetically shielded, for those who

intend on destroying their stereo sound by placing a TV in between the speakers. The company also offers a centre channel speaker voiced to match.

Amphion makes a big thing of its crossover points. The company points to the 2kHz-5kHz region as the place where the human hearing is most sensitive, but this is also the place where most crossover points are placed. As a consequence, we can readily hear the point of integration between treble and bass. The Helium 2's crossover frequency is at 1.5kHz and therefore just outside the all important presence region.

The Amphion ethos is cool on free-field measurement. These are speakers that will not necessarily perform well in the anechoic chamber, because they are evaluated in a more domestic environment than that somewhat sterile environment. Amphion's engineers claim that this practical approach addresses some key issues about room reflection without recourse to filling a room with absorbers, reflectors and other sorts of treatment. The company's proprietary Uniformly Directive Diffusion (or UDD) technology helps counter this, by addressing that the directivity of speakers vary with frequency; bass and midrange sounds tend to radiate spherically, while higher frequencies are more likely to beam directly at the listener. Ultimately, Amphion has developed their speaker range to work equally well in the listening room as in the lab, and this makes them far less

likely to be affected by the idiosyncrasies of the listening room.

Stands are a key issue with these speakers. They look as if they will work perfectly on standard 600mm stands, but looks can be deceptive. The acoustic centre of the speaker is the point between tweeter waveguide and bass driver, right in the centre of the front baffle, and that means ideally raising the speaker another 50mm or so. When Blutak'd on mass-loaded Kudus stands they sounded fine,



although I had to slump even further into the sofa to get the best sound. Fortunately, slumping on sofas is easy after several larges glasses of good whisky. Amphion recommends a very mild toe-in, aiming the speakers slightly to the outside of the shoulders of the listener. This isn't quite as off-axis or wide as required by KEF's Uni-Q, but is less toed in than normal, and the Amphion toe-in seems just about right in practise.

Rear-wall proximity is important but not critical, thanks in part to the addition of a bung that can be inserted in the rear port. Inserting the bungs knocks 1.5dB off the bass level, ▶

► for settings closer to the rear wall. Amphion suggests this allows the speaker to work up against a wall or even in the corners of the room, but this appears a bit too enthusiastic; 25cm or more from the room boundary with the bungs works well, but 1m or more from the walls without bungs sounds best. If you place the speakers close to the rear wall, give them slightly more toe-in, as the manufacturer recommends.

Moving to a paper bass cone instead of aluminium does make the speaker slightly more amplifier friendly and frees up the bottom end of the speaker sound more readily.

It also makes the speaker a bit more amplifier-chummy. The tight, slightly thin sound of alloy bass drivers often require a valve amplifier to beef the sound up, whereas the paper cone makes bass deeper and fuller on solid-state amplification that doesn't cost as much as a saloon car. In fact, the speaker made very acceptable sounds with something as humble as an Audio Analogue Puccini. Nevertheless, the Helium 2 is power hungry, and works at its best being hooked up to something

meaty and close to the 120 Watt suggested maximum power rating.

The review of the Amphion Argon 2 suggested that the speaker went through a two-week flat spot during the product's run-in period. No such variations occurred with the Helium 2. It started out good and just got slightly better and better. Whether this was because someone else had

a chance to run in the speakers or whether the less demanding design meant less of a run-in is a moot point. Whatever, the speaker behaved itself throughout the whole review period.

This is a speaker that challenges the received wisdom of how a speaker should perform at the price... and comes up with good alternative answers. Don't expect the holographic imagery or transparency of popular monitor-wannabes at the price. Instead, this is more like a low-efficiency, low-coloration horn sound, presenting the music in a manner that makes the

Amphion sound like musicians making music rather than an exercise in studio acoustical engineering.

This is an extremely smooth and coherent sound, perhaps due to the crossover point and the wave guide. Somehow, it manages to sound smooth even when the treble can be slightly spitchy with sibilant off-air vocals for example. It seems to push the treble forward in a laid-back manner; this sounds like a contradiction and in most cases it would be. But here, the treble is clean and direct, yet seems as if it is rolled off. This is unlike most speaker designs at the money (where the speaker has a definite bright or dull tonal character) and instead has the balance of a true high-end design. What sets this speaker apart from its peers is an earthy realism to the sound. It's the antithesis of bland music played on bland systems. It's like the speaker has a built-in Norah

Jones filter (a substantial bonus to this listener), simply because it doesn't present the standard-issue anodyne 3D imagery that usually passes for high-end sound at this price. Joni Mitchell is a perfect arbiter of how the Helium 2 handles music; when she had an edge of sorts (*Court & Spark, Blue*) the Amphions come to life. Play something from the time when she was a wonderfully produced painter (*Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm*) and nothing can hide the dullness of the music.

It's not that the Helium 2 is bad at imagery; it isn't, but it does portray imagery in a different manner to the norm. Sounds are not as exposed, not as separated as regular soundstages. It creates a tight, cohesive knot of sound between the speakers, with right-sized images. The sound is detailed, too, but again the sort of detail produced isn't of the standard type. Instead of detail presenting itself as a sheer onslaught of information, this is more selective. It's a sort of musical detail, that focuses on the structure of individual



► instruments and how they are used to make music, rather than the ignoring the music and concentrating on trivial like what gauge of strings the guitarist uses.

Most sounds from the Amphion's peers can be likened to an architect's drawing of a house; accurate and dimensionally precise, but of no real aesthetic value. Continuing the analogy, the Helium 2 is more like a Modernist interpretation of the same property; pin-sharp precise, no, but a bold interpretation that is deeply artistically interesting. Try something structurally dense like Schoenberg and you see what this means and why it's so important. Freed from the tyranny of musical convention, the ten-toned Schoenberg makes sounds that challenge our well-tempered ears. Many speakers either try to make this sound more in line with our ordinary concepts of music (and fail) or try to make the sound purely atonal (and fail). The Helium 2, simply focuses on Something Else - the noise the music makes if you want. The result is pure Schoenberg. The same could be said for almost any form of music, from Eurodisco to Montiverdi madrigals.

There is one telling and crucial acid test for any speaker; human voice. We are designed to discern even the slightest changes in vocal articulation and character and any deviations from the original are easy to spot. The benchmark here is the classic LS3/5a BBC monitor and the ultimate test is listening to the Today Programme on Radio 4 (closely followed by comedy from Bill Hicks, Derek & Clive and *The Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy*). Once again, the Helium 2 does things differently, but is all the better for it. The classic BBC monitor sound is more tonally correct and perfectly reflects the close miking in the Radio 4 studio. But, the Helium 2 side-steps this by making a sound that is less like a man in a radio studio and more like a real man's voice. It's not

holographically projected into the room, it's not so detailed that you can hear whether the speaker had a sore throat in the last three months or so and it doesn't even have the sort of nailed-down solidity that makes sounds take on an almost physical form, but it does make the person sound like a real person.

This isn't the deepest sound around, but it seems not to matter too much. The speed of the speaker system, the breathtaking



integration from top to tail and the overall rightness of the sound more than makes up for any bottom end limitations. It is possibly also deeper than its bigger brother; deeper, but not as ultimately accurate. It also is not the loudest loudspeaker on the planet, and needs an amplifier with a large powerful current delivery to make it really sing. But, it is also probably the only speaker in its price range that would appeal to those trying to find a speaker to tag on the end of some truly high-end gear.

There's a profusion of big name

speaker brands making products that gain endless recommendations, are sold everywhere and have the advertising clout to be repeatedly promoted to a hungry buying public. Most of these designs are made to appeal to the maximum number of listeners and are efficient and beautifully mannered, if a little uninspired from a high-end standing. The Amphion Helium 2 is different. Although more amp-friendly than other speakers in the range, this is not capable of being partnered with any old amplifier. Also, few other speakers in this class make such an

impassioned plea to the emotions

as the Helium 2, even if that emotionality comes at the expense of image and transparency. For many, this is a trade-off worth making.

Amphion's Helium 2 is a charismatic performer in a characterless world and is just the thing for those who discovered that there's more to life than Celine Dion. ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loudspeaker
Drive Units:	25mm titanium tweeter in wave guide 135mm paper mid/bass unit
Cross-over:	1.5kHz, Single Wired
Port:	Rear port with foam tuning bung
Impedance:	8 ohms
Sensitivity:	86dB/W/m
Bandwidth:	50Hz-20kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	155x310x265mm
Weight:	7Kgs
Price:	£550 (Birch veneer) £500 (Paint finish)

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