



Amphion Ion Loud- speaker

Small-room specialist

Neil Gader

The high end is by and large a specialty market driven by enthusiasts—enthusiasts who don't know the meaning of the word compromise. But what about the audio buff who doesn't want to set his sights lower, only *smaller*? The answer just might come in the form of the \$1350 Amphion Ion from Finland. On the surface of its black or arctic-white enclosure the Ion may appear to be nothing more than a well-crafted, size-challenged two-way, but its performance is nothing less than "grown-up."

Here's what I mean. In terms of tonal balance the Ion plays it straight, with a poised midrange and a refinement that gripped my attention like few mini speakers I've reviewed. Amphion hasn't hijacked the treble balance to emphasize speed and detail, nor tweaked the port tuning to boost a narrow band of upper-bass frequencies to suggest true bass. These dubious choices make for a good impulse buy, but in the long run they'll wear on you like a bad suit.

In the Ion's case, refinement takes its cues from an inert enclosure, uncolored drivers, and clean execution. Amphion's design philosophy centers on the fruit of over five years of R&D and is known as Uniformly Directive Diffusion (U/D/D). The principle is based on maintaining the natural balance of ambient/reflected information vis-à-vis the direct sound, as well as ensuring a linear spectral roll-off into the room. U/D/D is incorporated in all Amphion models, with the premium Xenon and Krypton units receiving

“hypercardioid” advancements said to virtually eliminate reflections from the back and the sides of the speakers.

Amphion also argues for the superiority of lower tweeter crossover points, below the presence range where human hearing is at its most sensitive. For the Ion that point is set at 1.6kHz. Amphion believes that the tweeter—typically the driver with the lowest mass—when operating predominantly alone will produce the faster and more transparent sound in this range. While it’s well known that running a tweeter this low can raise some red flags—among them, directivity anomalies, reduced output, and increased dynamic compression—Amphion has addressed these issues, and quite successfully I think by recessing a larger 1" titanium tweeter in a very shallow throat, and scalloping a baffle waveguide. Both act as gain-loading devices, with the waveguide optimizing dispersion in accordance with U/D/D imperatives. I was wrong in assuming that these devices might make horn-loading artifacts an issue; even a powerful mezzo like Audra McDonald singing the Neil Young tune “My Heart” on *Build A Bridge* [Nonesuch] came across smoothly, in harmonious voice unbroken by any narrow-band shoutiness.

The Ion’s are small-room specialists and thus shine in a listening space (like mine), where its low frequencies can receive the wall reinforcement required to balance its lighter native tonal balance. For my tastes, I settled on a distance of about eighteen inches from the back wall, which is where I began getting some genuine kick out of a kick drum and mid-bass pop out of electric bass. Acoustic instruments like bass viols seemed to breathe easier, and deep-water baritones like Tom Waits and Bryn Terfel projected sound that was more centered in their chests. Height and a small degree of toe-in are equally important for the Ions to convey what they’re capable of. Sturdy stands in the 30"-high range aligned the center point of the drivers with my ears and turned out to be ideal at my listening position. You’ll know it when you hear it—the drivers will speak with one voice and image focus will snap to attention. However, for those seeking true bass

there is no alternative than to subwoofer the Ions. And if you’ve got the dough, a musically evolved sub, like one of the smaller RELs, makes for a perfect dance partner.

You’ll know it when you hear it

Sonically, the Ion projects the kind of pure musicality that is unusual in a small loudspeaker. The upper register of solo piano is vivid, lilting, and articulate. There’s a bit of added top, but the sibilance range is natural and balanced. Image focus is a key strength of the Ion, and its near-point-source-style coherence is especially pleasing on power vocals like Diane Reeves and Claire Martin. In this aspect I was reminded of some of the better concentric drivers I’ve recently heard. The central midrange is slightly forward and hews to the warmer, slightly darker side of neutral, perhaps due to the softer energy I sensed in the upper mids. With the Ion’s 4.5" woofer, tonal balance is definitely lighter, since there’s no BBC-style bass bump to lend an impression of extension. Ultimately, the low-end response rolls off pretty quickly below 70Hz; so acoustic stand-up bass doesn’t quite have the skin-tickling vibrational energy of the real thing. And the Ion can’t quite muster the resources to impart the gale force dynamics of pianist Evgeny Kissin’s concert grand during *Pictures at an Exhibition* [RCA]. However, it’s very controlled under pressure, and even as dynamics top-out, they do so evenly; so there isn’t the sensation of the speaker suddenly developing a “new” and unattractive voice at louder levels.

Audio writers are fond of describing speakers that “disappear.” I’m rarely convinced. But hyperbole aside, the Ion gets closer to mastering this illusion than most speakers do on their best days. On Aussie singer-songwriter Missy Higgins’ “Nightminds” from *All For Believing* [Warner Bros.], the image focus of voice, guitar, and bass was so unwavering in space that I was tempted to issue an APB to locate the drivers. Inner detail and low-

level resolving power seem hard-wired into the nature of the Ion. For example, during “More and More,” from the SACD re-release of *Blood, Sweat and Tears* [Columbia], there’s a section of the bridge, prior to the guitar solo, where drummer Bobby Colomby answers each vamp with a unique short drum fill, accenting the toms in one instance, the snare in the other. Colomby’s hands are fast, but the Ion doesn’t smear even a shred of this timbral information. For those addicted to quasi-nearfield listening—a five- or six-foot distance—the Ion is a marvel of transparency and depth. It creates layers of complex soundfields and immersion that imitates a good set of headphones but without the fatigue.

Large or small, every loudspeaker is essentially a specialist. The Amphion Ion is not on a mission to rattle the palace windows in the Green Zone or blast Slayer into the cheap seats at Staples Arena. It’s a premium design that’s more in accord with a tradition where smaller rooms and contained living spaces require speakers to assimilate, rather than dominate. **TAS**

Specs & Pricing

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Type: Two-way stand-mounted loudspeaker
Driver complement: 1" tweeter, 4.5" woofer
Frequency Response: 55Hz–20kHz
Impedance: 8 ohms
Sensitivity: 86dB
Dimensions: 5.25" x 10.5" x 8.75"
Weight: 10.5 lbs.
Price: \$1350

Associated Equipment

Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V pick-up arm; Shure V15VxMR cartridge; MBL 1531, Simaudio Moon Supernova, and Sony DVP-9000E5 digital players; Plinius 9200, and MBL 7008 amplifiers; Tara Labs Omega, Nordost Baldur, Kimber Cable BiFocal XL; Wireworld Silver Electra & Kimber Palladian power cords; Richard Gray line conditioners; Sound Fusion Turntable stand