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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



"...it is the collection of all of these traits at a mid-level price that makes it an exceptional speaker."

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Amphion Argon2 Anniversary Loudspeakers

by S. Andrea Sundaram

In 2002, *SoundStage!* publisher Doug Schneider reviewed the Amphion Argon2 -- the successor to the company's original Argon minimonitor. It was largely based on Doug's praise of the speaker that I sought out a pair to hear for myself. To put it succinctly, I found the Argon2's speed, clarity, and neutral tonal balance to be a revelation at its modest price -- then \$1600 per pair. In the years since that purchase, I have heard other speakers that do this or that better, but the Argon2s have remained a worthy reference, both in terms of absolute performance and value.

Ten years after the introduction of the original Argon, Amphion has made a major revision to what was an excellent speaker. Did they strike the proper balance between continual improvement and doing no harm?

If I needed to disguise a system upgrade from a non-audiophile significant other, I'd almost be able to do it with the Argon2 Anniversary (\$2990-\$3490 USD per pair depending on finish). Aside from the cherry stain being a little darker and more lustrous, the new model looks identical to the original. Each speaker measures 15"H x 7 1/2"W x 12 1/4"D and weighs 25 pounds. The back, sides, and top of the speaker are made from MDF, with the front baffle being made from Finnish birch on the birch- and cherry-finished versions. This wood has a beautifully fine grain that will help it to blend into most decors. On the back of the speaker there is a port located behind the tweeter. The only visible change from the original Argon2 is the single pair of high-quality WBT binding posts -- there used to be two pairs.

The upgrades to the latest model are things that cannot be seen. It shares the same SEAS 6 1/2" aluminum-cone midrange/woofer as the original, but the tweeter is now the same SEAS titanium-dome design, dubbed "the Integrator," used for Amphion's flagship speaker, the Krypton2. Interestingly, Amphion checks each tweeter by ear, saying that they have not yet found a measuring system that can do this. To accommodate the new tweeter, the crossover has been redesigned, though the crossover point is still an astonishingly low 1200Hz. The waveguide carved around the tweeter was redesigned in 2006 and has been used on all Argon2 speakers since that time.



Review Summary

Sound "Fast, clean, and evenly balanced" -- "not, however, sonically identical to their predecessors." "The first thing that struck me about the Argon2 Anniversary's performance was the bass, and I mean that it *literally* struck me.... I felt the bass drum thwacks in my chest. That's not a sensation that one typically associates with minimonitors." The midrange is "admirably neutral," and "the new tweeter [is] quite a bit smoother-sounding than the original."

Features "The upgrades to the latest model are things that cannot be seen. It shares the same SEAS 6 1/2" aluminum-cone midrange/woofer as the original, but the tweeter is now the SEAS titanium-dome design...used for Amphion's flagship speaker.... To accommodate the new tweeter, the crossover has been redesigned, though the crossover point is still an astonishingly low 1200Hz. The waveguide carved around the tweeter was redesigned in 2006 and has been used on all Argon2 speakers since that time." "The back, sides, and top of the speaker are made from MDF, with the front baffle being made from Finnish birch on the birch- and cherry-finished versions."

Use "With a claimed sensitivity of 86dB/W/m and a nominal impedance of 8 ohms, dipping only to 7 ohms, the Argon2 Anniversary remains a relatively easy load for most reasonably powerful amplifiers, tubed or solid state." "Their controlled dispersion makes the Argon2 Anniversary speakers relatively forgiving of placement."

Value "While \$3000 on up per pair isn't cheap, it is actually on the low side for a minimonitor with this kind of performance."

With a claimed sensitivity of 86dB/W/m and a nominal impedance of 8 ohms, dipping only to 7 ohms, the Argon2 Anniversary remains a relatively easy load for most reasonably powerful amplifiers, tubed or solid state. The low end of the Argon2's frequency response is still 40Hz, but the new tweeter extends the high end to 30kHz. The greater high-frequency extension is less about faithfully producing information that humans can't hear and more about pushing the tweeter's break-up frequency far beyond where it could have any effect on those sounds that are audible.

Setting up

Their controlled dispersion makes the Argon2 Anniversary speakers relatively forgiving of placement. I did experiment somewhat, but, unsurprisingly, I found that the speakers were at their best where I had placed their predecessors. All of my critical listening was done with the speakers' front baffles 39" from the front wall, 6 1/2' apart, and toed so the drivers' output crossed just behind my listening position. I placed the speakers atop 30" Plateau stands and connected them to my integrated amplifier with DH Labs Q10 speaker cable.

Sound

Often when I set up a new pair of speakers, it takes me some time to adjust to their sound. Coming to the Argon2 Anniversary speakers from the Thiel SCS4s, however, was like coming home. The new Argon2s are, in broad terms, very similar to the originals. That is to say that they are fast, clean, and evenly balanced. They were not, however, sonically identical to their predecessors, and after a few weeks of listening to them I came to a solid understanding of what those differences were.

The first thing that struck me about the Argon2 Anniversary's performance was the bass, and I mean that it *literally* struck me. On *Poems of Thunder* (Naxos World 76002-2) -- a collection of Chinese percussion pieces -- I felt the bass drum thwacks in my chest. That's not a sensation that one typically associates with minimonitors. At first I thought that the bass weight of the Argon2 Anniversary was only notable when compared to that of the somewhat lightweight Thiel SCS4, but when I eventually compared it to that of the original Argon2, I found the new version to be weightier. No, the new speakers cannot deliver the same physicality as large floorstanders, or as Wilson Audio's über-monitor, the Duette, but their low-frequency weight is remarkable for their size.

Associated Equipment

Loudspeakers – Amphion Argon2, Esoteric MG-10.

Integrated amplifier – Graaf GM-50.

Digital – Ayre Acoustics C-5xe universal audio player.

Analog – Michell TecnoDec with modified Rega RB-300 tonearm and Shure V-15X cartridge, Trigon Audio Vanguard phono stage with Volcano power supply.

Interconnects – QED Silver Spiral, JPS Labs Superconductor, AudioQuest Sidewinder, DH Labs Revelation.

Speaker cables – DH Labs Q-10.

Power conditioner – Equi=tech Son of Q.

That impressive bass weight doesn't come at the expense of definition. The Argon2 Anniversary could deliver bouncy walking bass lines with adequate separation between notes. Those individual notes also had easily identifiable pitch and tone. I find that playing any recording with a good acoustic bass line -- such as the Andrea Pozza Trio's *Sweet Loraine* [Venus TKJV-19154] -- can uncover whatever problems may exist in a speaker's low end. Through the Argon2 Anniversary, no notes were emphasized or de-emphasized, and the tone of the instrument was consistent throughout its range. That indicates to me that the speaker will not only have an even anechoic response, but it will behave itself in a real listening room.

Moving up to the midrange, the Argon2 Anniversary's was admirably neutral. I've heard audiophiles refer to some speakers as having a seductive midrange, which implies to me a certain amount of pleasing coloration to everything. The Amphion speakers aren't like that. Instead, they give back exactly what's on the recording. Diana Krall sounded seductive and Alison Krauss sounded angelic. Male vocals were also rendered naturally, with no undo chestiness. In the upper midrange the Argon2 Anniversary corrects a very slight coloration in the original, resulting in an even tonal palette equal to the very best.

When I first started listening to the Argon2 Anniversary, I hadn't yet received any product literature. The tweeter in this version looks the same as that for the original, and I thought that it was the same. I was, therefore, a little surprised to find the new tweeter quite a bit smoother-sounding than the original. Over the years since I bought my Argon2s, I've heard other speakers, some less expensive, with extraordinary high-frequency refinement that made the original Argon2 sound slightly harsh in comparison. In perceived extension, some tweeters that are found in more expensive speakers seem to edge out the one used here, but the new titanium tweeter in the Argon2 Anniversary is as smooth as any I've heard.

Aside from being smoother in the treble, what I noticed with the Anniversary version in comparison to the original was a slight improvement in the harmonic structure of higher-voiced instruments -- violins, flutes and oboes. I also marveled at the Argon2 Anniversary's ability to preserve the tonal shading of brass instruments. Since Amphion is a Finnish company, one of the first LPs I played through the new Argon2s was Sibelius's *Symphony No. 2* with Pierre Monteux conducting the London Symphony (RCA LSC-2342). Living Stereo LPs are not where I would typically turn to find accurate instrumental timbres, but I was struck by the contrast between the forlorn sound of the trumpet solo toward the end of the second movement and the same instrument's fanfare-ish stridency elsewhere in the piece. The grave misfortune of this recording is that the tonal balance seems to shift abruptly in the last minute or two, becoming thin and slightly hard. The Argon2 Anniversary didn't cover up this flaw, but it wasn't quite as unpleasant as I've heard through other speakers, including the original Argon2.

Soundstaging was one of the strengths of the original Argon2, and the Anniversary edition carries forth the tradition. Images extended slightly outside the speakers laterally and from the speaker plane to far behind the front wall of my listening room. On the same Sibelius recording, the trumpet solo in the second movement was at once present -- in that I could hear every detail -- and set well back behind the rest of the orchestra. The sound of French horns shimmered off walls still farther back. While not as holographic as the very best I've heard, the instruments and voices were thoroughly solid and believable. I could reach out to touch various sections of the orchestra, but not individual violinists. I am one who thinks that soundstaging does add to the listening experience. While I am occasionally in awe of the ability of some speakers to produce holographic images, the Argon2 Anniversary

casts images voluminously and precisely enough to satisfy me.

Macro-dynamics are never really a strength of minimonitors in absolute terms, but some designs can handle the big swing from soft to loud better than others. My standard test for macro-dynamics is a CD of the Sibelius Violin Concerto (BIS 300500). This disc has an exceptionally wide dynamic range and a number of instances that show it off. At about one minute into the first movement, a held high note in the solo violin is followed by a sforzando in the brass. In a concert hall, this note is startling, and should also be so through your audio equipment. When the dynamic range of a speaker is compressed, this note just doesn't "pop" the way Sibelius intended. Through the Argon2 Anniversary, it "popped." At seven minutes into the same piece, in the first cadenza, the violin is interrupted by a crescendo in the brass followed by another sforzando. The linearity of the crescendo is something that few smaller speakers can get right, but the Argon2 Anniversary can. The Amphions don't redefine macro-dynamics for small two-way speakers, but they are squarely situated near the top of that particular heap.

Macro-dynamics are important, but without good micro-dynamic performance -- the smaller shifts and shadings in loudness -- music loses its expression and nuance and becomes merely sound effects. The Argon2 Anniversary is highly accomplished at conveying the subtleties of voices and instruments. And, unlike with some other speakers, you don't have to turn the volume way up to uncover these details. Whether the inflections of the human voice, or the variations in the way a bow was drawn across a string, the Argon2 Anniversary didn't obscure these details so crucial to making recordings come alive. On his first recording of Bach's *Suites for Unaccompanied Cello* (CBS M2K36867), Yo-Yo Ma plays so precisely and flawlessly that one might think the playing is being done by a computer. It is not the *tempo rubato* that tells you that you are listening to a human being -- and the modern master of his instrument -- but the shading and inflection of each note. In audio terms rather than musical ones, shading and inflection are just small changes in amplitude. A speaker must be able to reproduce those small changes as accurately as the larger ones.

For me, the other thing that makes reproduced music come alive, or at least sound more like it does live, is transient response. I'm very sensitive to a speaker smearing the leading edge of notes. Electrostatics usually win such a competition, but among dynamic speakers the Argon2 Anniversary, like the Argon2, outlines the beginning of each note with exceptional clarity and precision. Not only does good transient performance make a speaker sound more like live music, but it is part and parcel of good time-domain performance -- what the Brits call pace, rhythm, and timing. The Argon2 Anniversary would please a number of Brits.

Comparison

As with many well-designed speakers, my criticisms of the Argon2 Anniversary's performance are less about what it does wrong -- nothing really -- and more about what it doesn't do quite as well as some other speakers. At \$6000 per pair, the Esoteric MG-10s cannot quite be considered direct competition for the new Amphions, but they are very instructive in discovering where the Argon2 Anniversary measures up to the best and where it falls short.

Beginning with the low-end, the Amphion and the Esoteric speakers have similar extension, but the Amphions do exhibit noticeably superior weight. The MG-10s have excellent bass for a minimonitor, but the Argon2s give up very little to small floorstanders. In a modestly sized listening room, the Argon2 Anniversary will most likely come the closest to full-range sound that you'll get without the room-treatment headaches of larger speakers.

Perhaps partly due to their exceptional bass, the Amphion speakers can also play significantly louder than the Esoteric speakers without signs of strain or tonal shifts. When the MG-10s are played at very high volumes, the bass doesn't seem to quite keep up with the treble. The Argon2 Anniversary speakers have no such trouble. Eventually they will start to compress -- as will any speaker -- but at sane to moderately insane levels they hold together well. I rarely listen to my music at high volumes, but it's nice to know that a pair of speakers can deliver when called upon to perform at nearly rock-concert levels. The increased loudness capability of the Argon2 Anniversary also makes it suited to use in larger rooms than those in which the MG-10 is comfortable.

Where the MG-10 justifies its higher price is in its astonishing speed and transparency. Even though the Amphion speakers are themselves very good at these things, the Esoteric speakers are simply in another league. Whereas the Argon2 Anniversary can reproduce a string being plucked, the MG-10 can indicate which part of the player's finger was used to do the plucking. The sound of that plucked string then dies away a little more naturally through the MG-10s than through the Argon2 Anniversaries.

The harmonic textures of instruments are also ever so slightly truer through the Esoteric speakers than through the Amphion. Through either speaker one can easily distinguish between different types of instruments and between different instruments of the same type. But those accustomed to hearing acoustic instruments live will notice that the MG-10s just get a little closer to that sound.

Earlier I mentioned that the Argon2 Anniversary can be bettered in soundstaging. It can, given a good source, create a vast and well-defined soundstage, but the MG-10 is phenomenal in this respect. While the greater bass of the Argon2 Anniversary makes the venue seem slightly larger than when heard through the MG-10, the Esoteric speaker can create images that are positively holographic. No speaker I've heard can compete with the MG-10's sense of transporting you to the recording venue.

In absolute terms the differences between these speakers are quite small, and recordings that possess the detail necessary to highlight the differences are unfortunately quite rare. You may wonder, then, why you should pay so much more money for detail you'll only rarely hear. Simply, when it's there, it can take your breath away. The purpose of fine audio equipment is to reproduce sounds exactly as they are on the recording -- good, bad, or indifferent. The MG-10 gets closer to that goal, albeit at a hefty premium.

Compared to the older Argon2s, that I own, the Anniversaries are better in most respects. The original speaker has a slightly leaner sound that will be preferable to some listeners. The design team at Amphion obviously feels that the majority, however, will prefer a little weightier bass, even if it is perceived as slightly slower. I like both, but I would choose the Anniversaries. The original speakers were also a superb value, and the Anniversaries are still very competitive in the crowded two-way minimonitor field. The improvements that have been made -- particularly the new tweeter -- justify a higher price, but largely thanks to the fall of the US dollar, the current price does not make the Argon2 Anniversaries the steal that the Argon2s were a few years ago at \$1600 per pair.

Conclusion

Sometimes an audiophile or a reviewer will fall in love with a particular speaker because of one aspect of its performance. There are many ways in which the Argon2 Anniversary is an excellent speaker -- its speed, tonal neutrality, and voluminous soundstaging -- but it is the collection of all of these traits at a mid-level price that makes it an exceptional speaker. While \$2990 on up per pair isn't cheap, it is actually on the low side for a minimonitor with this kind of performance.

When one stops the dissection of a component's sound into audio minutiae, one is left with the question, "Is the product musically satisfying?" In the case of the Argon2 Anniversary, the answer is a resounding "yes." These are speakers I could live with for a long time, both as an audiophile and as a music lover. If you give them an audition, I wouldn't be surprised if you find yourself living with them too.

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Amphion Argon2 Anniversary Loudspeakers

Price: \$2990 USD per pair in white or black, \$3490 per pair in birch or cherry veneer.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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