

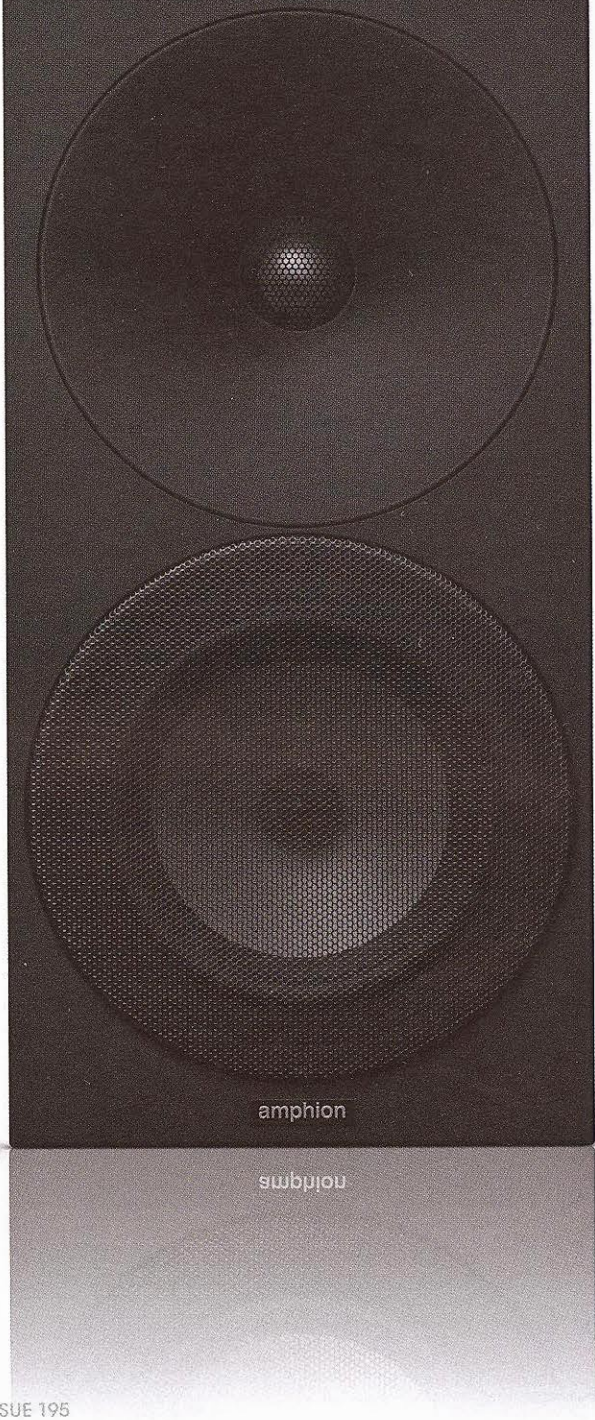
# Amphion Argon 3S standmount loudspeaker

by Steve Dickinson

Having spent a fair amount of time with the floorstanding Amphion Argon 7LS for the system piece in issue 181, I ended up buying the review pair for my own use because I think they represent a significant benchmark as to what is available in the sub-£4k price range. Plus, they seem to suit the size of my listening/living room quite well. There's lots that I think the Argon 7LS gets right and that many similarly priced speakers don't, but it's also interesting to note that the Amphions' presentation is a little different to many of their peers. So it's a thought-provoking exercise in what is important, and what is simply nice to have if it can be costed-in; and conversely, what might seem initially attractive but turns out to be not necessary, important or, ultimately, desirable.

And following on from that thinking, there's a conversation to be had as to whether the 'right' choice for my situation is automatically going to be a floorstanding design. What would I lose if I moved to a standmount design, and would it matter? Might there even be gains? [Looks down to see a small, neat standmounting loudspeaker pointedly tugging at his ankle and looking meaningfully at the space currently occupied by the 7LSs].

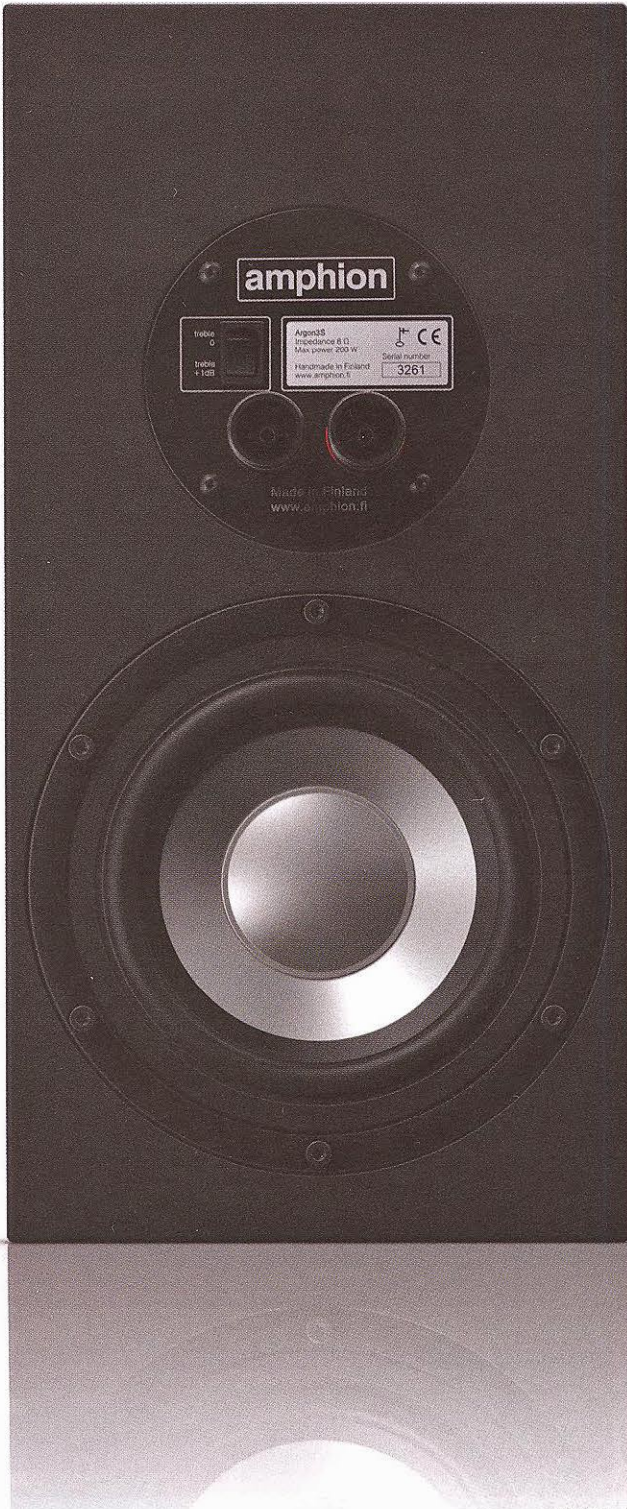
The Argon 3S is the largest of the three standmount designs in Amphion's Argon range, sitting above the dinky Argon 1 and the positively cute Argon 0. It has much in common with the floorstanding Argon 7LS, utilising the same titanium tweeter and aluminium main drive unit, same crossover point, and the cabinet is the same width and depth, just shorter and with fewer drivers. It also uses the same approach of the sealed box with rear-mounted, passive auxiliary bass radiator as used in the Argon 7LS, whereas the smaller Argon 0 and Argon 1 are both ported designs. It's not by any means a large standmounter either, being a little taller but no wider than the classic 'BBC' mini-monitor designs, and about twice as deep, so around twice the internal volume of that famous 5 litre box. (There's an Argon 5 centre channel speaker, too, which could conceivably be stood on its end and paired to make a larger standmounter than the Argon 3S, but this is another ported design using the same, slightly smaller, ►



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► Which is emphatically not to say it doesn't do bass, there's much more on offer in that regard than in those BBC monitor designs, for example, but the numbers don't tell the full story. There are small standmounters whose measurements will tell you they go deeper, and louder, and perhaps they do. But what the Argon 3S gives you is tight, tuneful, convincing and, more importantly, properly focussed bass that securely underpins the music and propels it along, not woofly grumbings that rattle the rafters but don't seem to belong to anybody in the band. Leonard Cohen's vocals might, through the 3Ss, go more lightly on that famous subterranean bottom octave, but he sounds like a real person, performing to a real audience in a real event, because all the harmonics in his voice are happening at the same time, as they would in life. 'Killer' from Seal's debut album *Seal* [ZTT] relies on a deep, solid, driving bass riff and the Argon 3S gave a much more satisfying rendition of that than some of those ported standmounters can, precisely because the bass traded a little depth for a lot more impact. The leading edges of the bass notes are cleanly defined, the timbre is more solid and refined, the pitch is more tuneful, and the timing of its delivery is absolutely on the money. There's also great depth to the image and lovely, natural vocal textures. And here's a thing, yes the same track through the Argon LS7 might go deeper and harder, but the Argon 3S feels slightly more immediate and present, lighter on its feet with a corresponding slightly better sense of *bounce*.

Much of this tradeoff depends on context, of course. My fairly modest, squareish, 4m room necessitates relatively nearfield listening, the floorstanders will offer more scope in larger spaces. They also scale up a little better, the NDR Big Band with Abdullah Ibrahim on *Ekapa Lodumo* [Enja] is given its head more through the LS7, the 3S works hard and does well, but ultimately has to concede in matters of scale to its larger sibling. But, perhaps because there's a little less bass energy, the interplay between Ibrahim's piano and the big band is easier to discern via the 3S, you sense his contribution more and the smaller speaker disappears more readily; so ultimately you pays your money and makes your choice. And actually, it's quite shocking how little the smaller speaker concedes to the larger model when it comes to resolving a convincing and satisfying musical experience. The key touchpoints of timing, energy delivery, resolution and timbral detail are very evenly matched.

► main drivers as the Argon 0 and Argon 1). So from a technical standpoint, the Argon 3S looks to be the closest match to the Argon 7LS, just rather more compact.

Amphion market the Argon 3S as a 'bookshelf' design and they don't offer dedicated stands, so I set them up on the pair of curvaceous MusicWorks acrylic stands that I have on hand, and hooked up to my Accuphase E-480 integrated amp via Nordost Tyr 2 cables. If you think that's a bit OTT for a pair of small, £2,000 loudspeakers, something about the Amphion philosophy suggested this wouldn't be wasted. The review pair came in the other standard finish Amphion offer: nominally black, it's really a dark charcoal grey and in the same slightly chalky, silky finish of my white (a gentle, soft white) Argon LS7s. Both these finishes are a little different to the normal run of things, and I like the attractive, slightly understated vibe that seems to speak to that low-key Amphion approach.

Let's start with an old warhorse from just about every hifi show since Noah invented the stereo pair: Hugh Masekela and 'Stimela' from *Hope* [Analogue Productions, SACD]; this was in every meaningful sense a most convincing account: solid, secure imaging, believable vocal and instrumental timbres and textures, and a superb sense of atmosphere and presence. The live recording, the audience response, and the way Masekela builds that sense of anger and injustice through his phrasing and cadence, all portrayed to unexpected levels by these diminutive boxes. It's very, very easy to get drawn into the narrative and carried along; it's a 10-minute track, but it felt much shorter. These speakers do that small-box disappearing act supremely well, largely failing to draw attention to themselves, and just letting the music spill forth. It's a familiar Amphion trait, they don't impress by being impressive, they just let the music speak for itself. Leonard Cohen's 'Who by fire' from *Live in London* [Sony Music] was another case in point, no obvious source of sound here, just tight, natural images on a convincing and lifesized soundstage. And here comes that slightly diminutive elephant in the room; the thing that everybody will tell you about small box loudspeakers. We can't talk about Laughing Lennie without mentioning bass, can we?

So let's talk a bit about the bass performance. Like the Argon LS7, the 3S uses a sealed cabinet and ABR rather than the more familiar (and probably less costly) reflex port. As far as bass is concerned, it's more about quality than quantity. ►

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

- Type: Two way, standmount loudspeaker with passive bass radiator
- Driver complement: 1 x 1" titanium tweeter; 1 x 6.5" aluminium woofer
- Crossover frequencies: 1600 Hz
- Frequency response: 38 Hz–25,000 Hz (-6dB)
- Impedance: 8Ω
- Sensitivity: 87 dB
- Power handling: 50–150 W (recommended)
- Dimensions (HxWxD): 380 x 191 x 305 mm
- Weight: 12Kg
- Finishes: white (accent colour options available for driver grilles); black; walnut
- Price: £2,000 (white/black); £2,200 (walnut)

Manufacturer: Amphion Loudspeakers Ltd  
Tel: +358 17 2882 100  
URL: [amphion.fi](http://amphion.fi)

UK sales: Auden Distribution  
Tel: +44 (0) 7917 685759  
URL: [audendistribution.co.uk](http://audendistribution.co.uk)

And it's not like the Argon 3S lacks heart. They will make very good use of lots of high quality power. Patricia Barber, 'Mourning Grace' from *Café Blue UN-mastered* [Premonition] went antisocially loud without getting hard or shouty, retaining all the important nuance and the interplay between what are very obviously superlative musicians. 'The Moon' from *Mythologies* [Blue Note] shows her very much at the top of her game; atmospheric, driving, urgent and compelling, Barber's piano is agile, tuneful and the subtleties of her phrasing very apparent; this is a convincing and involving musical event.

So if there's a tradeoff, it is perhaps on the continuum between speed and agility, or scale and ultimate depth, but in reality, in normal sized rooms, this represents a relatively small shifting in one direction or the other. And the other strengths both loudspeakers have, in terms of an overall coherence, an ability to get out of the way and let the music speak for itself, the easy, natural way they draw you in to the performance, that was there in bucketloads in both designs. Don't dismiss the Amphion Argon 3S, and don't assume it can't make sense in a high end system. It has reminded me that enough of all the important things is actually plenty. +