

Amphion Two18

Reviewed by Tom Fine

A few months ago, I took on a project that pushed me into the dreaded realm of needing new studio monitors. After about ten years of using a pair of Behringer Truth B2031A passive monitors (don't turn up your nose or ears until you try them; they blew away all similarly-sized speakers I tried until now), I began the process of remastering Marcel Dupré's pipe organ recordings for Mercury Living Presence and Philips. I needed reliable deep bass from my monitors, and the Behringers couldn't go low enough.

I briefly tried adding a subwoofer, but it didn't work in my room, and I also didn't like the centred bass, since different bass frequencies sound different in different parts of the stereo sound-picture of a highly reverberant space like Paris's Church of Saint-Sulpice and New York's St. Thomas Church, two of the three locations where these recordings were made. In short, this kind of bass doesn't centre itself, and it sounds strange when all bass frequencies come from the same centre channel below the desk.

After reading Adam Monk's positive review of the [Amphion One15](#) and [One18](#) [Tape Op #105], I asked to demo a pair of the company's largest studio monitors, the Two18. "Largest" is a relative term, since this model is still only 21.7" x 7.5" x 12.4" in size. It utilizes a waveguide-mounted 1" titanium dome tweeter and two 6.5" SEAS aluminium woofers in a sealed cabinet with twin bass resonators on the rear panel. Amphion claims usable frequency response of 39 Hz — 20 kHz (± 3 dB). My experience is that the usable bass extends a bit further down, far lower than I've heard before from speakers this size.

As Adam reported in his review, part of the pleasure of the Amphion experience is dealing with founder/owner Anssi Hyvönen, who has recently started working with U.S. rep Dave Bryce. The loaner pair was shipped to me from a major studio that shall remain nameless, where there had apparently been experiments in maximum viable sound pressure levels. Net-net, one of the woofers was blown and another one had some "hair on the edge" in some playback situations. Dave quickly sent me replacement drivers, and the repair was as easy as undoing a half-dozen Torx screws, putting the right wires on the clearly marked speaker terminals, re-seating the driver, and tightening the screws. Voila, good as new.

Anssi also gave me good advice about where to position the speakers in my somewhat cramped studio space. It ended up that placing them about a foot out from the walls, and moving my fibreglass panels around a bit, yielded the fewest and least annoying upper-bass nodes while



preserving plenty of deep bass level, without producing an artificially dark sound quality. I verified this through several hours-long listening sessions — a treat since I got to hear some of my favorite music with new clarity and punch. Especially enjoyable were my favorite LPs; without the typical harsh studio monitor midrange, vintage vinyl sounded all the more sweet.



From the get-go, I liked the highly focused but non-screaming midrange and the accurate treble (meaning it would be described as "reserved" compared to most other studio monitors, which I find over-harsh on top). I was surprised how much the mid and top resembled the underrated Behringers, but with more evenness and less "nasal" sound qualities (this is high praise because one of the things I like about the Behringers is the absence of "honking" midrange that is so typical of nearfield monitors, especially the self-amplified kind).

Once I got down to business mixing the 3-track Dupré tapes to stereo masters, I immediately noticed that I could work at lower SPLs than my old system required, and that anything I did as far as channel mix on the Amphions translated very well to my big B&W 808 speakers upstairs and also to my Sennheiser HD 650 headphones [Tape Op #43]. So, the stereo image and frequency spectrum decisions I made with the Amphions worked on big speakers in a big room and on high-fidelity headphones. The Amphions were especially helpful in sorting out how to balance musical detail against room reverberation, and how best to spotlight Dupré's quick and complex playing. For each mix I turned in, the client feedback was very positive, and the client and I both agreed that the remasters compare very favourably to the original LP issues. Working on the Amphions, I didn't find myself regretting decisions or going back and listening again and again because I was doubtful of what I was hearing. These speakers speak the truth!

I asked Anssi to explain his design philosophy leading to his company's series of professional monitors. First and foremost, he said, "We never wanted to make yet another box. The goal was to come up with something which would hopefully indirectly contribute into putting emotion back to music again."

He explained how he accomplished that goal: "Speaker building is always a balancing act. The larger the driver, the more it can move air. The larger it is, the slower it gets. The trick is to keep the drivers fast, but still come up with reasonable ability to move air. A passive radiator helps in this respect, but that is not all it does. One of the nicest additional benefits of using a closed-type construction is to be able to better control what happens inside the box in terms of air flow and pressure changes, which increases the midrange resolution by allowing the active drivers to work better."

In a nearfield situation, working at reasonable SPLs, I think these speakers can reliably tell an engineer about everything but the very bottom octave. The difference in the bass of a pipe organ between the Amphions and the big B&Ws is that the Amphions produced the sound of the low note attacks, but the B&Ws moved the floor when the bass pipes really let go. I don't think you need the floor shaking to make reasonable mix and EQ decisions, but that's open to disagreement. With a fast run down the organ console, where the frequencies quickly drop, I hear each descending note

sound distinctly through the Amphions, whereas the B&Ws sound more like a downward-sliding tone, likely because the woofers can't piston-fire as quickly as the notes are sounding. Translating this to a modern pop or sound-for-picture mixing situation, you'll get fast bass transients out of the Amphions, but not enough bass energy to make the walls and floor shake.



Taking breaks here and there from the remastering and other studio work, I listened to CDs of a few 2014 Grammy winners, the kind of great music that doesn't get featured on the evening telecast. I wanted to hear a variety of styles and production techniques through these speakers. My listening notes follow.

St. Vincent — St. Vincent (Best Alternative Rock Album): The Two18s brought out the jagged, "pointy" qualities of the music and sound, and the surprisingly wide and crisp dynamics. Also clear, beyond and above all the interesting sounds and textures, was Annie Clark's very fine voice. The album's overall sound quality was loud but not overwhelming, and many interesting sounds, riffs, and hooks emerged from the dense mix. This album is worth hearing on good speakers or good headphones, preferably from a real CD or high-resolution file, rather than a lossy stream, because it's an ear treat.

Chris Thile and Edgar Meyer — Bass & Mandolin (Best Contemporary Instrumental Album): The Amphions offered very clear definition of space and placement, and great detail of both musicians' fingering, bowing, and picking. It was surprising how much varied sound two acoustic instruments can make, in the right hands. The mix had a "3D" feeling, with clear width, depth, and height. It also sounded balanced and detailed across the room.

St. Louis Symphony, David Robertson (conductor) — John Adams: City Noir (Best Orchestral Performance): Typical of modern symphony recordings, the perspective is somewhat distant and crowded (congested) when many instruments are playing together, but the speakers did a good job of voicing individual instruments and maintaining the stereo spread available in the recording. This is dark and moody music, as the title suggests, but the recording is somewhat bass-shy. Some solo parts seem to float above the orchestra, which is a very interesting sonic effect.

Hilary Hahn with Corey Smythe — In 27 Pieces: The Hilary Hahn Encores (Best Chamber Music / Small Ensemble Performance): The Amphions excelled in bringing out the details of Hahn's violin and Smythe's piano. The recording has a very close, produced quality, but is not harsh. Rather, those superb violin details are sometimes too much (as when we can hear the horse hair on the bow making high-pitched resonances). The fact that the "too much" is audible is a credit to the speakers, because professional monitors must tell all, the good and the bad.

Chick Corea Trio (Corea, piano; Christian McBride, bass; Brian Blade, drums) — Trilogy (Best Jazz Instrumental Album): A crisp and detailed recording like this spotlights the even frequency response and quick dynamics of the Amphions. The instrumental balance is maintained no matter how loud or soft the ensemble plays. Despite the close mic'ing, nothing is overly bright or boomy. The speakers brought out the precision of the playing and the careful choice of notes during improvised solos.



Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Band — Life in the Bubble (Best Large Jazz Ensemble Album): Through the Two18s, this recording was very peppy and driving, but never annoying. The music and players offered plenty of texture and dynamics, and there was also very nice stereophony. Although it's totally different music, this album brought out the same good things in the speakers as St. Vincent's album — very fast response to percussive and dynamics shifts, and wide and even frequency response that allowed me to hear all the details in complex music and mixes.

After a couple months with the Amphions, I'm not letting them go. I believe they have brought my monitoring environment to a higher level of precision, and the fact that I can work at lower SPLs will prolong my audio career and music-listening enjoyment. They are one of the few studio monitors of any size that I have encountered that both sound accurate and are a pleasure to hear.