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# editorial

**W**e are seeing significant change in audio. Not just in terms of the move toward streaming products and away from disc replay, not even in the recognition that small is beautiful once more, but something deeper; a distinct change in the very fabric of what constitutes high-end audio.

Whether it's due to economic forces or simply changes in the way people view their free time and spend their money, there's a move toward a more pragmatic approach to audio that must be applauded and supported. While there's still a great deal of interest in traditional high-end equipment – especially in the fast-growing 'BRIC' economies (Brazil, Russia, India and China) – rank and file audio enthusiasts the world over are discovering a new paradigm of smaller, smarter products that still deliver excellent performance. Far from the 'sky is falling' prophecies of audio doom-mongers, today's open-minded audiophile has a plethora of new, exciting and pioneering products at their disposal, many of which don't choose to play by the traditionalist's rule book.

A difficult question keeps being asked today; are we buying big and expensive because it's good, or because it's big and expensive? In many cases good performance is embedded in precision engineering, which inevitably stacks on the pounds, both sterling and avoidupois. But there are products that can deliver high-end performance without backbreaking, wallet-tearing strain.

The high-end remains committed to the replay of recorded music in a manner that strives to limit the shortcomings of the recording process. It should not just be about price, size, weight or

rarity value and what delivers high-end performance – at all levels – must be explored. In other words, we should aim for high-end values, not just high-end prices. At least, that's my take on things. Do you agree?

Any change takes time in a magazine, because we plan several issues in advance. But rather than simply change direction for the sake of it, this gives a perfect opportunity for you to help shape this change. We welcome your input on the shape of Plus to come, and rather than rely on a questionnaire, we've left things open for your views. Of course there has to be some moderation, but why should we let our past completely define our future?

Alan Sircom  
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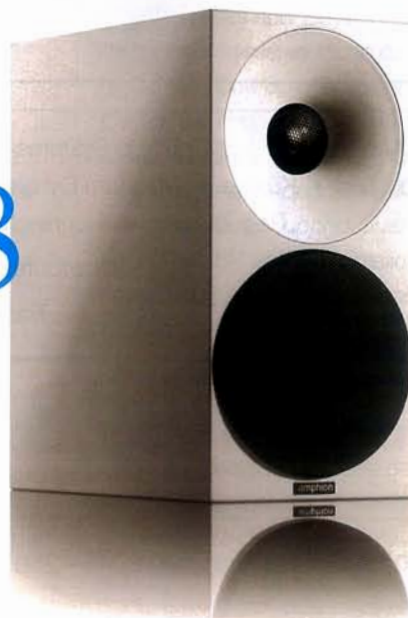
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# NuForce Icon 2/Amphion Helium 410 desktop system

By Alan Sircom

I'm going to make a confession. For every hour I spend in front of the main system, I must spend two or three behind a computer screen. And I suspect I am not alone in this. While not all of this computer time is spent playing music, the sound of that computer's output has shifted from a bonus to a necessary evil to an increasingly vital part of my listening day.

This bipartisan system is a little more 'hi-fi' in outlook than most 'computer speakers'; it's more like 'computer separates'. The NuForce part is a slim, standalone combination USB DAC, headphone amp and amplifier proper called the Icon 2. It's a 24W switch mode amp, coupled to a small headphone jack and a 24-bit DAC for the USB input. It also has an input jack for an iPod should you wish. It's a closed loop system, even the speaker cables use RJ45 connectors at the amp end, rendering the 2m limit a strict one. If you want anything

beyond 24/96, look elsewhere (possibly elsewhere in the NuForce catalogue) and if you use loudspeakers of more than 92dB sensitivity, you'll hear the switching and you'll pass on the Icon. But the Amphion Helium 410 is only 86dB sensitive. And an easy eight-ohm load.

The two-way (25mm titanium dome tweeter and 114mm paper mid/bass), single-wired and rear ported speaker is finished in pure black or white (which is surprisingly effective on a computer table, coloured grids for the mid-woofer are available) and even comes with mounting holes for wall-brackets. As ever with Amphion speakers, the crossover point is a touch lower than usual – in this case 1.6kHz – thereby putting it at the no-so-obvious end of the presence region. Amphion put the -3dB roll-off point at around 60Hz, but in reality, this speaker really stops at 'upper bass'.

Stick the system in place of your existing PC speakers and you'll be smitten... after a few days. Because, despite the concept being on the 'magic beans' side of audio engineering, the system needs a while to come on song. In the world beyond audio, people might let the idea of the loudspeaker's cones and cone surrounds requiring a bit of a shakedown, but not electronics – they are just good to go from the get-go, aren't they? Well, no... not in this case. Here, the Helium 410s jump out the box raring to go and the little Icon 2 takes a few days to bed in and come to life. For the first day or two there is a harsh and distinctly edgy graininess to the midband that simply goes completely away a few days into its allotted task. And then never comes back. This isn't a subtle change; it's like two different amplifier sounds.

My advice, leave the system on some porn repeat frenzy for a weekend. That way, not only will everything sound right when you start listening proper,

your neighbours will call you Captain Viagra if you play it loud enough. Then, once the one-handed entertainment weekender is spent, you are left with something that sounds really rather fun.

There's an 'right' quality to the presentation; it's direct, fast, taut and surprisingly coherent. There's even a stereo stage; instead of the vague mono or the 'hole in the middle' sound that passes for music at many computer workstations. It's a 'no messing' sound, bright and articulate and detailed, but also – rare given the context – not something that sounds lost and confused when you play a Mozart piano sonata. But it can also pump it out; the 24W might seem like a bit of a limit, but as you are about a metre from the speaker's front baffles, it's not enough to cause concern when playing air guitar to ZZ Top's La Grange at your desk when no-one's around.

OK, by 'proper' system standards, you can get a more dynamic sound and there's an octave or two down below that only gets mentioned in dispatches here, but you could point those fingers at any near-field monitoring system,

*“Best of all though, it achieves that goal with a smile on its face, and the sense of fun is infectious.”*

and you could hook a sub to the system. You could also point to the amp as the weaker of the two devices, but that kind of defeats the object. This simply makes your desktop computer sound one hell of a lot better than it currently does, good enough not to need to reach for the listening room behemoth. And it achieves that desktop sound enhancement process without the slightest whiff of BS. Excellent!

That is more than a nebulous 'goal', it's a clearly-defined aim of Amphion and why Amphion and NuForce are working in harmony in this case. I got an earlier sample with a bigger, notionally better set of Amphion speakers, complete with the more normal (for the Finnish brand) and slightly bigger aluminium bass units. While this bigger system worked better with my carefully-massaged ALAC files (more bass, more detail in the bass) the slightly softer, less demanding sound of the smaller paper cone bass unit of the Helium 410 does help the broader range of sounds you might get from the myriad sources you get on a computer.

A computer speaker system has to cope with a vast range of sounds with no guarantees of audio quality, all the while being well integrated enough to work within arm's reach of the listener. This is a harsh environment for good sound but the Amphion/NuForce hook-up passes muster brilliantly. Best of all though, it achieves that goal with a smile on its face, and the sense of fun is infectious. Fun enough in fact that it might cause some big-league head-scratching when you return to your more highfalutin' but not as ultimately entertaining hi-fi system.

There are two ways of looking at the Amphion/NuForce system; the wrong way is to think of it as a posh method of getting your computer to make noises. On the other hand, if you are as time-poor as the rest of us and don't want to prostrate yourself before the shrine of audiophilia every time you want to play a piece of music, this is the answer. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Amphion Helium 410

Two-way ported bookshelf loudspeaker

Drive Units: 25.4mm titanium dome

tweeter, 115mm paper cone woofer

Crossover point: 1.6kHz

Impedance: 8 ohm

Sensitivity: 86dB

Frequency response: 60Hz-20kHz ±3dB

Power recommendation: 20-80W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 13.2x26x22cm

Weight: 3.5kg

Colours: black, white, full white and colour grids

Price: £599 per pair

Manufacturer: Amphion

URL: [www.amphion.fi](http://www.amphion.fi)

NuForce Icon 2

Input: RCA analog maximum 2Vrms

USB DAC: USB 1.1, 2.0 compatible.

USB native bit rate: 32, 44.1, 48, and 96 kHz, 24bit maximum

3.5mm Stereo jack

Speaker Outputs: NuForce RJ45 to banana plug speaker cables (2m)

Output: Peak power: 30W x 2 (4 Ohm)

Output power at 1% THD+N, A-weighted: 24W x 2 (4 Ohm), 18W x 2 (8 Ohm)

Gain: 22.2 dB

THD+N: 0.02%

Frequency Response: 20 to 20kHz +/- 1dB SNR > 90dB A-weighted

Headphone output: 80mW x 2 @ 16-Ohm (THD+N 0.05%)

Line Out (for Subwoofer) connection 60W 100-240VAC worldwide voltages PSU is included

Dimensions (WxHxD): 2.5x15.2x11.5cm

Weight: 2.2kg

Colours: black, red, white or blue sleeve, black fascia

Price: £250

Manufacturer: NuForce

URL: [www.nuforce.com](http://www.nuforce.com)

System price (as tested): £849

Distributed in Europe by: Robytone

URL: [www.robystone.com](http://www.robystone.com)