



Three's company

If you're looking for a low-cost standmount, Acoustic Energy's AE300 is well worth an audition, says **David Price**

Celebrating 30 years in the business, Acoustic Energy has undergone something of a transformation of late, with a recent change of ownership and a relaunch. Effectively now an independent company after a management buyout, it's now in the process of introducing a raft of new products that includes the self-powered AE1 Active (HFC 421). Regular readers will also have recently seen the AE100 standmount (HFC 430) and AE109 floorstander (HFC 425) from the company's

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entry-level 100 series, but now it's the turn of the mid-priced 300 series. The new range includes the AE309 floorstander (£999) and the AE300 standmount that you see here.

The AE300 series is said to be a heavily upgraded and reworked version of the entry-level AE100, with all the tweaks made possible by the higher price point. It's a conventional box loudspeaker design with moving coil drive units in a two-way mid/bass driver and tweeter configuration that has simply been better honed. A compact standmount, it is designed for small-to-medium sized rooms and sports 18mm-thick MDF cabinet walls in a standard box shape. Extensive internal damping has been used to reduce colouration says the company, and bracing technology derived from Acoustic Energy's Reference Series is employed. To the rear is a slot-shaped duct port, said to reduce the effect of air turbulence. Designer James Luce (see Q&A) says "A more typical circular port tends to be strong at one frequency and quite noisy, while the

slot works more gently over a wider range, enabling easier rear wall positioning." The cabinet comes in a choice of open grain walnut wood veneer, piano-grade high gloss black or white lacquer options – our walnut sample looks very swish indeed. Matching versions of Acoustic Energy's 'Reference' stands are available to go with the finishes of the 300 Series, and cost £200 per pair when purchased bundled together with the AE300.

Both drive units are bespoke Acoustic Energy designs rather than being bought off the shelf from external suppliers. The mid/bass unit is a 130mm affair with a brand new ceramic/aluminium sandwich cone with a shallow profile, and long-throw motor system. A new 28mm aluminium tweeter has been developed, which is said to offer high power handling and low distortion, allied to good dispersion thanks to the company's Wide Dispersion Technology (WDT) waveguide. The two drivers cross over at 2.8kHz; the crossover itself is a third-order, 11-component impedance-matched and phase-aligned design. Multi-stranded OFC wiring is chosen for its matching electrical properties to the copper coil windings in the drive units, says the company. Round the back, a single pair of sturdy speaker binding posts is fitted.

Acoustic Energy specifies a frequency response of 45Hz to 30kHz, which is a little wider than expected for such a compact speaker. The trade off for the deep bass is of course sensitivity, which is quoted at 86dB – a decibel or so below what I'd expect from a modern standmount, and lower too than the smaller AE100 budget model. This means that it needs a good transistor amplifier of at least 50W RMS per channel and ideally a good deal more. Quoted impedance is 60hm, which is pretty

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy AE300

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.5kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
175 x 300 x 260mm

FEATURES
• 25mm tweeter
• 130mm mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

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much par for the course, and Acoustic Energy says the loudest the speaker can go is 112dB, which is enough to wake up most listeners!

Sound quality

The AE300 performs very much like the more affordable AE100, which is no bad thing of course, except there's more of it. Rather like Spinal Tap's guitar amp that goes up to 11, so this new standmounter speaker offers the same basic punchy and animated sound, but it's bigger and bolder and more assertive here. At the same time, it's also a more subtle and polished product in a way, bringing greater insight into the recording rather than just focusing on the music's groove.

Feed it some simple electro in the shape of *Uncle Bob's Burly House*, and the AE300 sounds surprisingly large and physical for something of such slender means. True, it's not going to usurp a floorstander in the great scheme of low frequency things, but still this smallish standmounter goes far lower than perhaps it should. This has vast tracts of sub-bass that kick in at regular intervals and instead of coughing and wheezing, the speaker pumps it out like a good 'un. It's surprisingly tuneful too, considering the relatively small size of its mid/bass unit. So often with diminutive boxes you find yourself making excuses, yet none are needed here.

The slot-shaped duct port is claimed to reduce the effects of air turbulence



Q&A

James Luce

Brand manager, Acoustic Energy



DP: Who designed the AE300?

JL: Chief engineer Mat Spandl and myself, with Mat primarily focusing on acoustics and me on physical design. The process is always collaborative and involves much back and forth between listening, measuring and adjusting. As the design nears completion more staff are involved in the listening and finally development ends with select dealer listening in various rooms and systems to ensure real-world compatibility.

Why did you decide to use aluminium cones and domes?

Acoustic Energy has used these in our premium models since the very first AE1 in 1987, the main benefit being the incredible stiffness which allows the drive unit to behave as a pure piston, even at very high volumes. The result is more accurate reproduction of the musical signal than softer materials, which break up and flex sooner. The tweeter retains tonal consistency with the mid/bass driver across the frequency range. All drive unit materials have a sonic signature and, in our experience, keeping them analogous to each other gives a more integrated sound.

Where are the cabinets and components made?

Our production partners in China make them. We use separate specialists for cabinet and drive unit construction to match our exacting design standards, and one of us will always personally oversee quality control and production runs.

Why the middling sensitivity?

It's always a balancing act between volume and bass response in smaller speakers, and we chose the most natural level for the combination of components at a typical 86dB. The actual load is quite benign at a stable 6ohm, so the AE300 should be easy enough for most amplifiers at this price point to drive. From this size and sensitivity, we're able to achieve bass response into the low 40Hz region thanks to the cabinet, porting and driver design, which covers the demands of most music.

IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm tweeter
- 2 Slot-shaped duct port
- 3 Binding posts
- 4 130mm mid/bass driver

Warping back another two decades, Steve Hackett's *Star Of Sirius* is a great piece that some treat as a lost Genesis track; it's dense, textural and multi-layered, with plenty of dynamics courtesy of that big Phil Collins drum sound. The AE300 manages to unpack a surprisingly large amount of low-level detail, throwing out a lot of subtle, nuanced information such as the textures of voices and ARP synthesiser. It holds things together on the crescendos commendably well, compressing far less than expected at high levels and letting the lustre of this fine analogue recording shine through. The track has that trademark, super-dry seventies rock studio sound, but this little speaker still manages to make it sound warm and human.

Pushing forward to the latter part of the last decade, and 4hero's *Give In* is next up. This is a great sounding modern R&B track with plenty of space and air to it via the right system. The compact Acoustic Energy does well here too, conjuring up a large soundstage that boldly goes – in my listening room – where few other small loudspeakers can. It's hard to design a small two-way that doesn't image well, but even given the benefit of its small size this speaker excels. Strands of the mix are located with precision, and the central vocal line sounds really full and enveloping. The relaxed yet assured way with which the AE300 pushes the sound out into the room really impresses.

In truth, though, it isn't this aspect of the speaker's performance that really tugs on the heartstrings – it is the way that it gets into the groove. This track has a massive, sumptuous

one and seems custom made for this little loudspeaker; things flow with a lovely gait. There's no sense that the AE300 is in a hurry, that it sounds showy or over eager to please. Rather, it just slips into any rhythm it can find and sidles its way through. I find myself really rather beguiled by how it carries the natural phrasing of the music, as well as subtle dynamic accenting that's really likable.

Conclusion

This is not a universal panacea – it doesn't do everything perfectly. Many will be keener to audition the AE309 floorstander with its octave or so of extra bass and greater ease at high volumes. However, its treble is good enough to get the job done, even though there are more sparkly sounding standmounts around at this price. What the AE300 does, it does very well and is always a pleasure to listen to – in its own special way it makes music magic, and you can't say fairer than that ●

HOW IT COMPARES

Listened to in isolation the AE300 seems hard to beat, but competition is very tough at this price. Monitor Audio's Silver 100 (£650) is good enough to give the Acoustic Energy sleepless nights; not least because its super finish is clearly better, especially the detailing around the tweeter. Sonically it has a bigger bass – thanks to the 200mm mid/bass driver – and packs a big punch. Treble is more spacious too. However, the AE300 sounds more fun – it's got a bigger heart and soul, despite its smaller dimensions. It loves rhythms, while the Monitor Audio sounds slightly more staid.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Animated, punchy sound; usefully refined too

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Surprisingly capable small speaker with style to spare

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL

