



Here we GO again

AE's baby sub-sat system has been spruced-up for a third-generation outing. **David Vivian** wonders why it costs so little

Miniature loudspeakers that, with a little help from a hidden partner, sound every bit as good as quality floorstanders have become one of audio's more enduring trends for obvious reasons. You can put fist-sized cubes places even the most compact standmount speaker won't fit. Suddenly, desktops, window ledges, the nearest convenient shelf or table all become fair game. And the subwoofer generating that size-defying bass? Just place it under the desk or behind the sofa. Low frequencies aren't too fussy about the positioning of their source.

Add wireless connectivity and that old sub-sat one-two, originally devised to boost the sound quality of laptops and PCs, is brought bang up to date to embrace a genuine music-first remit. In that context, such a system, while still a natural for the computer market, could make most single-box wireless lifestyle speakers look bulky and sound as if they're trying too hard to hit the low notes or simply can't be bothered. New impetus for the old school? Actually, Acoustic Energy's almost bafflingly affordable AEGO series of sub/sat speaker systems has been pulling off this trick for years. The smart little ensemble you see here

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy
AEGO³ 2.1

ORIGIN
UK/Malaysia

TYPE
Wireless sub-sat
speaker system

WEIGHT
9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
Subwoofer:
195 x 350 x 307mm
Satellite:
75 x 105 x 85mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power
output: 65W RMS
• Inputs: analogue;
optical digital;
Bluetooth 4.0 with
aptX support
• Remote control

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builds on the success of the widely popular AEGO M 2.1 package, which you can still buy. The three speakers, each fed by amplification housed in the sub enclosure, sell for a remarkably reasonable £200 and, compared with the AEGO M, benefit from a tech and aesthetic upgrade to keep the sonics and style fresh. For the same price, the system can be had with a slim TV soundbar instead of two satellites.

As we're more interested in music than movies, we opt for the sats. They are six-sided with an in-built tilt so the single mid-treble driver fires slightly upwards into the room at an angle of 30°. AE's engineers experimented with the firing angle, establishing this as the optimum performance for room projection and reducing reflections from the top surface of AV furniture if the sats are to be used with a TV in preference to the soundbar (also angled upwards). The housings are made from composite aluminium, which as well as being cool to the touch and a neat aesthetic match for Apple laptops and tablets, adds to the impression of density and solidity. They're claimed to have a significant sonic edge over the satellites used with the AEGO M 2.1 system, most notably in their wider frequency range.

The subwoofer is about the size of a modest PC tower and just as easy to tuck away out of sight. Wired inputs comprise an analogue line-in via 3.5mm stereo mini-jack and optical digital, while aptX Bluetooth 4.0 allows high-quality music streaming from any Bluetooth-enabled smart device. The unit, which Acoustic Energy says took three years to develop, houses three channels of amplification claiming a total of 65W RMS and also acts as the control hub of the system with LED status and indicators for volume and bass level on the front. The satellites are connected to the amp section of the sub with the supplied, RCA plug-terminated, cables.

Once mains power has been hooked up we're ready to rumble, though that's not really what this system is about. The sub has four bass settings – along with volume and inputs, accessed via the tiny plastic remote – but even setting four is unlikely to persuade the neighbours of local seismic activity. This isn't that sort of sub. A more effortless and convincing style of bass than you might expect from your typical wireless box is closer to the truth and, to fine tune balance for optimum musicality, AE suggests a setting of two or three will be fine for most types of music in most rooms.

Sound quality

A couple of conflicting thoughts, here. First, whichever way you look at it, £200 is cheap for a just-add-source hi-fi system and experience suggests that expectations should be managed. Then again, experience also suggests that Acoustic Energy – a brand



No stranger to the sub-sat philosophy, Bose's Acoustimass 3 is a good match for the AEGO. It isn't a bad product, looks pretty similar and is nicely made. But it costs £150 more and doesn't sound anywhere near as musical. Not to labour the point, but I don't think you'll find a sub-sat package at anywhere near the price that does. If you don't fancy the three-speaker deal, the more conventionally standmount-sized Q Acoustics Q-BT3 at £350 (HFC 379) and Ruark Audio MR1 (£300) are wireless alternatives that hit the sonic mark without the help of a sub, but again fall some way back in any serious sound-per-pound comparison.

synonymous with some of Britain's most iconic small speakers over the years – wouldn't put its name to something that sounds, well, 'cheap'. So which is it to be?

Most of my casual 'other room' listening is served up by a Geneva Aerosphère Large (HFC 407), which for my money (and it was), is the most stylish and sonically gifted of all the single-unit wireless speaker contenders currently on the market – with two provisos. One, it's large and conspicuous and therefore, unavoidably, a style statement. And two, its stereo imaging is of the 'unpacked' variety rather than determined by the positioning of two

It has enough in the tank to generate loud-ish levels in a medium-sized room

separate speakers. There's a three, too. It has a built-in, upward-firing sub.

You can guess where this is going and, yes, £650 versus £200 is a little unfair. But let's see what happens. What I like most about the Aerosphère is its dynamic generosity, its ability to present the big musical picture with drive and conviction and a powerful, well-extended bass. It isn't a detail freak, its tonal balance can sound rich and its DSP-enhanced soundstage doesn't always ring true, but musically it nearly always hits the spot.

With the AEGO satellites flanking it on a shelf above and the sub/control module placed just behind, switching

between the two, Bluetooth streaming from Spotify quickly allays any fears that the little sub-sat system will crash and burn, though the differences in presentation are striking and likely to cement personal preferences.

Immediately attractive is the AEGO's greater sense of air and space. Good as the Aerosphère is at spreading the sound around, like any single unit source, it has to concede defeat to the imaging capabilities of two well-designed satellites carefully positioned.

As such, the AE system has a better developed sense of acoustic ambience with many of the tracks on Eric Clapton's latest album, *I Still Do*. On *Catch The Blues*, the AEGO delivers the more believable spatial relationship between Eric's up-front vocal and playing and the silky background vocals of Michelle John and Sharon White. Live recordings such as Genesis' *Live Over Europe 2007* benefit almost disproportionately, a comparatively wide-open perspective on the venue emphasising both the atmosphere and audience contribution.

Tonally, the AEGO sounds a little drier and more neutral, too, and certainly has enough in the tank to generate loud-ish levels in a medium-sized room. Where it most obviously loses out to the costlier Aerosphère – and this becomes more apparent via the analogue inputs fed by a Questyle QP1R hi-res portable (HFC 409) – is in refinement, tonal texture and ultimate power. In short, the Swiss orb is smoother, more sophisticated and, even with the AEGO's sub turned up to four, goes louder and quite a bit lower.

Conclusion

That said, if the Aerosphère suddenly felt the need to desert me for a modern art installation, I certainly wouldn't object to the AEGO³ 2.1 taking its place. It has the sound, build and style to live up to the Acoustic Energy billing and, for the money, it's ridiculously easy to recommend ●

CONNECTIONS



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Size; flexibility; convenience; sound
DISLIKE: Subwoofer could do with a little more muscle
WE SAY: A cost-effective and hugely likeable alternative to the single wireless speaker route

OVERALL ★★★★★