



HI-FI review

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• Acoustic Energy

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ACOUSTIC ENERGY AE1 HI-FI SPEAKER (2017)

SRP: £1,000.00

What is the AE1 Active?

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The Acoustic Energy AE1 Active is a compact, two-way standmount speaker that is built around full active principles. It is also more in keeping with 'traditional' active products than some notional rivals. This is not a product to operate on its own but a classical combination of speaker and amplifier. We'll cover where this leaves you and how they might best be used in due course.

The big deal for many of us is that they wear the AE1 badge. The title is one that has been used very infrequently and when it has, it's been attached to some very significant products indeed. The original AE1 was one of the very first high-end standmount speakers and one that contributed hugely to the development of the concept as a whole. It was in many ways a flawed device but, despite that, it still returned to production over a decade after its initial run. It remains one of my all-time favourite speakers and means that anything that wears 'AE1' on it needs to be pretty special. So, we need to ask some questions about the specification and see whether it delivers on the heritage. After that, we can see if it is any good!

Specifications



The AE1 Active is a two-way standmount speaker that is built as a true active design so, when a signal is being received by the AE1 it firstly goes to the crossover and is divided into the frequencies that the drivers require. From there, the signal is amplified by an amplifier per driver. This means that each AE1 contains two 50 watt amplifiers that receive their dedicated feed independently of one another. This also means that each speaker is completely self-contained. Each cabinet requires power and signal to perform and while they are sold as a pair, they are completely autonomous.

The drivers themselves are a mix of the traditional Acoustic Energy ethos and the brand's more modern leanings. The mid-bass unit is a 127mm ceramic coated aluminium design that features the classic Acoustic Energy wide foam surround and pointed dust cap. It is partnered with a 25mm soft dome tweeter – a departure from the company's original use of metal for both drivers. The tweeter is sunk into a shallow but noticeable wave guide. This is designed to help the tweeter disperse its energy in a more consistent and linear fashion than would be the case if it were simply beaming out from the front of the cabinet. The tweeter has a permanent protective mesh on the front which is present whether you use the grilles or not. Around the back, a narrow slot port helps the AE1 hit low notes whilst minimising the air velocity through the port to avoid audibility.

The AE1 Active has been designed from the outset to be an active speaker and this means it has some additional tricks up its sleeve. Because the amp and drivers have been designed from the outset to work together, there is the ability to boost or cut the bass and treble response to better suit the size of the room and the context that you are using them in. This takes the form of a fixed +/- 2dB adjustment for both drivers. Depending on the room furnishings and chosen position of the speakers, this could be a very useful addition indeed but one that can be completely switched out of the way if you don't want it.

Depending on where you sit in the use of active speakers, the AE1 Active is either the answer to a prayer or absurdly minimalist. While many new arrivals to the category boast wireless connectivity, on board DACs and support for various streaming services, the AE1 takes a different approach. Connectivity starts (and ends) with a single XLR and RCA input per speaker. Essentially, the AE1 will do whatever a preamp tells it to. There is a trim control on the rear panel of both speakers but this would make a deeply unsatisfactory method of volume control and is instead designed to let you tweak the levels to avoid any imbalance from the speakers being a different distance from your listening position or avoid potential over driving from something with biblical gain. In essence, this is a speaker designed to work with existing electronics, not replace them.

Design



The original AE1 almost revelled in its ugliness. A masterclass in functionality, even dressing it in a smart wood veneer did very little to head-off the rather 'route one' school of design. Just to confuse matters though, by the time the AE1 Mk3 appeared (which was also a brilliant sounding bit of kit, just to keep the pressure up on the current incumbents), the AE1 had morphed into a very handsome design indeed. Acoustic Energy, it seems, has no trouble spanning the full range of aesthetics.

The Actives are handsome and well-proportioned things. At 30 centimetres tall, they are pretty compact but they don't feel squat thanks to the sensible placement of the drivers and general proportions. From the front, there are almost no clues at all that they AE1s are active – in fact the tiny white LED running light is a bit small for at a glance use. They do look like Acoustic Energy products though and there is enough sense of the brand identity there to make them recognisable as Acoustic Energy, whilst also managing to balance this with feeling clean and modern at the same time.



Quite *how* modern they'll feel is going to come down to the finish you choose. Black and white piano finishes are available and these will feel a bit more clean and high tech than the wood finish seen here. This being said, I rather like the wood finish. It's a little in on the shiny side and possibly a bit orange but it helps the AE1 Active feel more like a domestic product. The use of chrome and brightwork is sparing the whole effect is very pleasing. The build quality is also in keeping with the asking price too. The veneering is done to a very high standard and the cabinets feel solid and inert. Compared to something like the active version of the [KEF LS50](#), the AE1 feels more traditional but never actually old fashioned.

As a result of their design though, you are going to have to put a modicum of thought into using the AE1. They come supplied with a reasonably long mains lead but you will need to make sure that they are close enough to a power source. At the moment (July 2017), the AE1 Actives are only sold in pairs but Acoustic Energy is looking at the demands for single units which might be of interest to multichannel fans. Do feel free to let the company know (politely and by the normal channels!) if you are interested in such a thing.

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How was the AE1 Active tested?

The AE1 Actives were placed on Soundstyle Z60 stands at either end of a Quadraspire QAVX rack. This allowed them to be plugged into an IsoTek Evo 3 Sigmas mains conditioner and fed an XLR signal from an Oppo Sonica DAC which itself was receiving information from a Melco N1A2 and [Tidal](#) as well as some testing from an Audio Files Modified Audio Technica LP5 with Rega Ania and Goldring E3 cartridges and fed to the Oppo via an Avid Pellar Phono stage. Test material has included lossless and high res FLAC and AIFF, DSD, Tidal and some vinyl.

Sound Quality



Beyond the engineering arguments that go into the benefits of active speakers, there is a sense that they should have a sound that benefits from their amplification being optimised for the driver and cabinet. They should sound 'together' in a way that combing amplifier A with speaker B can't necessarily match. After some running in and a little playing about with placement, this is something that the AE1 delivers in spades.

What do I mean by this? Listening to something like Fink's *Pretty Little Thing*, the immediacy of the AE1 is genuinely invigorating. This is a simple track; vocals, guitar and some stripped back percussion and effects. The AE1 delivers them as beautifully defined separate points of information but tied together in a way that gives a genuine sensation of being present at the time. There's no sense of embellishment to the material, instead it sounds outstandingly natural and this in turn feeds back to the general feeling of realism these speakers create.

Increase the complexity of the material and go for the absolutely bonkers *Star Furnace* by the apocalyptically name The Comet is Coming and the AE1s deliver the densely layered fury of the track while still trying to make sense of it. Fine details that can be lost in the mix when listening to the same track on the (admittedly rather more affordable) Steljes NS6 are clearly discernible but worked into the track as a whole. The effect is tonally even and cohesive meaning that you tend to take in the performance as a whole rather than focusing on the details, however artfully picked out they may be.



The effect of the bass and treble trim adjustments on this are fairly benign. I suspect that the bass adjustment is going to see more use than the treble one for most owners – the upper registers of the AE1 Active are pretty convincing to my ears and in all but the most reflective or absorbent rooms would leave a positive or negative adjustment sounding somewhat audible. However the bass performance is a little different. I'm not sure about the conditions where such a compact speaker might produce too much bass but the 3dB boost is applied in a very refined manner and gives the AE1 Active the scale to work well in large rooms.

Judged for what it is – which is not a true £1,000 speaker but a £1,000 solution to part of your amplification and a loudspeaker – it is hard to be overly critical about what the AE1 active offers. There have been times when pushed hard that some other similarly priced amp and passive speaker combinations have sounded a little more energetic but there is also a sense that the performance that the Acoustic Energy is generating is probably the correct one. If you want your music to be delivered with a constant sense of get up and go, this might not be the correct choice as you'll only get that effect from music that is supposed to have it. The other aspect of the AE1's performance that needs to be pointed out but sort of goes without saying, is that you will need to have decent source equipment – not necessarily expensive but sufficiently capable so as not to pass on any obvious flaws to a pair of speakers that will happily make those flaws apparent.

Provided that you can do this though, the AE1s are extremely easy to live with. Nothing I've asked them to play in the time they've been here has unsettled them or left me regretting pressing play. Their effortless cohesion and even-handedness allows them to be as happy picking through Arvo Part as they are Jurassic5 and they'll do a commendable job with both. It's worth noting that the Oppo Sonica has impressive and very linear gain available from its volume control and this has suited the Acoustic Energy extremely well. I suspect that living with them at the end of a less linear volume control might prove to be frustrating but this is neither their fault nor something that would easily be avoided by the use of a different active design.



Conclusion

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SCORE

OUT OF 10

Pros

- Refined yet punchy and accurate sound
- Well made
- Flexible in terms of partnering equipment
- Handsome and well made

Cons

- Won't flatter poor equipment and signals
- Wood finish a little orange
- Ultimate limits to headroom

Acoustic Energy AE1 Active Speaker Review

Viewed from an industry standpoint, there really hasn't been a better time for a manufacturer to release a 'conventional' (by which I mean non self-contained) active speaker. The sheer range of source equipment that has preamp functionality – and good preamp functionality at that – on the market is huge and continues to grow. The Acoustic Energy AE1 Active completes a system quickly and efficiently and in a way that makes total sense for modern setups where the boundaries between source and control are increasingly blurred. Active speakers have been around for years and yet, it finally feels like the supporting hardware has caught up.

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The Rundown

Build Quality

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Connectivity

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Sound Quality

9

Ease of Use

9

Features

8

Verdict

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