

# Gladiator, ready!

**Nick Tate** battles with this Roman-named, premium-priced floorstanding speaker



**DETAILS**  
**PRODUCT**  
 Acoustic Energy Corinium  
**ORIGIN**  
 UK/China  
**TYPE**  
 3-way floorstanding loudspeaker  
**WEIGHT**  
 40kg each  
**DIMENSIONS**  
 (WxHxD)  
 235 x 1,100 x 385mm  
**FEATURES**  
 • 29mm soft dome tweeter  
 • 120mm carbon fibre midrange driver  
 • 2x 140mm carbon fibre bass drivers  
 • Claimed sensitivity: 92dB/1W/1m (4ohm)  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
 Acoustic Energy  
**WEBSITE**  
 acoustic-energy.co.uk



**A**coustic Energy is living in interesting times. Over the past few years it has released a range of budget and mid-price speakers that have punched quite a way above their respective weights. The company's newest designs have been interesting and distinctive, cleverly combining a surprisingly sophisticated character with high levels of musicality – two factors that rarely come together as a package. So where next for the Cotswolds-based speaker specialist?

The answer, of course, is a more high-end design. The Corinium, as the company calls it, is a large, premium-priced floorstander – the name referring to the Roman name for Cirencester, which is near Acoustic Energy's Tetbury headquarters. This big floorstander started as a research project. The design team wanted to see just how much better they could make the mid-price AE520 (HFC 468) floorstander, by redesigning it without its 'built-down-to-a-price' compromises. An extremely capable product for the money, it had a really big, powerful yet silky sound. The

## Corinium combines tonal smoothness and couthness with great musicality

result – after nearly three years of gestation – is that Acoustic Energy claims its new flagship design marks: “a step change in performance”.

Managing Director and chief designer Mat Spandl explains: “We wanted to make a speaker that was more open and detailed, without simply turning the brightness up”. He continues: “We really focused on the bass-mid balance, this is an area responsible for much of the blurring in box speakers as you have a lot going on with room interaction, as well as stitching the drive units together acoustically.”

In a world where so many ‘small footprint’ floorstanders look like one another, this one stands out – in a good way. Its visual charm comes from its relatively subtle and slightly angled profile (done for time alignment), its visual cleanliness and simplicity, and the excellent quality of the finish.

It's a three-way design with four drive units – a 29mm soft dome tweeter, 120mm carbon-coned midrange driver and twin 140mm carbon-coned bass units working in parallel. The tweeter is said to have a

very light dome for good efficiency and transient speed, whereas the midband driver has been designed to cover five octaves, from 260Hz all the way up to 3.4kHz.

Mat Spandl refined the bass port to act very unobtrusively, pointing out: “it's more of a sealed box design that's underlined by a bass port”. The midrange driver is also vented to open air, but again this is done subtly.

The cabinet has walls of differing thicknesses – ranging from 22mm to 50mm thick. It's made from AE's Resonance Suppression Composite (RSC) material. The front has a 6mm aluminium baffle, which has a 4° tilt up and away from the listener. Black, White and Tectona (Teak) real wood veneer finishes are offered, plus a stylish British Racing Green.

The Corinium has a claimed sensitivity of 92dB/m/1W, which is very good – but the caveat is that its nominal impedance is 4ohm. This means you'll need a powerful amplifier with very good load-driving ability. For the purposes of this review, Musical Fidelity's M8xi (HFC 465) is used. The much more affordable Exposure 3510 (HFC 506) drives it very well, but it is very revealing and needs the best possible integrated amplifier driving it.

## Sound quality

This is the best Acoustic Energy speaker I've ever heard, and that includes the legendary AE1 from back in the Eighties. It offers excellent performance at the price and is a massive upgrade over the company's previous 'flagship' floorstander, the AE520. The latter is almost half the price, but the Corinium is more than twice as good.

The defining characteristic is its combination of tonal smoothness and couthness, and its great musicality. It works really well across the board in performance terms, offering a beautifully even and balanced tonality with no nasty shouty areas, plus great delicacy and detail retrieval, as well as real grip and timing precision. It's even really good at tracking dynamic peaks and can go very loud gracefully – although you'll need a muscular amplifier for this.

Tonally it is almost velvety; like the AE500 series it has a lovely 'dark chocolate' patina to the way it makes music. Cue up the sophisticated pop of Seal's *Future Love Paradise* and you're instantly smitten. It digs deep to tell you all about the classy production, but doesn't laser-etch it on your cranium. Seal's voice is, if anything, texturally a little dull or at



**HOW IT COMPARES**  
 Bowers & Wilkins' 702 S3 (£5,500) is an important addition to the big mid-price floorstander market, and packs a serious punch. It's a powerful, dynamic and detailed design – but has subtlety too. The Corinium matches the B&W's physicality yet brings a slightly more suave and sophisticated sound. There's a little less midband glare, but just as much insight and a more expansive soundstage. All the same, personal preference will play a major part in your choice – so do try to audition both of these excellent floorstanders if at all possible.

least subdued. Yet despite not being a bright-sounding loudspeaker, the Corinium really gets to grip with its timbre and grain.

This isn't a speaker that gives you a deliberately romantic, sepia-tinged and soft sound – quite the reverse. In the time domain, it's very fast and responsive. There's way less overhang in the bass and midband than the cheaper AE520; the bass drum goes on and off as quickly as a flashing LED. The strong, well-braced cabinet makes it sound lithe and just loves to put out big swathes of low-frequency sound. Jennifer Lucas' Nineties dance classic *Take On Higher* proves to be huge – the Corinium stays in complete control throughout despite the swathes of sub bass.

Part of its speed is down to its excellent tweeter. It's a lot more couth than the already very capable AE500 series unit and is faster too. It gives a very delicate rendition of this song's looped hi-hats, despite the rather lo-fi production values. Upgrade the sound source to something better, like the percussion work on *Something* by The Beatles and you can hear just what a good recording this is. It has a real delicacy that only seriously capable speakers can reproduce.

This is a good chance to appreciate the excellent soundstaging. Again, it's a big upgrade over the AE520, able to melt into the atmosphere at medium to higher volumes – you can hear its cabinet disappear! Its real party trick

is with powerful, large-scale recordings – whether it's the epic classic rock of Led Zeppelin or the expansive electronica of Kraftwerk. Here it pushes out vast swathes of sound yet stays completely in control. It resolves huge amounts of detail, yet never has the listener recoiling over a sharp sound balance. And it handles dynamic peaks with ease, showing admirable grace under pressure.

## Conclusion

Acoustic Energy has let itself off the leash, so to speak, and finally done an expensive loudspeaker. The result is superb; it might not be cheap, but it certainly delivers more than one has a right to expect at the price. Indeed, it is closer to big floorstanders from flashier names costing five-figure sums. Catch it if you can ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
 ★★★★★  
**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
 ★★★★★  
**BUILD QUALITY**  
 ★★★★★  
**EASE OF DRIVE**  
 ★★★★★

**LIKE:** Superb, silky sound; design; build  
**DISLIKE:** Needs a powerful, gutsy amp  
**WE SAY:** Excellent, high-performance floorstander

**OVERALL**  
 ★★★★★