



Blast from the past

Nick Tate reckons Acoustic Energy's new AE2 40th Anniversary speaker is a treasure trove of times gone by

This new compact speaker is surely one of the most important new products of 2026 – simply for what it signifies. Tastes change as decades roll by and that applies to hi-fi too. The speakers we used 40 years ago were nothing like what we have now. They remind us of their era's priorities and how they're different to our current ones. There are few better examples of this than Acoustic Energy's 'new' AE2 40th Anniversary Edition. Although it isn't an exact copy of the original 1988 design, it's pretty darn close. It shares the same philosophy, but employs modern materials where the originals are no longer available. Even though the cabinets and drive units are not identical, designer Mat

Spandl's thinking is completely at one with the original. So it's a fascinating conceptual experiment. The original AE2 was designed by Phil Jones – an accomplished bass guitar player who wanted a live, sinewy and tactile monitor sound. Released a year after the 1987 AE1, which delivered all this from a tiny cabinet, the AE2 added extra headroom, punch and bass extension. This was done by using stiff, strong aluminium drivers mounted in a two-way, mid-tweeter-mid array. This aims to improve how the sound disperses up and down, giving a more symmetrical radiation pattern. These were set into a concrete and plaster-lined wooden cabinet, with a relatively wide front baffle – by

DETAILS
PRODUCT Acoustic Energy AE2 40th Anniversary Edition
ORIGIN UK/China
TYPE 2-way standmount loudspeaker
WEIGHT 14.5kg each
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD) 235 x 385 x 315mm
FEATURES • 29mm aluminium dome tweeter • 2x 125mm aluminium cone mid/bass driver • Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (6ohm)
DISTRIBUTOR Acoustic Energy
WEBSITE acoustic-energy.co.uk

modern standards. Three small bass reflex ports were positioned around the front baffle. The original AE2 sold well, won widespread critical acclaim and personified the era's approach to speaker design – getting great sound from a smallish box.

Back to the present and the AE2 40 uses the same newly developed mid/bass units and tweeter from last year's AE1 40. These are fractionally larger than the originals and have uprated

The AE2 40 clearly relishes intense productions at high listening levels

internals. The mid/bass driver uses a spun, hard-anodised, ceramic-coated aluminium cone that's crucial to the character of the speaker. The voice coils are thermally bonded to the cone, which is said to give very low distortion. The twin mid/bass drivers crossover with the new anodised aluminium dome tweeter at 2.2kHz via a stripped-down, low order minimalist crossover – radical thinking back in 1988, but pretty standard for most speakers now.

Instead of being lined with concrete and plaster, the new cabinet features constrained layer damping using bitumen. Steel plates have been added to increase rigidity. There's a

choice of High Gloss Black, along with lacquered Real Wood Veneer – both done to an extremely high standard. The gold drive unit bolts are a nod to the later AE2 Signature. Magnetic grilles come as standard.

Having two relatively small drive units in a relatively low internal volume cabinet with narrow aperture bass ports is not a recipe for high efficiency. And so it proves with the new AE2 40. Acoustic Energy claims 88dB with a nominal impedance of 6ohm, which isn't bad considering the size, but you'll still need a gutsy amp to drive this speaker to serious levels. It's optimised for rooms larger than 25m²; a ceiling of 200W maximum input power is specified and frequency response is 35Hz to 45kHz (+/- 6dB).

One of the joys of last year's AE1 40 (HFC 534) was that you can perch it almost anywhere and it sings like a bird. The AE2 40 is no less likeable in this regard. Ideally you'll get the best from it by placing it on a pair of beefy 16in stands. It's possible to ram the cabinet close to a rear wall and suffer relatively little boom. Little toe-in is needed, either. Testing is done with a Musical Fidelity M6xi integrated amp, driven by a Chord Electronics Hugo TT2 DAC (HFC 468) fed by CD and streaming sources.

Sound quality

There's nothing currently on sale that looks like the AE2 40 and the same goes for its sound. It's very close to the original Signature version of the early Nineties. This means it's tight, taut, crisp, rhythmic and punchy – yet there's a subtly warm tonality too. What stands out is its ability to take



Monitor Audio's £3,000 Gold 100 6G is bigger and pricier than the AE2 40, but sits in the same mid-size standmount niche. It's a handsome three-way design complete with MA's MPD III ribbon-style tweeter, a 75mm C-CAM metal cone mid driver and similar 200mm bass driver. At 86.5dB sensitivity (4ohm), it's harder to drive than the Acoustic Energy, so bring a serious amp to the fight. It goes louder with less strain, has a silkier and more atmospheric treble and even outdoes the AE on bass extension. Yet still the AE2 40 is easily the more musical option of the two.



any piece of music and eke out its rhythmic and dynamic aspects, pushing these to the fore. Yet at the same time it doesn't sound harsh or shouty. It's best summed up as giving a 'refined monitor' sound and it's easy to imagine it in a studio doing near-field duties.

The Beastie Boys' *Sabotage* shows just how much the AE2 40 relishes intense productions at high listening levels. It unstintingly thumps out the hard, gutsy bassline along with the jagged guitar and keyboard work. The screechy vocals grate in the way they're intended to, but never descend into distortion. It's almost as if the Acoustic Energy was born to play this sort of music.

Moving back to the disco era, the AE2 40 shows its mettle with the more dreamy sound of Ganymed's *It Takes Me Higher*. You're instantly aware of that chunky bass guitar line modulating up and down in a super-supple way and the hi-hat cymbal fluttering above. The AE2 40 is smooth, but has an authentically metallic ring to it that many speakers can't replicate without sounding spiky. The swirling analogue synths in the background get plenty of space, making for an atmospheric feel.

Tears For Fears' *Sowing The Seeds Of Love* is quite a production for a pop song and the AE2 40 dutifully unpacks its many strands with forensic detail without sounding analytical. It's not an easy thing for a loudspeaker to shine a light on a recording's fine detail without descending into harshness, but the Acoustic Energy does just this. Even when the song draws up to the final complex dynamic crescendo, it sounds confident and authoritative.

This speaker also does subtle, too. The beautiful contemporary jazz of

Immanuel Wilkins' *Emanation* shows him to be a brilliant young alto sax talent and through the AE2 40 the composition sounds dynamic yet nuanced enough to catch the lead instrument's reedy, vibrant tone and the backing piano's deep, sonorous cadences. Indeed, alongside the AE2 40's love of timing and dynamics, its tonality is really rather special. Bass, mid and treble are all very well integrated with one another and there's delicacy from bottom to top.

Conclusion

The AE2 40th Anniversary Edition is a highly convincing design and competitively priced for what it delivers. Best of all, it has a certain charm that's rare these days. Although not perfect in every respect, it just gets into the groove of whatever you play and pretty much forgets itself. You're just left listening to the music. Many of the latest loudspeakers are just as capable – if not more – on paper in terms of bass and treble extension, and maximum sound pressure level. Yet somehow this quirky-looking retro speaker is so much more fun to hear ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful, rhythmic, fun sound
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Needs gutsy amplification
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A charming, uplifting music maker
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★