



Little wonder

Nick Tate reckons Acoustic Energy has a winner on its hands with the recently refreshed AE300² standmount speaker

Every time Acoustic Energy launches a new small loudspeaker, there's a shudder in the space-time continuum. The company made its name with the now-legendary AE1 mini-monitor of the late Eighties and it was so good it casts a shadow over its other small speakers even now...

Of course, the AE300² is not the modern equivalent and nor is it meant to be. It costs roughly the same as AE's first ever speaker – but only when you ignore 40 years of inflation – so in real terms it's way cheaper. This is a premium budget design that sits between the mid-price 500² and entry-level 100² series.

Designer Mat Spandl explains that this is the company's first product to appear since the launch of its flagship Corinium (HFC 513), and much of the know-how from this project was put into the 300-series refresh, adding that it sounds significantly closer to the current 5-Series than its predecessor did. There's a new mid/bass driver, tweeter, cabinet and crossover – with

the mid/bass unit being the biggest improvement. The 120mm driver combines paper and coconut husk for its cone material, which is said to limit cone break-up and resonance for a warmer and smoother sound than the first AE300's aluminium cone.

Above it sits a new 29mm fabric dome tweeter derived from Corinium. Again, this replaces a metal dome, and is said to have lower distortion. "In my experience a hard dome can often favour accuracy whereas a soft dome, when executed correctly, can add a nice open zest to the sound without becoming too hard sounding", he says. The crossover is at 3.5kHz.

Last but not least is the cabinet, which is around half of the AE300²'s manufacturing budget. In this instance AE has specified its RSC composite cabinet design, which it shares with the Corinium. RSC is more acoustically inert than standard MDF, but the extra expense has meant that a high-quality vinyl finish is now standard, instead of a real-wood veneer. There's a range of modern

'silk-touch' Matte Black, White and Walnut finishes available.

Sound quality

This is a small speaker with a grown-up sound. Its AE100² (HFC 489) sibling is a great little entry-level design, but the AE300² is clearly better at reproducing music – without losing the fun factor. Indeed, even when compared with its price rivals, it's one of the most composed, balanced and articulate performers – and doesn't sound like a budget box.

Its relative lack of cabinet noise is very apparent; play a jaunty slice of Eighties pop in the shape of New Musik's *Sanctuary*, and there's far less hardness from the AE300² than you'd expect, which means you're left with a tonally slightly darker and smoother sound – but one with just as much life and vigour. Singer Tony Mansfield's vocals often sound shrill, as can the synthesiser work, but not here.

The AE300²'s quiet cabinet and closely spaced drivers give an 'out of the box' feel that makes modern synth pop like Empire of The Suns' *Walking On A Dream* hover above the listener. Images are pushed out far left and right, but the sound doesn't push itself in your face.

AE's signature 'swing' is fully apparent with Herbie Hancock's *I Have A Dream*; there's a lovely rhythmic gait to the sound as it ebbs and flows around the listener. Although never tonally shrill, it's a lively listen thanks to a tight grip on the music's delicate timing. Bass is as taut and tuneful as a speaker of this price gets and the treble – although a little softer and more subtle than some rivals – is still crisp with fast attack and decay.

Conclusion

Civilised yet fun and smooth yet feisty, the AE300² offers great value in the budget standmount space, making it well worth an audition ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy
AE300²

ORIGIN
UK/Japan/China

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
170 x 320 x 270mm

FEATURES
● 29mm fabric
dome tweeter
● 120mm paper/
coconut husk
mid/bass driver
● Quoted sensitivity:
86dB/1m/1W (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Acoustic Energy

WEBSITE
acoustic-energy.
co.uk

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Smooth, detailed, fun sound

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: Class-of-the-field budget box

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★