



Little wonder

As the cost of living spirals out of control, **Nick Tate** tries this highly capable, cost-conscious small speaker out for size

Whatever happened to the bargain basement standmount? Back in the mid-Eighties you could buy a pair of Wharfedale Diamonds for £80, while a decade or so later Mission 760s would set you back £130. When you take the relative change in value of money over the years into account, that price now translates to roughly £260 – the cost of the AE100² you see before you.

Designer Mat Spandl alludes to this, noting: “We can’t do anything decent below this price point”. Put simply, the compromises needed to sell a budget speaker any cheaper than this in 2022 are such that Acoustic Energy wouldn’t want to put the company’s name to it. And this is, of course, a Chinese-manufactured product, where costs to produce are still lower than in the West.

Forgive all this slide-rule twiddling, but it does illustrate just how tight things are when designing and selling entry-level speakers. This brings me on to the next point – doing a good

cheap speaker is way harder than doing a good mid-price or even high-end one. This is because, with a budget box, every last penny has to be counted, and indeed pinched.

If you’re a designer creating a £2,600 standmount, you don’t have to justify every last ‘dollar and cent’ spent in the finished product, and a £26,000 speaker designer can splurge money around with gay abandon. Yet here, everything has to be as good as it possibly can – because everything counts in small amounts!

One key design aim for the AE100² was to make it reasonably sensitive, and the quoted 87dB shows that this has just about been achieved. The 130mm paper coned mid/bass unit is as large as can be crammed into a speaker that’s just 165mm wide; many rivals use 110mm units, which are less efficient and less good at handling power. Paper isn’t particularly fashionable as a cone material, but a speaker designer of great experience whom I know and trust – not connected to Acoustic

Energy – told me it’s still a great material for a drive unit cone, being light, stiff and natural sounding.

High frequencies are dispensed by a 25mm fabric dome tweeter. Although Acoustic Energy is famous for its metal and – more recently – carbon dome high-frequency units, fabric is a fine compromise. Potentially such a tweeter can sound very smooth, and mates nicely, tonally, with paper mid/bass drivers. The crossover does its stuff at 2.9kHz.

The cabinet features AE’s favoured rear-firing slot-shaped bass reflex port; all the company’s speakers now use this and it makes its presence felt less than conventional round ports and you can push it closer to a boundary without issue. The cabinet is 15mm high-density fibreboard; HDF is more expensive than the MDF used by most speaker makers, but due to its greater rigidity, Acoustic Energy has used less of it. Like every speaker cabinet in the world, it produces its own colourations, but Mat Spandl’s view is that they’re quite euphonic and agreeable ones all the same.

The end result is a small, ported two-way design with a claimed

Even with the volume really wound up, it holds on tight and doesn’t lose the plot

frequency response of 51Hz to 26kHz (-3dB) and 120W RMS power handling. By the standards of the aforementioned budget boxes of the Eighties and Nineties, these are quite staggering numbers – and show how far speaker design has progressed, at least on paper. The cabinet also looks very neat, especially in its satin white finish; satin black and walnut vinyl wrap are also available. In the flesh, it feels markedly swisher than those golden oldies too, with the magnetically attached grilles adding to the sense of sophistication.

Sound quality

The AE100² is a slinky low-budget design that sounds surprisingly suave. First, let’s remind ourselves that no speaker at this price point is anywhere near perfect. Rather, the trick is too minimise what it gets wrong – because in absolute terms it’s never going to be accurate and/or neutral. And that’s the strength of this little mini-monitor – it hides its limitations in a really self-effacing way.

Put it on the end of a half decent system – I use a Chord Hugo 2 (HFC

488) DAC feeding an Exposure 3510 integrated, with a variety of digital sources – and it sings. It’s lots of fun, yet totally inoffensive – so it doesn’t scream, squawk or boom at you. This in turn lets you enjoy music more than with most bargain-basement standmounts. It’s way less detailed and open than, say, Acoustic Energy’s own mid-price AE500 (HFC 465), yet is a quarter of the price without being just 25 percent of the fun...

Cue up some classic rock in the shape of Peter Gabriel’s *Solsbury Hill*, and you’re treated to a jaunty few minutes of foot tapping, plus the chance of some fist waving as you really get wrapped up in the tune. It’s a fabulous piece of music, of course, and the AE100² shows why. Rhythmically it’s surprisingly good for a budget box, and the recording comes over as relatively uncompressed. Even on the song’s crescendo at the end, with the volume control really wound up, this wee speaker holds on tight and doesn’t lose the plot.

This proves to be a great portent of things to come, because whatever programme material I try during my reviewing, it doesn’t get in the way of enjoying the music; quite the opposite. In absolute terms, the AE100² is tonally a tad soft and opaque; you get nowhere near the insight that you would from a considerably more expensive design. Yet this doesn’t seem to hold it back in any way, as it has a compelling rhythmic quality that maintains your interest no matter what.

HOW IT COMPARES

In the great scheme of cheap speaker things, Q Acoustics 3020i (HFC 441) sits very close to the AE100². It’s almost the same size and weight, has similar measured performance and price. Even the styling isn’t that different. Sonically they’re not poles apart either, but the 3020i presents itself in a softer and soggier way. It doesn’t quite have the snap and punch of the AE100². The result is that the Q seems just a touch too middle of the road, even if it is still a fine design at the price – especially if you’re running a forward sounding system.



I love the way the bassline bounces around to the strains of Elvis Costello’s *Pump It Up*; the AE100² doing precisely that. It thumps out a good amount of low frequencies considering its diminutive dimensions and really pushes hard on musical climaxes. The result is a big, bouncy bass guitar groove that drives this classic new-wave song along. Further up in the midband, Costello’s slightly acerbic, shouty voice is carried more smoothly than expected, with some of its hardness taken away. Up top, cymbal work is a little veiled, but still crisp enough to sound realistic and satisfying – after all, the last thing you want is for your budget speaker to sound bright.

Stereo imaging is about as good as it has a right to be; it’s far from perfect in absolute terms, but decently wide and nicely ‘out of the box’. Indeed the spacious tech of Kraftwerk’s *Spacelab* is very well carried, really pushing out far into the room, left and right. Depth perspective isn’t amazing, but it’s a baby speaker that’s cheaper than what many spend on speaker cables! Within the soundstage, things are reasonably well laid out, but we’re not in the same league of pinpoint precision as a high-end electrostatic.

Overall then, the outstanding thing about the AE100² is that it suffers from none of the usual cheap speaker nasties. Of course, it’s a real come down from any good £1,000-plus

standmount, yet somehow it doesn’t seem to matter – such is its charm. Within seconds of cueing up a track, the listener is happily getting into the music’s mood – and you can’t say much fairer than that.

Conclusion

Acoustic Energy’s AE100² is hard not to like. It has a friendly, warm, inviting and affable character that doesn’t bother you with too much detail about the recording, but instead gets you into the music itself. You might even say it has a certain charm of its very own. As such, it’s a highly impressive thing at this price – and hard not to recommend with open arms. With cleverly designed budget loudspeakers, less can be so much more, it seems ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Rhythm; tonality; sonic charm

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Cheap and cheerful fun