

Acoustic Energy AE2 40th Anniversary – double the fun?

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Acoustic Energy AE2 40th Anniversary Edition

History has a funny way of repeating itself. Back in the late eighties, an embryonic Acoustic Energy found that no sooner had they got the AE1 into production than enthusiastic recipients began asking for a bigger one. Fast forward to 2025 and no sooner has a rather wiser and more experienced Acoustic Energy launched a 40th Anniversary Edition version of the AE1 than people were asking what else they might do with the hardware. The answer in both cases is the AE2.

The AE2 is pragmatism manifest because it's the answer to the question 'can you make a bigger AE1?' when all you have is the hardware to build AE1s. Rather than seek out the means to make a larger mid bass driver, Acoustic Energy added a second example of the existing mid bass driver. By offsetting the tweeter from a true D'Appolito arrangement, the cabinet wound up roughly 60% larger than an AE1, adding to the width as well as height and providing room for a third forward firing bass port, creating a speaker that looked (still looks in fact) different to anything else.

The resulting speaker was well received and while it never sold in the quantities the AE1 did, it developed a loyal following and remained in production until 2001. *Unlike* the AE1, it really only has one descendent in the form of the Reference 2 from 2011 (which, by the by, was the best model in that Reference range). This slightly more limited historical footprint means that Acoustic Energy is being more measured in their intentions for the Anniversary Edition. Originally, production was to be capped at 400 pairs but as this barely covered initial orders, the decision has been made that production will be continued over the 40th Anniversary year period but no longer.

Like the 40th Anniversary AE1, the AE2 is not simply a case of dusting off some existing jigs and restarting production and it doesn't share a single part in common with the original. The 125mm mid bass unit is shared with the AE1 and uses the straight sided spun aluminium cone of the original but it's now ceramic backed and even more rigid. The pair hand over to a 29mm metal dome tweeter that mimics the original but isn't a direct copy of it, crossing over as it does at 2.2kHz; significantly lower than the AE1. Some of the reason for this drop is that no AE2s used the original, extremely delicate tweeter found on very early AE1s and **later iterations could take more bandwidth and power without bursting**. Like the AE1 Anniversary, refinements like inner port flares and shorting rings are now present too.



The cabinet also follows the pattern of 'the same but better' as the AE1. It's stiffened in such a way as to replicate the original rather than achieve the levels of rigidity that Acoustic Energy can achieve in their modern designs. It's meaningfully and unavoidably bigger than the AE1 too. It's no taller (38.5cm/15in) than the resident Focal Kanta No1s I've used for years but the additional width which is maintained for the full depth of the cabinet makes it feel significantly bigger. Around the back, you'll find a single pair of speaker terminals.

The new speaker might not share any parts with the original but it's visually identical and this means it's exactly the same proposition in terms of finding house space for it. Simply put, **no combination of artful stand, mood lighting or sympathetic placement with other furniture is going to make the AE2 look like anything other than a collection of drivers and holes** corralled into formation (although the adoption of magnetic grille tabs has at least eliminated four small holes). You didn't buy an AE2 originally because it was a furniture grade speaker, you bought it because of the performance on offer. The Anniversary doesn't change this proposition but it sweetens the deal by having two excellent finishes (I think the black in particular looks brilliant) and being built to a truly exemplary standard. Even judged at the asking price, this feels like a lot of speaker.

The measured performance of the new AE2 mostly follows that of the original which means that is substantially harder hitting speaker than the AE1. Low end roll off is now given at 35Hz (at +/- 6dB) and tested in my room here, that number is almost achievable within 3dB. Sensitivity also climbs to 88dB albeit you need to take into account that the AE2's layout and driver complement does benefit from a bit of current behind it so I'd be careful about describing them as easy to drive.

Sound quality

Given that I eulogised about the original AE1 in my review of the Anniversary version and still own a pair of them, you might assume that I feel exactly the same way about the AE2. The reality is more complex than that. On the occasions I've listened to original AE2s I've never felt quite the same way about them that I do the AE1. There are two important caveats to this though. I've never knowingly heard a pair of AE2 Signatures and the examples I have generally



led a fairly hard life. As noted, you didn't buy an AE2 for how it looked so finding survivors that haven't been run fairly hard is quite tricky.

What the AE2 does out of the box is deliver a scale and authority that the smaller speaker cannot get anywhere near. I've recently been enjoying Roon's ability to sort my music library at random to rediscover music I haven't played in an age and one of the first things I played on through the AE2 was the eponymous debut by The Bravery. From the moment the kick-drum begins in the opening *An Honest Mistake*, the AE2 reaches parts the AE1 cannot. Each one of those drum strikes is felt as well as heard; a neat little fist bump to the sternum that subconsciously increases the scale of what you are hearing.

This combines with a meaningful increase in the soundstage as well. Massive Attack's *100th Window* gains the wall to wall scale to go with its hard hitting bass and everything up and gains a believable sense of the space it happens in. This still isn't going to be my first choice to really do justice to a full orchestra but it'll keep plugging away long after the point where an AE1 has tapped out and gone home.

Even so, my first impressions weren't as euphoric as they were with the AE1 and it was more than the work of a moment to find out why. The breakthrough came largely by accident and happened when the resident Cambridge Evo 300 (which delivers fine results with the AE1 Anniversary incidentally) left the system to allow for a Naim Uniti Star Lite to be tested. The combination of AE2 and Evo 300 was good... but oddly not as good as combining two deeply capable devices should be. The Naim Uniti Star Lite by contrast has 230 fewer watts than the Evo 300 but it hinted at a synergy that is key to getting the best out of the Acoustic Energy.

To this end, I dug a Naim Supernait 3 out of hibernation and from there, the AE2 clicked in a way that has left me feeling substantially different towards it. What the Supernait (and a Musical Fidelity M6si and Hegel A200 which have passed through while the AE2 has been here) is able to do is take that hard hitting and potent speaker and inject *just enough* urgency into what the AE2 does that it effectively becomes an AE1, simply one imbued with improbable levels of punch.

This means that that the AE2 is fun in a way that many modern speakers; **impressive feats of engineering that comprise improbable ends of the periodic table and a web brochure that features measurement devices that look like they laser Sean Connery in half at the weekend**, can't get anywhere near. Breathe by the Prodigy suddenly has an anthemic quality that takes me back to 1997 and the point I first heard it. To watch the AE2 running hard, those small drivers gently blurring as they go about their frenzied business, is to be reminded that **this pastime of ours can be about more than lines on a graph.**

What is truly admirable though is that the same careful introduction of new ingredients into

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the recipe have yielded similar benefits to the AE1. There is still colouration compared to something truly modern but it's reduced over what was once the case and what remains is subjectively beneficial. **It's also impressively forgiving for something so immediate.** Even poor recordings being played at thoroughly unsociable levels rarely see it unsettled. As I said, I never heard the original AE2 Signature but this is still the most complete AE2 I've ever listened to.



Conclusion

Complete or not, this is still not the automatic choice at the price. It's relatively big speaker; and the driver layout and styling only emphasise this. If the looks don't phase you, the need to pay a bit of attention – more attention than most of its rivals need certainly – to what you partner it with just might. The thing is though, I suspect quite a few people are going to hear a pair running on the end of suitable electronics and those concerns will start to seem more and more irrelevant. **The AE2 40th Anniversary is manifestation of joy that will have you listening longer and louder.** If its time with us is going to be fleeting, we should very much make the most of it.

Pros

- Delivers scale, authority and hard-hitting bass with a wide soundstage
- Fun, energetic and engaging sound, with the AE1's character but more punch
- Reduced colouration compared with the original
- Forgiving of poor recordings, even at high volume
- Exemplary build quality and two excellent finishes
- Ceramic-backed cone, inner port flares and magnetic grille tabs
- Feels like a lot of speaker for the money

Cons

- Large, and its driver layout and styling won't suit all tastes
- Needs careful amplifier matching
- Not the easiest speaker to drive, benefits from plenty of current
- Not the best choice for full orchestral music
- Limited production run



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