

## Acoustic Energy AE309.2 speakers in full effect

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Chris Kelly



### Acoustic Energy AE309.2 speakers

Ask any British person what their country is good at and you will get almost as many answers as there are interviewees. I doubt however that many will mention the design of audio equipment. However, it is a field in which we excel, and in particular in the crowded loudspeaker arena there is an amazing cast of specialist companies vying for our hard-earned cash. Among the vanguard of these is Acoustic Energy, founded in the 1980s and still going strong today. Over my years of reviewing I have had several pairs of Acoustic Energy loudspeakers come through my listening room, and have always found them to deliver a most enjoyable sound. A chance to hear the new Mark 2 version of the AE309 floor standers was offered and accepted without hesitation.

There are four distinct series of loudspeakers within the Acoustic Energy catalogue, with Corinium being the high end flagship, below which come the 500, 300 and 100 series. The new mark2 300 series offers three sizes of main loudspeakers plus, for those who need it, a matching centre speaker. The AE309.2s which arrived here are the smaller of two floorstanders. The first thing noticed on unboxing was the weight the loudspeaker. At 18.5kg the enclosures are heavy enough but manoeuvrable.

Fitting the high quality spikes was easily achieved, and the grilles attach magnetically to the front of the loudspeaker, which gave me a chance to examine the drive units before attaching them. There is pair of main cones arrayed vertically, with a recessed cloth tweeter above them and mounted centrally, so there is no worry about which goes on the left and which the right (as is the case with offset tweeters). The main drivers are made of a new composite of paper and coconut fibre, the research for which was part of the high end Corinium project. The soft dome tweeter is an all-new design for the AE300.2 series and features the company's wide-dispersion technology, it is slightly recessed in the cabinet.

The cabinet on this pair was finished in the company's new 'silk-touch' matte black, which is wonderfully fingerprint resistant, albeit there was still a pair of white cotton gloves in the package. There is also matte white version or walnut, for those who prefer a slightly more traditional finish. The AE309.2 is a genuinely compact speaker, measuring a modest 90cm (3 foot) in height.

The cabinet itself is a constrained layer damped (CLD) design, another spin-off from the Corinium design work. It's a sandwich style of construction with far better damping than typical MDF types. The rear of the cabinet hosts a pair of binding posts and further up, a horizontal letterbox style bass port, more about which later.



For the review period the AE309.2s were paired with my Primaluna Evo 300 Hybrid integrated amplifier. Sources were the visiting Michell Orbe SE turntable with my Gold Note phono stage, my Yamaha CD-S3000 SACD/CD player and DAC, into which are plugged the Auralic Aries Mini streamer and our television, the first via a coaxial cable and the latter with an optical one. The loudspeaker cable was the Tellurium Q Ultra Silver II, plugged into the single pair of sturdy binding posts on the rear of the Acoustic Energy enclosure. In other words the AE309.2s were installed into a system well above the price point that most potential buyers might deploy them. I was highly intrigued to see how they would hold up in such an environment. In terms of placement, I put them as close as possible to the positions that my HiFi Racks Fortis stands usually support my Harbeth speakers.





### Living with and listening to the 309.2s

The first test with any equipment that arrives in our lounge is whether or not Mrs K notices it and, if so, what she has to say about it. That evening that she came home from work and we eventually went to sit down and relax (she after a hard day's work, me not so much), she immediately made some very complimentary noises about the way the loudspeakers looked. She walked over to inspect them and commented favourably on both the look and feel of the finish. Wife Acceptance Factor (WAF) is not always present in the male dominated world of audio equipment.

Prior to all that I had used my Qobuz account to stream music through the AE309.2s to get them warmed up and to allow them to settle after their transit from Acoustic Energy's Cotswold headquarters. I left them to their own devices for the whole afternoon but when I did go in just to check on them I was sufficiently impressed to sit down and listen for a few minutes. I was using a playlist that I had created and the first full track I heard was the remastered version of Phil Collins' *In The Air Tonight*, with its thunderous drum track. I turned up the volume and was mightily impressed with the room-filling ability of these diminutive speakers.

We watched a film that first evening and both commented on the amount of detail that we were getting, the clarity of the dialogue and the impressive weight of the action scenes. The technical specification for these loudspeakers quotes a frequency response of 33Hz to 29kHz, which is impressive. Bass was excellent, fast and tuneful and deep enough to handle film duties without any need to bring my subwoofer into action. Given that we were watching *Top Gun - Maverick* that was an impressive performance.

In the days that followed I played an eclectic selection of music, on vinyl and on silver disc. I usually start with a familiar favourite, and on this occasion, I went with Dave Alvin's rather wonderful *Eleven Eleven*. The second track on side one is *Johnny Ace Is Dead*, a great slice of Americana story-telling. Mr. Alvin's baritone vocals sounded just right to my ears – he draws the listener into the tale of the ill-fated eponymous character and the AE309.2s conveyed this wonderfully well.

I then delved into my collection of Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs records and selected a couple of them pretty much at random. First up was Santana's *Caravanserai*, an album that I have loved since I bought my original Columbia label copy from Richard Branson's Virgin Records, when it was mail-order business and the owner was still finding his way into the world of commerce. But I digress. The wonderful quality of the music created by Carlos Santana and his bandmates was fully realised through these inexpensive loudspeakers. The nuanced fusion of jazz, rock and latin styles on this album still gives me goosebumps, and it flowed effortlessly into the room. The AE309.2s create a very credible soundstage without any exaggerated height, width or depth. Not just with this album but with everything I played, and even at quite high volume levels, these little units did sterling work. Bass was plentiful and never felt forced. I could only tell that the slim bass port was working by walking over to the cabinets and feeling the air moving with my hand.

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Switching to the two disc 45 rpm pressing of Love's magnum opus *Forever Changes*, I was entranced all over again with Arthur Lee and Bryan McClean's contrasting musical visions. I still remember the shock of hearing mariachi trumpets on a rock record back when the album was first released. Many years later they still stirred me deeply and I fell in love with the music all over again. Over the review period I played small scale jazz and symphonic classical music and it all sounded really good, as did solo classical guitar and opera. The AE309.2s never lost their composure, and were just as adept at subtlety as they were with bombast. Naturally there are



limits to what one can expect from any small loudspeaker, but in normal use, in a typical British lounge, these little guys were more than up to the task.

I would just add that the vast majority of my listening was done with the grilles attached to the cabinets. Removing them had little audible impact so this simply comes down to personal preference.

### Final thoughts

I was not surprised at how good these little floor-standers were. I have great respect for the Acoustic Energy brand based on my previous experiences, so I signed up for this review expecting very good things, but I got more than that. I had to keep reminding myself that I was listening to a loudspeaker system that only costs around £1,200 per pair in the UK. Yes they are made in China, but so is almost all affordable hi-fi gear on sale today. My Primaluna amplifier was designed in the Netherlands but built in China, to an impeccable standard. The AE309.2s are also really well made and should give years of listening pleasure.

We are not half way through the year yet, so many months away from our Editor asking for nominations for our product of the year awards. If you have read this far it hardly requires a spoiler alert to hear that I have a few names pencilled into my list. The Acoustic Energy AE309.2 loudspeakers are already there, in black ink. If you are building your first audio system, or are thinking of upgrading what you already have, you owe it to yourself to hear them. I want to congratulate the team at Acoustic Energy. They have taken so much from the flagship Corinium series and incorporated it into the loudspeakers in the three series below. The AE309.2 has the look and feel of a much more expensive loudspeaker, and a sound with which I would be happy to live long term - I can give it no higher praise than that.



The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.