the ear
HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review

AE Active redefines the entry level active speaker

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Acoustic Energy AE Active speakers

Back in 2023 I wrote a review of the Acoustic Energy AE1 Active loudspeakers which was very complimentary, and rightly so. Fast forward to the final quarter of 2026 and the replacement for that model – simply called the Acoustic Energy AE Active – arrived here at Kelly Towers, along with a pair of the AE1 40th Anniversary loudspeakers so that I could, to some extent, contrast and compare them. Unlike some of my colleagues in the reviewing world I do not have perfect audio recall of products that have passed through my system for review, so I have referred back to my 2023 piece to jog my memory.

Let's start with what has changed between the two models, which will clearly demonstrate that this is not a simple tweak at the behest of the marketing department. Instead the AE Active is essentially a new loudspeaker in most regards. Externally, the cabinet has subtly changed shape, now measuring 31.2cm (12.5 in) high but with over a kilogram trimmed from the weight. The main driver is the 6th generation 125mm cone from the AE1 40th Anniversary while the tweeter has seen some major revisions. It is a 27mm anodised aluminium dome with a completely redesigned rear chamber. The crossover has also been redesigned and is now a 3.1kHz, 2nd order active analogue filter (reworked to minimise phase loss). The 50W per channel Class A/B amplifiers have also undergone some refinement to improve dynamic headroom.

The final change that's worthy of mention is that the power management is now significantly more sophisticated, with the speakers going into auto standby mode when there is no incoming signal for around 15 minutes, a tiny LED glows either white or red to show whether the speaker is awake or not. As soon as an incoming signal is detected the unit springs to life and the LED changes from red to white.

The rear panel of the AE Active is inevitably quite busy. Starting from the bottom we have an IEC mains input with an on/off switch. To the left is a switch that allows the user to choose between 100–120 and 220–240 Volt supplies – essential for the lucrative export market. Above that are two small diagrams that explain the three settings available to vary bass and treble response. To the right of the explanatory panels is the rotary volume control. To the left of the bass and treble controls are the two input options, one RCA and one XLR. Right next to them is



a small switch marked On in the up position and Auto in the downward one. This gives the user the option as to leave the speakers permanently on or use the standby capability mentioned. Last but not least, above all that is a slot-shaped bass port which runs to within a centimetre or so of the edge on either side.

The pair of AE Actives I received were finished in gloss black and supplied with an acoustically neutral grille that attaches magnetically to the front panel. Also in the box is a pair of white cotton gloves and I definitely recommend that these be used to avoid covering the gloss work with fingerprints. I placed the speakers on the stands I use for small loudspeakers and the tweeter was at ear height for my normal listening position. I angled the loudspeakers in so that a straight line from their tweeters would meet about 25cm behind my head.

At my request Tellurium Q very kindly made me up a pair of RCA-terminated Ultra Black II cables long enough to run from the amplifier to both left and right loudspeakers. These were plugged into the sub out sockets on my Primaluna EVO 300 Floyd Hybrid integrated amplifier, with the switch set to stereo. The speaker cables in the EVO 300 were removed, so the valve-driven pre-amp section became the preamplifier for the Actives. I set the volume control on the Actives to the central position to start with.

The sources plugged into the Primaluna were my Gold Note PH-10/PSU phono preamp which supports my Vertere DGX turntable with the Vertere Mystic II cartridge. My Yamaha CD-S3000 CD/SACD player was also connected. I followed what I consider the correct start-up sequence, which was to turn on the amplifier first then I turned on each of the AE Actives whose switches were set to the On position. The tiny LED glowed white and we were ready to go.

Listening to the AE Actives

Once I had given the whole system plenty of time to warm up and settle down I plucked half a



dozen SACDs off the rack and sat down for the first of several lengthy listening sessions. First into the Yamaha's disc tray was Love's *Forever Changes* on the Mofi release from 2014. Masterpiece is a word bandied about too freely but I believe that it is totally applicable to *Forever Changes*. Here it was issuing forth from the Actives with all the power and all the subtlety, the light and shade that lies in every note – delicate acoustic guitar, mariachi trumpets, driving rock, the two very different voices of Arthur Lee and Bryan MacLean all arrived in an enveloping sound at my listening position. A quick dab on the amplifier's remote control after a minute or two to increase the volume and everything coalesced into a riveting experience. Actually those words are an excellent summary of what the AE Actives always delivered. With a complete change of mood the next disc was a feast of Russian classical music, courtesy of the RCA Red Seal Living Stereo release of Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. This was recorded in 1959 and released on SACD in 2004, yet the music came pouring out of the AE Actives in ravishing detail and all the dynamics of the recording very much intact. Reiner drew great performances from all his players with the brass section in top form throughout and this was represented in all its greatness.

My musical tastes were formed quite early in life, as they were for many of us, so I often default to music from that era. Forgive me therefore for swinging from Reiner to Hendrix with a pause only to swap the discs in the Yamaha. In 1967 the Jimi Hendrix Experience recorded their second album, *Axis: Bold As Love*. In 2018 Analogue Productions released separate mono and stereo box sets on vinyl and SACD, with the latter the AE Actives did Jimi proud and allowed me to really appreciate the remarkable work of Mitch Mitchell on drums and Noel Redding on bass as well as their leader's vocal and astonishing guitar mastery. With the volume just on the comfortable side of loud the music was irresistible. I had to remind myself that I was listening to two 50-watt amplifier modules inside the diminutive AE Active cabinets. In case you are wondering, I prefer the mono mix to the stereo for its more visceral rock qualities, but both are absolutely excellent.

I won't bore you with a long list of albums but let me mention one more. Dire Straits' *Alchemy* is a live album of concerts recorded in 1983 in what was then known as the Hammersmith Odeon in London. On the Japanese SACD version that I played through the Actives there was a fantastic recreation of the original event, with the band's lead guitarist, vocalist and songwriter Mark Knopfler in top crowd-pleasing form. His finger-picking guitar technique is to the fore as the band stretch out on a number of songs from their early recordings. The highlight for me is Knopfler's work on *Sultans Of Swing* – a virtuoso at the very top of his form, and faithfully served by the AE Actives.

When in the days that followed I changed to playing records the AE Actives were just as

effective. My original early copy of *Dark Side Of The Moon* sounded gorgeous as did everything else that I asked of them. Even after several hours of playing at decent volume there was no sign of the amplifiers getting too hot. I switched the standby system to Auto and the speakers responded quickly when the signal reached them.

In the context of my system you might think that a pair of active loudspeakers that retail in the UK for less than a quarter of my Primaluna amplifier might have been outclassed,



outgunned and generally embarrassed, but you would have been sorely mistaken. If I was starting out in the bewildering world of system building and wanted a really good system to get me going I think I would be sorely tempted by the Acoustic Energy AE Actives. I would try and find the budget for a good preamplifier – something like the Quad 33 would be good I think – and whatever source units that suited me and probably live an audio happy ever after. Is 2x 50 watts enough? Well, in my regular UK lounge (roughly 14'x12'x8') there was never any sense that the AE Actives were running out of puff, nor did the sound harden much at all. I played around with the bass and treble controls but in the end I left them centred because that gave me the most musical and balanced results.

What about the siblings?

As I mentioned in the beginning, I had a pair of the 40th Anniversary AE1s here and on three occasions I unplugged the AE Actives and put their handsome little siblings in their place. It was a very interesting exercise. I have always enjoyed AE1s, which first appeared in 1987, and they were a firm favourite with first-time buyers back then and for many years after that. What struck me after listening to the AE Actives was that there are more similarities than differences. At 87dB sensitivity, the AE1s have always worked best with amplifiers with good reserves of power. They paired really well with my Primaluna, which has 100+ watts available into an 8 ohm load, and recreated all the music I played through them with a slightly forward-of-the-speakers soundstage. There was width beyond the speakers' outer cabinet walls. Bass was rich without getting ponderous and the higher frequencies had plenty of air. But here's the thing – I got very close to the same results with the AE Actives; I never felt disappointed when I returned to them after a session with their older siblings, which is a real compliment to their capabilities.

Conclusion

After all that has been said my conclusion is simple. If you want to build a system that will last you for years and that does not overcomplicate things, the AE Actives are a great place to start. How Acoustic Energy's design and product marketing team have been able to make such a highly competent loudspeaker, with a very good amplifier built in, with this build quality, these excellent sonics and at this price point is a mystery to me. What we have here is great value for money – some might even call it a bargain – with no vices and many highly desirable characteristics. The originals were very good, but these are better – a lot better to my ears at least. As always, I highly recommend an audition, but for me these are an obvious best buy and a shoo-in for consideration as one of my products of 2026.

Pros

Redesigned version of a well regarded speaker
Detailed, dynamic sound with good light and shade across very different music
Plenty of power
Very close to the sound of the 40th Anniversary AE1s with a high end amp
Flexible connections: RCA and XLR inputs with bass and treble adjustment
Smart auto-standby with an LED showing status
Strong build quality and magnetic grilles

Cons

Requires a good preamplifier and sources, not a complete system on its own
No wireless inputs
The rear panel is quite busy
The gloss finish shows fingerprints
Tested with a much pricier preamplifier and sources than typical buyers will use

