

GROUP TEST

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AE300_Mk2

Acoustic Energy

AE300 Mk2

An understated but ever-so-capable performer

Acoustic Energy? That's a name we haven't featured for a good while. It's not that the company hasn't been making capable products over the past few years, but rather that they seem to do it more quietly than most. Other speaker brands seem to shout louder and put more resources into marketing and promotion. Still, having got the new Acoustic Energy AE300 Mk2 into our test room, we are pleased to report that the effort was more than worthwhile.

These mid-range standmounters are good, and certainly talented enough to worry their rivals from the likes of Bowers & Wilkins, Q Acoustics and Dali, to name just a few.

The AE300 Mk2 is a neatly made compact box. Each speaker unit stands 32cm tall and is a relatively slim design at just 17cm wide. Visually, this pair of standmounters is about as unobtrusive as speakers come at this level.

It is available in three finishes - walnut, matte black or matte white - and looks smart regardless of the option chosen.

A rear slot-shaped port means they shouldn't be placed too close to the wall

Echoing the character of its manufacturer, this isn't a design that dazzles with its technology or appearance, but exudes a quiet aura of solid functionality that appeals to us hugely. This speaker's build quality is impressive. The cabinet uses a constrained-layer construction that combines 18mm MDF with bitumen to give a rigid and well-controlled foundation for the drive units to work from.

The attention to detail is pleasing, with neat, crisp cabinet edges and understated cosmetics that avoid the visual clutter of most rival designs.

The AE300 Mk2 is a two-way speaker that combines a large 29mm fabric-dome tweeter with a relatively small 12cm paper/coconut fibre mid/bass, a unit that leans heavily on the lessons learned during the development of Acoustic Energy's high-end Corinium range. The two drive units cross over at a relatively high 3.5kHz, and the result is a middling 86dB/W/m sensitivity and a nominal 6-ohm impedance.

Designed for smaller rooms

We wouldn't get too hung up on the fact that the AE300 Mk2's impedance is quoted as being a little lower than that of some rivals. The speaker's mostly benign impedance curve ensures that any decent price-compatible amplifier will be able to drive them properly. That certainly proves the case when we try both the Arcam A5 integrated amplifier (£749) and the Rega Brio Mk7 (£799).

These speakers have a rear slot-shaped port and so shouldn't be positioned back up against a wall or in a corner. In our 3 x 7 x 5m (hwd) test room, they work best around 30-40cm out into the room, but have enough control and grip in the bass to be positioned a little closer, if you need to,

although the stereo imaging and overall transparency suffer a little if you do.

Ideally, the speakers should be angled just a little towards the main listening position to firm up the stereo soundstaging and optimise focus. They are designed to work best in small to medium-sized rooms. If anything, our test room is a little on the large side for optimal results.

The quality of a speaker stand can make or break the performance of a standmounter design. Make sure you use a support that lifts the tweeter to around ear level at the listening position for the best results. We use a pair of Custom Design FS104 Signature, which work well.

Slow burners

The Acoustic Energy AE300 Mk2's performance is the very definition of a slow burner. Our initial impression is one of a competent but unremarkable performer, but over time, we find going back to almost any other speaker that costs similar money a bit of a chore.

They are skilfully balanced, being unfussy enough to work well with streaming amplifiers such as the Ruark Audio R610 while having the stretch to show the benefits of moving to Naim's much pricier Nait XS3 integrated.

Of course, given the price point, we suspect more than a few pairs of AE300 Mk2 will end up being driven by the aforementioned Arcam and Rega amplifiers, and these are the pairings we concentrate on most throughout our test process. Our main sources are Naim's ND555/555 PS DR and a Cyrus CDi CD player.

Regardless of partnering equipment, we find much to like here. The AE300 Mk2 have poise and control. Feed them a demanding recording such as Michael



"They don't try to bite off more than they can chew, and in the process deliver a superbly judged sound that works well across genres"

STEREO SPEAKERS £649-£699



Jackson's *Off The Wall* and they don't sound out of their depth. There is an excellent level of detail, but it is presented in a natural and unforced manner.

Smoother and more refined

Our current benchmark at this price are the Bowers & Wilkins 606 S3, and these certainly deliver the music with more bombast, and initially it seems more clarity too. But as we listen longer, it becomes clear that much of that impression stems from the 606 S3's brighter and more etched sounding treble.

The Acoustic Energy pair are smoother, more refined, and when you listen longer, it is clear that they sound more natural too. Jackson's voice comes through with convincing passion and urgency, while high-frequency sounds shimmer rather than sizzle.

The AE300 Mk2's dynamics are strong too, as shown by the way these speakers handle the hard-charging *Burn This Disco Out*. When reproduced correctly, this song has a feeling of almost unstoppable momentum, and it's something that these speakers convey superbly. Rhythms come through with drive while bass is rendered with uncommon control and articulation.

The paper/coconut fibre mid/bass unit is relatively small at 12cm

These standmounters don't produce the most powerful lows around, but what they do deliver is balanced and agile. Given the kinds of rooms and positioning they are likely to be found in, that makes perfect sense.

We swap musical genres to *The Planets Suite* by Holst, and the AE300 Mk2s show their cultured side with even-handed tonality and the ability to render instrumental textures with skill. They dig up plenty of information and present it in an organised and refined way. They have the composure to deal with the savage crescendos of *Mars* and enough authority to convey the sheer majesty of *Jupiter*.

Stereo imaging is good for the price, and the soundstage is layered with precision. When we close our eyes, the speakers are

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★

hard to locate, which speaks well of their constrained-layer cabinet construction as much as their well-judged dispersion.

These Acoustic Energy AE300 Mk2 are up against some tough competition, but we feel their controlled and detailed presentation serves them well. They don't try to bite off more than they can chew, and in the process deliver a superbly judged sound that works well across musical genres and with a wide range of electronics. If you are looking for a pair of standmounters at this price, put these high on your shortlist.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

SOUND
★★★★★
BUILD
★★★★★
COMPATIBILITY
★★★★★

FOR
• Unfussy and nicely balanced nature
• Lovely integration between drivers
• Good detail and controlled bass

AGAINST
• Tough competition
• Matte finish on our review sample shows up finger marks easily

VERDICT
Looking for unfussy but hugely talented standmounters at under a grand? These are a great place to start

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