



Hi-Fi Choice
RECOMMENDED

Little wonder

Looking for a standmount that's small but perfectly formed? **David Price** reckons the new AE100 might just fit the bill

Acoustic Energy is back. Not that it ever actually went away you understand, but the company has had a recent change of ownership – effectively undergoing a management buyout. It is now all British again and free to go its own way, as it celebrates its 30th anniversary. The 100-series got off to a bang with the new range-topping AE109 floorstander (HFC 425), and now it's the turn of the baby of the range, the AE100.

Very much an entry-level product, it's not the first AE product to have this moniker. Confusingly, the original was launched in the nineties, and had a 120mm paper cone mid/bass driver and fabric dome tweeter in a cabinet about the same size as the classic AE1. This one has a smaller mid/bass unit, but follows many of the original design cues inasmuch as it isn't fancily styled with dramatically shaped cabinets or any other such fripperies. Instead Acoustic Energy

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy AE100
ORIGIN
Malaysia
TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker
WEIGHT
4.5kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
270 x 160 x 240mm
FEATURES
• 28mm tweeter
• 102mm mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m
DISTRIBUTOR
Acoustic Energy
TELEPHONE
01285 654432
WEBSITE
acoustic-energy.co.uk

has concentrated on getting the best possible sound given the budget, delivering it in a modest-looking but not unattractive package. There is a number of “evolutionary changes” over its AE101 predecessor, the most obvious being the WDT waveguide which is said to reshape high-frequency soundwaves for better room integration. At the other end of the frequency spectrum, a new slotted duct port located at the rear of the cabinet is claimed to reduce midband coloration. The cabinet is made from 18mm-thick MDF, and comes in a choice of walnut vinyl veneer and satin black, with magnetic grilles.

The 28mm fabric dome tweeter claims to reach 35kHz, while the 102mm coated paper coned long-throw mid/bass unit takes things down to a 45Hz. The drivers transition at 3.6kHz, thanks to the seven-element crossover. The speaker

was designed to work in a range of rooms, and takes to my largish space well – requiring a pair of 24in stands and a slight toe-in. The AE100 can be run close to the boundary wall; in my room it is 15cm out.

Sound quality

The great thing about a small speaker is that by virtue of its size, it starts off with fewer flaws than a large one has baked in. Because the cabinet is smaller and so less likely to flex, the bass has a fighting chance to start and stop in time with the music. And that's the first thing that stands out about the AE100 – it's a really propulsive sounding thing. Other highlights include a pleasing tonal balance, and the ability to throw images into the room far better than you might expect given its dimensions.

I kick things off with some simple but beautifully crafted modern pop in the shape of Daft Punk's *Get Lucky*. The AE100 is lots of fun. Its bass is really 'boppy' sounding – bouncy and fluid. This indelibly stamps itself on to

It doesn't advertise its failings, so you're able to concentrate on the music first

whatever type of music you choose to play. While not exactly a Quad electrostatic, it's far more open in the midband than many would expect from an entry-level release. It really lets me into the wonderful world of Nile Rodgers' great rhythm guitar playing, and seems to love showing how tightly it syncopates with the snare and cymbal work.

Most tweeters on £200 mini monitors are best seen but not heard – yet the AE100 manages surprisingly well. The treble unit isn't half bad, giving quite a sparkling rendition of Elvis Costello's *Watching The Detectives*. There is no obvious coarseness and it integrates pretty seamlessly with the mid/bass driver, giving a smooth vocal sound just at the point where two-way speakers traditionally leave their comfort zone. It might not have a wonderfully lustrous high treble, but it's more atmospheric than others I've heard at the price and doesn't constantly remind you that you're listening to a cheap product. The overall effect is great; sounding punchy and articulate with lots of energy and articulation – plus a satisfying sheen.

It is surprisingly dynamic given its tiny mid/bass driver. It can't move massive amounts of air, but still has a

IN SIGHT



- 1 28mm tweeter
- 2 Slotted rear port
- 3 Binding posts
- 4 102mm mid/bass driver

go – it sounds less compressed than you might imagine. It catches the dynamics of The Long Ryders' *Capturing The Flag* in all the song's glory; working hard to communicate the subtle accenting of the playing, but with a fair stab at hanging together on crescendos too. This makes for a jaunty and expressive sound. At the same time it doesn't advertise its failings, so you're able to concentrate on the music first.

In terms of stereo imaging, small speakers have the instant advantage of having their drive units very close together – which makes for a more seamless sound. Acoustic Energy says it has done a lot of additional work on the phase matching of the drivers, and it shows. The soundstage is wide; orchestral instruments are located accurately and remain stable when the programme material gets louder. The downside is that in terms of depth perspective everything is fairly close to the plane of the speakers; you don't get a wonderfully three-dimensional feel that more expensive designs bring. All the same, the AE100's combination of speed, taut and lithe bass and open midband, make Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Symphony No.2* (London Philharmonic, Bernard Haitink) an unexpected pleasure. It is a little opaque in the midband in absolute terms, and inevitably lacks an extended, grumbling bass, but still it makes the music great fun.

Any £200 standmounter is going to be a long way from accurate, but I am impressed by the way it makes up for this in other ways; M's *Moonlight And Muzak* is a case in point. This is a well produced slice of

HOW IT COMPARES

There are many £200 baby bookshelf speakers, but Q Acoustics 3020 (HFC 402) is one of the best. Like the AE100, it's a great all-rounder. Obviously, no small speaker is going to have seismic bass, but the 3020 doesn't have any engineered-in humps to make it appear stronger. The AE100 is a little less extended deep down, but tighter. Going up into the midband the AE is more dynamic with better low-level detail. The 3020's cabinet seems to add a little bit more coloration here. Both speakers do well in the treble, but the AE again just pips it to the post, with a sweeter and more airy sound.

pop with a powerful bassline and expansive recorded acoustic. The AE100 tells me about both in no uncertain terms, giving a really fluid and engaging sound. As the volume goes up, I begin to become aware of the boxes joining in with the party. This speaker is a little coloured in a sympathetic way that doesn't detract from the music – there's a touch of thrum to the upper bass and lower mid but it never ceases to charm.

Conclusion

Competition is fierce at this price point, yet the AE100 holds its own. Its slightly warm, subtly euphonic nature never fails to make friends, and even though it has some limitations (as you'd expect from a product such as this), its breezy and amiable nature means you never dwell on the downsides. Partner it with a decent amplifier that has a fair deal of power, and a smooth and detailed source, and you may find yourself taking to the AE100 in a way you never thought you would ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

LIKE: Spacious, musical sound that's full of pep
DISLIKE: Limited bass extension, inevitably
WE SAY: Great entry-level standmount loudspeaker with plenty of charm

OVERALL

★★★★★