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Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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LOUD AND CLEAR

Acoustic Energy's AE320 floorstanders are a mid-price sensation



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DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Energy
AE320

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
26kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
175 x 1,000 x 320mm

FEATURES
• 1x 28mm
dome tweeter
• 1x 130mm
midrange driver
• 2x 130mm
mid/bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

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but the latter's aluminium tweeter dome works out weighing roughly the same as the high-end carbon fibre variant. This is because a thinner aluminium dome is possible.

The 28mm aluminium dome tweeter has the company's so-called Wide Dispersion Technology waveguide. This shapes the output of the tweeter to work better with the other drivers, resulting in a wider sweet spot, apparently. It's paired to the three 130mm mid/bass drivers, which sport a brand new ceramic aluminium sandwich cone developed for the 300 Series. It's said to be a very long-throw design for better dynamics and power handling, and has a flatter profile cone than the previous generation for smoother break-up and better dispersion.

The cabinet is hard to miss, because there's so much of it. It's made from 18mm-thick MDF and comes with a choice of Piano Gloss White, Piano Gloss Black and Real Walnut wood veneer finishes. It is carefully braced inside and the base is preloaded with



The sound is big, pile-driving and raucous, without getting out of control

what Acoustic Energy calls: "an inert mass material" – ie sand – which adds damping and reduces cabinet colouration. A set of 8mm floor spikes come supplied.

"The AE320's crossover uses a mix of first and second order filters similar to the AE520," James Luce explains. "It has an impedance correction circuit on the midrange to prevent unwanted resonances. High voltage film caps, a mixture of wirewound and metal oxide resistors are used with air core inductors on key elements."

It's really interesting to see more manufacturers using slot-shaped reflex ports; Acoustic Energy was an early adopter and so it's no surprise to see one here. It vents to the rear, but appears to create less of a boom near the rear boundary wall than most conventional back-firing bass ports. It's tuned to 42Hz. "Our slot port reduces audible chuffing compared to a circular port because it's less susceptible to jetting, which is a high speed gush of air in the middle of a round port which generates a lot of the extra noise", says James Luce. "The walls of the slot port dampen the airflow due to friction in the boundary layer, which slows airspeed and prevents the jet from forming. This improves the time

Big fun

Can Acoustic Energy's new AE320 successfully plug the gap between its budget and premium range? **Nick Tate** decides

Two or so years ago, the hi-fi press was waxing lyrical about Acoustic Energy's (then) new top-end 500 series. The 509 was a particularly good floorstander and affordable too at around £2,300. Since then its cost has gone up and that has left a gap in the mid-price market into which the AE320 steps.

The idea, according to Acoustic Energy's Mat Spandl, is to deliver most of what the 500 series speakers do, but at a more affordable price.

His colleague James Luce expands on the theme, adding: "It is generally aimed at the customer with a medium-to-large sized listening space for which the smaller AE309 might not quite have the authority to drive".

Inevitably the A320 misses out on what I think is the star attraction of the 500 series, namely the carbon fibre dome tweeter and carbon fibre coned midrange and bass drivers. According to James, the latter two are around half the weight of the aluminium cones used in the AE320,

domain response by dampening the tuning peak and reducing ringing.”

Sound quality

Acoustic Energy’s speakers have always been voiced to sound fun and the tradition continues here. The question is: how much fun and also, how much accuracy has been sacrificed? The answers are a lot, and not too much, in that order.

The most striking aspect of its sound is its sheer physicality – considering its price, at least. Put a pair on the end of even a middle-powered integrated and it delivers a lot of punch, high sound pressure levels and a visceral smack in the face. Van Halen’s *Jump* is quite a thing to hear, sounding big, pile-driving and raucous, without getting out of control or losing too much detail. That grinding bassline and thick analogue synthesiser glide sound seriously menacing at the high volume levels that I play this track at. The drum kit work is wonderfully punchy, with those famous pan-rolls thumping out like machine gun bullets. The AE320 properly catches the sheer pomp of this song and the overblown nature of its production.

In terms of its ability to make a big splash sonically, this is probably the loudest £1,600 floorstander that money can buy. Downwind of my reference 110W RMS per channel Exposure 3510 integrated, driven by a Chord Hugo TT2 (HFC 468) DAC, things goes to crazy-loud levels with the AE320 soaking the power up and



How It Compares
Bowers & Wilkins’ £1,500 603 S2 Anniversary Edition (HFC 474) is a fascinating contrast. It’s a more ‘grown-up’ sounding speaker, in that it’s more discreet, controlled, measured and refined. It does everything well and nothing badly. It’s about as neutral as you’ll get at the price, yet pumps out vast amounts of decibels in a controlled way. But it’s simply not as much fun as the AE320; it lacks its love of live music and enthusiasm. Its bass isn’t as tuneful, its midband not as expressive. See which you prefer.

The MDF cabinet comes in Piano Gloss White, Piano Gloss Black and Real Walnut wood veneer finishes

dishing out a huge stadium rock sound. Yet on slightly less over-the-top pop like Duran Duran’s *Rio*, it still works very well. This is a pretty slick bit of production that’s less compressed than the Van Halen song. The floorstander is transparent enough to tell me so and allows me to hear some of the production’s more subtle touches, like Simon Le Bon’s doubled-up, multi-tracked vocals. The AE320 proves a little less detailed than the 500 range, but not dramatically so and certainly not enough to spoil the music.

On this front, the AE320 scores extremely highly. You don’t just need to play it at high levels to enjoy it, it’s great fun at sensible volumes too. Its rendition of Randy Crawford’s *You Might Need Somebody* is very rousing. The AE320 captures her voice smoothly, including much of its coiled-spring tension and propensity to suddenly start belting out parts of the lyrics. I

The mid/bass driver is a long-throw design for better dynamics and power handling

hear fairly little in the way of nasality in the midband, plus a smooth crossover from treble down to mid and then bass, and an impressive lack of bass boom in the room. Despite this more subtle programme material, the Acoustic Energy pulls me into the music with an urgency and commitment that I don’t expect from designs at this price.

It’s very decent at stereo imaging, although not quite the best at the price. The electric guitar far stage right on Dodgy’s *Staying Out For The Summer* is well separated from the rest of the mix and the vocals command the central stereo space. But stage depth could be a little better; the AE320 tends to push the music forward and out at you a bit. This makes it enjoyably immediate, but not as accurate as its AE509 (HFC 456) or AE520 (HFC 468) siblings. Certainly with classical music, you’re more aware of its humble price point than with pop or rock. The recorded acoustic inside the concert hall used for a Deutsche Grammophon recording of Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony* isn’t quite as spacious as it can be. Yet this said, the music is as much fun as ever.

The tweeter proves a real class act; I’ve heard a lot worse in speakers costing this much. It’s surprisingly atmospheric and never grates with any of the material I feed it. At the other end of the frequency spectrum, this speaker goes down very low, and is enjoyably tuneful too. Although not



quite up to a good infinite baffle design in its precision and transient speed, the AE320’s bottom end is surprisingly taut and pretty much in time with events happening further up the musical scale.

In absolute terms, you can hear the cabinet a little bit; there’s a very subtle light thrum in the midband that’s also audible on pretty much all of its price rivals. It takes away a tiny bit of low-level resolution and transparency, but at this price that’s more than excusable. The real test is whether it gets the basics right, and the answer is a resounding yes.

Conclusion

Acoustic Energy’s new AE320 does an awful lot at the price. It gives an incredibly big and strong sound for the money, yet isn’t crude and doesn’t misbehave in any other respect. It’s a very good all-rounder, with nothing whatsoever about it that lets the side down at all – compared with rivals. Best of all, it makes music fun; pair it with a decent integrated amp and a good DAC and you’ve got a very grown-up sound for not too much money ●

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OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Powerful, engaging, punchy, dynamic
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Not quite as sophisticated as some
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Highly enjoyable affordable floorstanding option
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	

OVERALL

