



Acoustic Energy AE320

SENSIBLY-PRICED, BEAUTIFULLY FINISHED AND SLENDER ENOUGH TO FIT INTO MANY A ROOM, THESE BRITISH-MADE FLOORSTANDERS SOUND FINE, TOO

It's hard to believe that it was way back in 1987 that a new British loudspeaker company called Acoustic Energy burst on to the scene with the compact AE1 loudspeaker, which garnered much praise and sold like the proverbial hot cakes. In 1994 the company accepted a partnership with an overseas investor and like many other British brands moved some manufacturing to the Far East, at the same time expanding its sales and marketing activities around the world.

Today, the company is once again fully British-owned, and headquartered in the Cotswold town of Tetbury. Manufacturing is still carried out in China, under close quality control by the UK directors, but they're working on plans to return manufacturing to Europe. Acoustic Energy has never lost its commitment to the design and manufacture of loudspeakers and has avoided the temptation to branch out into electronics or other distractions.

Thus it was that in early December one of the aforementioned directors loaded a pair of the company's £1600 AE320 slim floorstanding loudspeakers into his car and delivered them to Kelly Towers. The car in question was a three-door Mini, so that was impressive: as a fellow Mini owner, it's good to know that our choice of vehicle is not as impractical as it might appear!

Unboxed and spiked, the speakers were carefully positioned in what I have determined is the sweet spot for loudspeaker placement in our 14'x12' lounge: toed in towards my listening chair, the inside rear corners are 58cm from the rear wall. From the listening position, and with the black grilles attached

the AE320s don't visually overpower the senses: at a metre tall, 17.5cm wide and 32cm deep, these are substantial enclosures but drew no word of complaint from Mrs Kelly, which is always good news!

The review pair were finished in a very good-looking walnut veneer over 18mm MDF panels, the cabinet using proprietary bracing technology trickled down from the company's Reference Series, while its base is pre-loaded with what's described as "an inert mass material". This adds damping to reduce cabinet colourations, and also make the AE320 very stable, meaning it doesn't need a plinth, aiding the impression of slimness.

The speaker certainly feels very 'planted' on its spikes on a carpeted hard floor: we have neither small children or dogs, but my sense was that the AE320s would be a safe choice where the listening space is sometimes shared with smaller creatures.

There are four drive units arranged vertically: three 13cm midrange and bass drivers, custom-made for Acoustic Energy, and above those a 28mm aluminium tweeter. The main drivers are made of a ceramic/aluminium sandwich material, with an ultra-

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Specifications

Acoustic Energy AE320

Type	Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Price	£1600/pr
Drivers	28mm dome tweeter, 13cm ceramic/aluminium midrange, 2x 13cm ceramic/aluminium woofers
Sensitivity	90dB/W/m
Frequency response	35Hz-30kHz
Impedance	8 ohms
Dimensions (HxWxD)	100x17.5x32cm

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shallow profile and a high-force long-throw motor system, designed for improved dispersion, extended bass slam and overall efficiency. The tweeter is capable of handling high power levels but with low resonance behavior, and employs the company's Wide Dispersion Technology waveguide.

On the back panel there is a pair of multiway binding posts near the base and – about halfway up – a slot-shaped bass port tuned to 42Hz. Much thought has gone into the design of this port, and its shape was chosen to help obviate the chuffing sound that can give less well considered port designs an audible and unwelcome sound signature.

Impedance correction

The crossover deployed in the AE320 is another example of the attention to detail lavished on this design: the nominal impedance of the loudspeaker is 8 ohms and the crossover is designed with an impedance correction circuit to ensure that the lowest impedance drop (at 150Hz) is held to 4.8 ohms, with impedance for the most part an easy 6 or 7 ohms. As such this is not be a demanding

load for any mainstream amplifier. With sensitivity quoted at a high 90dB/W, they should be easy to drive with any decent amplifier in the 25-200W power range.

The Listening Experience

So much for the thinking behind the AE320. I was keen to hear what all that design would mean when I actually sat down to listen using my current amplifier of choice, the Lyngdorf TDA13400 (rated at 200W per channel into 8ohms), and the excellent Audioquest Robin Hood speaker cables. The rest of the system consisted of a Linn Sondek LP12 Klimax and a Leema Acoustics Sirius Music server. I started in the Lyngdorf's Bypass mode, which meant that the RoomPerfect correction software was not used.

I'd been told that the sample AE320s had not had much running time before they were delivered so I set them to run for several days using various Qobuz playlists, and tried to avoid spending time listening critically. However I did note a sense of musicality even before the drive units had a chance to 'run in' which boded well for the coming weeks. In the initial phase however the tightness of the components was apparent and I resisted the temptation to turn up the volume until I felt that the sound had opened enough for that to be done without over-stressing the components.

Audible improvement

Once the first week had gone by there was an audible improvement, and I felt that it was now time to learn the real capabilities these loudspeakers. I began by listening to ripped FLAC files from the Leema Sirius. It was December so I thought I would start with Handel's *Messiah*, performed by The Sixteen under Harry Christophers, ripped from the Coro CD. Christophers takes this work at a brisk pace and the music poured forth from the AE320 with a terrific sense of a very clear and detailed soundstage, within which every instrumental section and every voice had its own space, yet arrived at my ears as an enveloping musical experience. An impressive start.

From there I played music from a large number of albums stored on the Sirius hard drive, and all exhibited the same musicality, the same even-handedness, across the frequency spectrum, with bass digging deep. The speakers claim extension down to 35Hz, but some organ pieces which I played felt as if they went even deeper than that. The mid and upper registers sounded very natural, with just the right amount of 'air' around the top end notes, and no edginess in the higher frequencies: as a result the AE320s are a very relaxing listen even over extended periods. This has not always been my experience with metal-



domed tweeters, but the designers at Acoustic Energy have done a fine job in blending the whole frequency spectrum seamlessly.

The intimate emotional work of the late Nick Drake was covered extremely well, drawing me into the singer's world completely. I have his three albums in a Japanese SHM-CD boxset, and the FLAC files on the Sirius came through with great realism, reminding me again what a tragic loss we suffered when he lost his life in November 1974.

Another acoustic guitarist and singer lost too young was John Martyn, who passed away back in 2009. Again a rip of a 3CD retrospective of his work drew me into the heart of his music, highlighting his dazzling fretboard skills as well as extraordinary song-writing. Through the AE320s I had a personal recital from this eccentric genius.

Let's rock – Texas-style

Switching to the rockier end of the musical spectrum, ZZ Top's evergreen *La Grange*, from their *Tres Hombres* album, had a real bite to it. From Billy F Gibbon's growling vocals through Frank Beard's thunderous drum break, the AE320s encouraged me to crank up the volume to levels which would have brought a rapid rebuke had I not been home alone. If anybody asks you why we listen to "old" music, play them this track on your system – no words should be needed.

Moving to vinyl replay, the Linn Ekstatik cartridge fitted to the Ekos SE arm on the Klimax LP12 has been a revelation, digging out details from my collection which had previously passed me by, and with a level of bass quality which I have never previously enjoyed from vinyl replay in my system. Through the AE320s this signal was presented beautifully, leading to many extended listening periods. I played rock, blues, jazz, pop, classical and choral music, and the AE320s never failed to engage and delight.

We listen to television through our two-channel system, and here too the AE320s did an admirable job with a wide range of content. The three dimensional soundstage worked very well with film soundtracks as well as with more sober news and current affairs content. Similarly, when I occasionally streamed BBC Radio 4, spoken-word programmes came to life through this system.

After several weeks of happy listening to the AE320s with the Lyngdorf amplifier in its Bypass mode, I decided to run the Lyngdorf RoomPerfect software. This is a very straightforward procedure, with a measurement taken at the listening position using the supplied high sensitivity microphone, followed by several more with the microphone stationed at random positions and heights. With that done, I switched to listening with RoomPerfect

engaged. The difference was minimal, which indicated to me that the AE320s are very well designed and had very few audible vices. For the rest of the review I left RoomPerfect switched on but it really wasn't doing anything I could hear.

I rather wish I had a more mainstream amplifier on hand as well as the Lyngdorf: I think the AE320s would really shine through something like the Naim Supernait 3, which I reviewed a couple of years ago, delivering the legendary Naim attributes of pace, rhythm and timing with the appropriate verve. It transpires that Acoustic Energy is more than just a brand name – it is a mission statement.

Running RoomPerfect also allowed me to add my REL 305SE subwoofer into the system – normally quite a time-consuming process, but one the software makes it very easy indeed. I chose to cross over to the REL at 60Hz, well above the 35Hz lower limit of the AE320s, and the result was interesting although unsurprising.

As I find with most loudspeakers, a subwoofer is by no means essential with these floorstanders., but with the REL in play I felt the performance was raised another notch, and not just at the low end. The sound across the frequency spectrum seemed a little bigger, a little fuller.

The Lyngdorf is a very even handed, uncoloured amplifier, which simply amplifies the signal from the source to the loudspeakers without adding or subtracting anything, making it a good reference for a reviewer. It is therefore with confidence that I am able to say that the AE320s are an excellent all round loudspeaker, with or without a subwoofer, capable of switching effortlessly from raucous rock to quiet classical music, and should partner very well with a wide range of amplification, including some which on paper should be a league or two above them.

Conclusion

For the past few years I have been a very happy user of standmount loudspeakers: they seem to work well in my relatively modestly-sized room, and are not too big to draw opprobrium from Mrs Kelly. My current pair retail at somewhere close to £4,000, without stands. By comparison these Acoustic Energy floor standers are currently listed at £1600, and a subwoofer is by no means necessary – the AE320s offer plenty of tuneful bass without additional help. A wide range of amplifiers should work well too, allowing the purchaser to build a very enjoyable system for a relatively modest outlay.

The AE320s will soon be collected from Kelly Towers but I shan't soon forget them. It is hard therefore not to laud them as a bonafide audio bargain – and very easy and an absolute pleasure to recommend them wholeheartedly.

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