

Acoustic Energy AE1 Classic



£845

IMAGINE PITTING A 1980s Ford Escort up against 2006 versions of a VW Golf. Could it compete? No chance! Twenty years is a long time in any industry, and hi-fi is no different. Yet the original AE1 was no ordinary speaker, so don't expect the outcome to be so negative.

The AE1s first surfaced in the mid-1980s, stunning the market with their exceptional sound, high price and cutting-edge engineering, single-handedly establishing Acoustic Energy as a serious speaker brand. Even today, the originals are highly sought after on the secondhand market, which is why Acoustic Energy has chosen to reissue the speaker after all this time.

Impressive colours and control

It's a measure of just how far ahead of the competition the AE1 was that it's not embarrassed in this test. More than that, in many sonic areas these speakers are right up with the class-leaders. It's an astonishing achievement for such an elderly design. Those twin metal drivers still blend seamlessly, projecting the sound with immense authority. They go loud, too. Play Radiohead's *Paranoid*

FOR

An authoritative, punchy sound; go loud; powerful bass for their size

AGAINST

Don't capture subtleties as well as newer rivals

VERDICT

The AE1s are true classics, still good enough to compete with the best almost two decades on

Android at neighbour-rattling levels, and the AE1s stay calm and composed. There's no sign of edginess or compression. In fact, we submit before they do.

Bass is strong, too; the speakers giving surprising weight. You'll need solid, heavy stands and a muscular amp, but get it right and the scale and punch are impressive. Stereo-imaging is expansive and focused also, provided the speakers are at least 30cm out in the room. Finally, the tonal balance is commendably even.

Weaknesses? Compared to newer rivals, the AE1s don't quite capture subtle nuances in a performance, be it Jill Scott's immaculate vocals on *Beautifully Human* or the LSO's passionate rendering of *Tragic* from Mahler's *Symphony*

"The AE1s are classics, still good enough to compete with the best decades on"

No.6. The result is the emotion in the music isn't communicated as clearly as it should be. Detail and low-level dynamics fall short of the best at this price level.

The blunt conclusion is that you can buy a better performance for the money. Even so, it's a measure of the original AE1s' design that it can still compete so well with newer rivals. Turns out it was less of an Escort, more of a Porsche 911.



Punchy and authoritative, these AE1s conceal the fact that their design is almost 20 years old

ATC SCM 11



£850

SOMETIMES HI-FI FORCES you to make a choice: between accuracy and entertainment. This *Group Test* demands you make such a decision. There are speakers here that'll do a better job with flawed recordings than these – those that'll round off the rough edges and make the sound more

"No other speaker renders Mahler's Symphony No.6 with such utter precision"

palatable – but the ATCs don't do that: they give the music to you straight. These SCM 11s remain faithful to the recording: warts and all. You'll hear the flaws all right, but they won't be exaggerated, either.

A neutral tonal balance is just one part of the equation. Class-leading resolution is another. No other speaker in this test renders the instruments in Mahler's *Symphony No.6* with such precision, or can unravel the intricacies of Radiohead's *Electioneering* with such ease. Think of all the hi-fi qualities we normally talk about: timing, dynamics,

FOR

Brilliant all-round sound; transparent; unfussy about positioning; rugged build

AGAINST

Not at their best at low volume levels; need a powerful amp

VERDICT

These ATCs set a sky-high standard for the rest of this group to try and match

scale... the list goes on. In each area the ATC is either the best, or positioned just behind the champ in that discipline.

The result of such all-round musical talent is speakers that'll play all types of music with equal ease. They're not particularly fussy about positioning, either. A sealed cabinet – the only one in this test – helps the low-end stay controlled close to a wall, and gives the SCM 11s the kind of tuneful, articulate bass most ported speakers can only dream of. Yes, some rivals have more bass – and we're not just talking about floorstanders – but better-quality bass? No.

ATCs take you away to ecstasy

Build quality is as rugged as you might expect from a manufacturer so closely linked to the pro-audio market (where equipment is used and abused, yet still expected to work year after year).

Flaws? These speakers shine brightest at medium volumes and above. At low settings they lose too much life for our liking. They're also insensitive, so need at least 100 watts per channel to motor.

That's all we can moan about. Don't buy anything else near this price without trying the SCM 11s out first. We love 'em!

The ATCs reproduce sound more clearly and faithfully than any other speakers in this test

