



AE's big-box loudspeaker range is designed with high-end home cinema in mind

Bringing bulk back in style

Jim Hill goes large with Acoustic Energy's range-topping super-sized Aelite speaker package, and decides it's time to get a bigger room



Speaker manufacturers, Acoustic Energy included, have been preoccupied in recent years with turning out compact and ostensibly stylish sub/satellite speaker systems to complement the boom in flatscreen TV sales. So, it's refreshing to see some good old fashioned coffin-boxes on the scene again. The unapologetically massive Aelite speakers are here to remind us just what we have been missing.

Acoustic Energy first struck gold with the compact AE1 bookshelf speaker in 1988, and then again more recently with the tiny Aego system. The latter employed some of the smallest satellite speakers in the business in an attempt to deliver surround sound designer flatscreen entertainment systems. The Aelite range, however, operates at the other end of the size spectrum and, as the name suggests, sits at the top of AE's product range. Clearly you'll need a fairly large cinema or media room to accommodate them.

However, **the sonic advantages of a large cabinet are considerable.**

A voluminous enclosure can generate the kind of room-filling drama that home cinema thrives on; you expect far more accurate stereo imaging from floorstanders than satellite speakers, making them much more musical too.

When the Aelite's have taken up residence in my listening room, reactions from friends to their

aesthetic appeal have ranged from 'ooh, lush' to 'yuk, hideous', so it's evidently a matter of taste. Even the bookshelf Aelite One surrounds are undeniably bulky, but their tapered cabinets are shapely at the same time – and all are beautifully put together from heavy MDF and expertly finished in acres of real wood veneer.

You can choose from a cherry, as pictured here, birch or, if you still live in the early 1990s, black ash finish.

Keeping in shape

The sculpted shape improves the speaker's internal acoustics by reducing the standing sound waves that can build up in a square-sided cabinet.

The Aelite Three, a towering three-way floorstander, weighs in at 18kg thanks to its huge, braced cabinet, four drive units and heavy plinth. The three metal-cone drive units are recognisable by AE's signature pointy dust caps, while the 28mm neodymium tweeter is a soft fabric dome design in plastic housing.

The same voice-matched drivers are found in the other speakers too. At the rear are three ports, one for each enclosed section, which can be tuned with a foam bung. Tuning in this way will help control the bass if you're room is small.

The centre channel – so important in a 5.1 home cinema setup – uses the same voice-matched tweeter and 118mm midrange drivers. It too is hefty

AV/CV

Product:
5.1 speaker array with performance in mind

Positioning:
Flanked by AE's Reference and Linear ranges

Peers:
Jamo Concert C809
Focal Chorus 800 Series

and rear-ported, so you won't be able to push it up against the wall. Like the rest of the speakers, it needs room to breathe.

Woofers time

As a stereo pair, you wouldn't dream of adding a subwoofer to the Aelite Threes, but in a home cinema situation, it always pays to have a dedicated LFE channel, and the Aelite sub is well equipped for the job. Its front firing 8.75in pulp cone is driven by a 200W amplifier and controlled by motorised volume and frequency knobs, so you can tune it from your armchair. There's no auto-off circuit, so eco-warriors should remember to switch it off at night.

As a system, the Aelite team forms quite a formidable soundstage. None of the boxes are volume-shy and they like to be driven hard, in this case by my reference Denon AVC-A11SR.

In stereo mode, the Aelite Threes thrive on a bi-wired connection to the amp – all of the speakers have bi-wire terminals – and really sing with guitar-based albums like *What's the Story (Morning Glory)* by Oasis on Super Audio CD. There's real depth and focus and palpable presence in the Mancunian vocals.

In five-channel mode – this is a multichannel SACD – your listening room is effectively turned into a live venue by the visceral performance. The production itself is intentionally brash and the result here is edgy in a good way. >



Down 'n' dirty: The Aelite sub adds some stomach-churning LFE to the system

The balance here falls only slightly on the bright side of neutral. Try a smoother mix, like Groove Armada's *Vertigo* album and the fast, tight bass is more appreciable. On SACD again, this excellent 5.1 mix is another good way to demonstrate how well the component speakers work together.

Getting cinematic

Although good with music, it's with movie soundtracks that this package really shines, though. The slightly forward treble and mid-frequencies lend action movie soundtracks the enthusiasm and crunching detail that is so important. With the immaculately-produced *Casino Royale* soundtrack, for instance, subtle sound effects and dialogue are never lost amid bass-heavy explosions.

The Bond soundtrack, as with most movies, puts a lot of emphasis on the centre channel

and the Aelite Centre has no problems with that. It's another chunky box, which is able to shift a lot of air, and the three drive units make the most of this. The result is a powerful dialogue channel that never lets down the frontal soundstage.

The low frequencies, in particular, bring *Casino Royale* to life. Take the chase sequence in chapter three, for instance. When Bond commandeers a digger to pursue the bomber through a building site, the 8.75in

subwoofer kicks in to reinforce its straining engine. You can feel the LFE channel in your stomach. The intention is to add drama and tension to a crucial scene and it works perhaps better than when I heard it at the cinema.

In my opinion, few current sub/sat systems – now matter how sleekly-designed and living-room-friendly – could have recreated the effect in the same way.

Placement of the speakers turned out to be a key to success. With rear ports all round, the cabinets need room to suck air, which means away from the walls. In my moderate-sized listening room, that's tricky, but important. I found that bunging up two of the ports on the Aelite Threes and attaching the 8mm spikes to the plinths also helped to a degree.

No room to hide

This system from Acoustic Energy won't suit everyone. There's no installing these cabinets behind acoustic walls and in a small home cinema they won't have room to express themselves.

In a large venue however, the Aelite array will truly shine and deliver a thrilling movie performance. At this price, you'd expect musicality too, and it's definitely not all crash, bang wallop. Musically, the Aelites can sing like caged birds. Albeit, very large and heavy wooden ones ●

→ **Specifications**

Aelite Three (fronts)

Drive Units: 25mm HF unit; 110mm MF unit; 2 x 125mm LF units
Frequency Response: 34 Hz-27 kHz
Sensitivity: 89dB
Power Handling: 175W
Dimensions: 230(w) x 920(h) x 297(d)mm
Weight: 18kg

Aelite One (surrounds)

Drive Units: 25mm HF unit; 110mm LF unit
Frequency Response: 40Hz-23kHz
Sensitivity: 89dB
Power Handling: 100W
Dimensions: 186(w) x 291(h) x 231(d)mm
Weight: 6kg

Aelite Centre

Drive Units: 25mm neodymium tweeter
Frequency Response: 55Hz-23kHz
Sensitivity: 90dB
Power Handling: 150W
Dimensions: 450(w) x 180(h) x 297(d)mm
Weight: 8kg

Aelite Sub

Drive Units: 220mm pulp cone
Frequency Response: 26Hz-180kHz
Onboard power: 200W
Power Handling: 200W RMS into 8 ohms
Dimensions: 488(w) x 369(h) x 365(d)mm
Weight: 23kg
Features: Motorised volume and frequency controls



HCC VERDICT

Acoustic Energy Aelite system
 £1,850 Approx

Highs: Sturdy and voluminous cabinets; good scale and dynamics with movies; handsome

Lows: Subwoofer doesn't switch itself off; needs a big room

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5