

American Acoustic Development C880 Loudspeaker

Manufacturer: American Acoustic Development,
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www.aadsound.com

Price: \$1,600/pr

Source: Manufacturer Loan

Reviewer: Gary Lea

The storied life of bassist and designer extraordinaire Phil Jones is the stuff of legends to be sure. I certainly will not wax poetic about what Phil's impact on the world of bass guitarists has been but his unique approach to bass amplification is well known throughout the music industry. He has also made an impact on the world of h-fi loudspeaker design. After studying electronics in college and then music at The Welsh college of Music and Drama while playing bass in various bands in the English bar and nightclub scene, with a dab of BBC studio work thrown in, he became a bit frustrated with the level of equipment available for bass players. Phil began to modify his own equipment in search of the elusive "tone."

He went on to become a pro sound engineer for Vitavox, a respected British loudspeaker company. This led to the formation of his own sound reinforcement company. It was here that he designed a speaker for his own recording near-field use. This speaker went on to become the Acoustic Energy AE1, a legendary small monitor that is lusted after by many audiophiles to this day. The AE speakers have seen use in some fairly notorious settings, not the least of which is Abbey Road studios.

In 1990 Phil moved to the US and worked briefly for Boston Acoustics, designing the Lynnfield series of hi-fi speakers. In 1998 he founded American Acoustic Development, which produces the speaker at the center of this review.

Phil is a true believer in producing products that deliver high quality sound at varyious price points. The C Series represents his attempt to produce a high quality speaker with a lot of slam for a relatively respectable price. At the top of the C Range, the three-way C880 can serve as a home theater speaker or as an entry-level audiophile

speaker. Where it will find its strongest market may well be performing both duties simultaneously. Either way I found it a great opportunity to listen to a speaker priced at the lower end of the spectrum for a change and to see how much bang for the buck one could get. I have listened to Phil's model 7001 Reference Monitor and had hopes of some trickle-down into the C880. I was not disappointed considering the cost difference of nearly \$6,000.

These are not small boxes and you need to have a fairly large room to handle them. The speakers measure 49.3 inches tall by 11.8 inches wide and 14.8 inches deep. They are available in three attractive wood tone vinyl wrap finishes. At these prices it is hard to provide a solid veneer for a speaker this size but the Cherry finish on my review set was very nice with a convincing appearance from a distance of three feet. The speakers weigh 68.5 lbs each so they do require a bit of muscle to move them around. The interesting thing was that when performing the knuckle wrap there seemed to be slightly more resonance from the cabinet than I expected considering the size and weight.

The C880 is a full 3-way design that incorporates two eight-inch woofers (natural fiber with a polymer coating), a 5-inch midrange driver, and a 1-inch titanium dome tweeter. The speakers show an impedance of 6 ohms and will handle from 25 to 250 watts per channel. The sensitivity is rated at 92 db so this is an easy speaker to drive. Stated frequency response is 25 Hz to 25 kHz.

The speakers arrived well packaged. Unpacking and setup were relatively easy considering the size of the speakers. I positioned them in my normal position and hooked them up. I let them run for a few days before sitting down to any critical listening. During the very first listening session I began to hear a buzz coming from the right speaker. It almost sounded like a tube buzz so I began checking the tubes in my amps. Then I realized that it was, in fact, the speaker that was buzzing. Seems AAD had a bad run of midrange drivers.

Once notified of the problem, they immediately sent not only a replacement for the right speaker but also one for the left. As soon as they arrived I pulled out the old drivers and installed the new ones. It was easy and quick to replace both drivers.

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Once that was done I gave them a bit more time to burn in before settling in to do some serious listening. This time there was no buzzing anywhere to be found and I was a happy camper.

Of course a speaker this size needs a bit of room to breathe and to work properly. I set them out so that the front panels were 54 inches from the back wall and 39 inches from each side wall and facing straight forward to begin with. With the speakers spaced at 84 inches from center of tweeter to center of tweeter and 103 inches from my ear in my smallish room the speakers absolutely towered over the listening chair. The drivers are arrayed with the tweeter sandwiched between the midrange and a woofer. This put the midrange at approximately 45 inches from the floor, which is a bit higher than I am used to.

Upon cranking up the C880 it was immediately clear what the virtues of this speaker were. I started out driving them with the Blue Circle solid state 100/101 amp/preamp combination. At 50 watts per channel this was not going to overwhelm the speakers but would be an interesting starting point. Even with this modest input level, they definitely provided a large sense of scale and frequency range that goes impressively deep for a speaker of this price. Thank you 92db sensitivity!

There's a sense of scale to the sound that smaller speakers, certainly not in this price range, simply can't match. Play music with a big sound and you'll hear a big, powerful musical performance. Similarly, run a movie soundtrack through them as I did and you will quickly realize that this speaker can relate a lot of musical detail with a surprising amount of clarity that defies the price. I would think that only the most diehard bass fan would think of adding a subwoofer to plumb those last few hertz. With the new midrange drivers installed and burned in a bit the delivery of the mids was very nice, even and just slightly restrained. However, the highs were a

bit strident compared to most speakers I have been listening to lately and the integration between the highs and the mids seemed to be just slightly off. This was most readily apparent in acoustic music. The speakers gave a good presentation but simply had what appeared to be a slight gap between the mids and highs. I admit that this could be a result of the new mid drivers not being as burned in as the rest of the drivers and a potential buyer should listen for themselves with an understanding that the bump in integration could be due to this pair's anomaly. This aside they did a fine job of handling

most everything thrown at them.

Just for grins I hooked them up to my reference Jolida Music Envoys at 200 tube-driven watts per channel. Talk about overkill, but the C880s handled it all in admirable fashion. With such a high sensitivity rating they do not require big power to get more than satisfying levels out of them.

I listened to a broad cross-section of music on the 880s. I noticed that the real forte of this speaker seemed to be large-scale rock. On Pink Floyd's live *Pulse* CD (Columbia CK67096) the C880 puts you in the action especially with the sound level pushed up a bit. You will not only

hear the music but you will certainly feel it. These speakers push a good deal of air. While the detail and soundstage was not as pinpoint as more expensive speakers, they did present themselves respectably in those areas. On the track "Wish You Were Here," the acoustic guitar came through with the requisite brightness and ring and did not get lost once the bass kicked in. On other tracks the vocals were carried very well, with female vocals seeming a bit more front and center. You could actually pick out Sam Brown's distinctive voice on backup vocals.



Where the speaker fell a bit short was in the reproduction of acoustic jazz. There just did not seem to be the depth of detail and low level resolution that I have grown accustomed to but then there are many speakers that fall short in this area. The C880 acquitted itself well with most other music and the larger the scale the better. Listening to Steely Dan's *Aja* (MCA Records MCAD-37214), on the title track you can really get the feel of Gary Katz's production with the up-front bass and drum tracks. Rhythmically the C880 rocks with the best of them.

One thing that I did with these speakers that I rarely do is that I moved them to my home theater room and hooked them up. Phil had mentioned that they would perform exceptionally well as home theater speakers. This is where it became very apparent to me where the AAD C880 would most likely find its best match and ultimate usefulness. This speaker was tailor-made for front channel home theater applications. I was amazed at just how good they made my movies sound.

For those of you who do not know me I am not that much of a TV guy but I do enjoy a good movie hear (get it?) and there. The short story is that I have a very basic theater setup. These speakers brought a huge improvement to the delivery of the movie soundtrack when I hooked them up. They also rendered the sub fairly useless. It is nice to have one less speaker to deal with in a surround sound setup, especially in these days of Dolby 127.6 channel sound. I settled in to watch *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (New Line Home Entertainment N6354) and was astonished at how the AADs brought the level of involvement up. I was right in the thick of the action as opposed to peering into it from a distance. I am not sure but I truly believed that the speakers somehow reinforced the information coming from the rear channel speakers



and everything seemed so much more "lifelike." The clanging of swords, the footsteps of Orcs marching, and rustling of the trees were all more clear and crisp. I think a surround setup with the matching center and rear channel speakers would be quite the entertaining system. If the retail price of the C880s is any indication a full surround setup would be very affordable considering the level of return.

For anyone stuck in the "I have to make do with one system for theater and straightforward two-channel listening" situation, the C880 would make a good starting point. For anyone looking for a very good speaker that belies its price tag you had best put this near the top of your shopping list. I think Phil has met his goal to provide a speaker that can offer a reasonably high level of performance for the money. The C880 gave a very good showing of itself and in this price range you would be hard pressed to find a better performer and a more flexible speaker.

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