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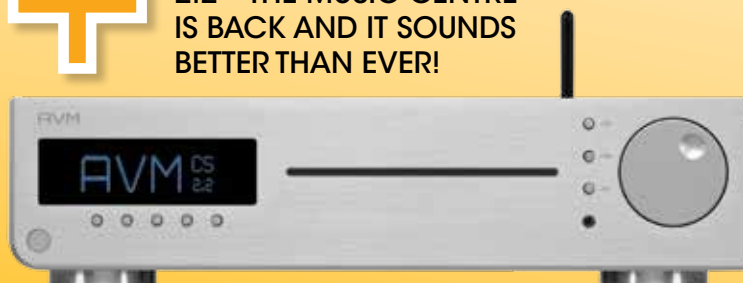
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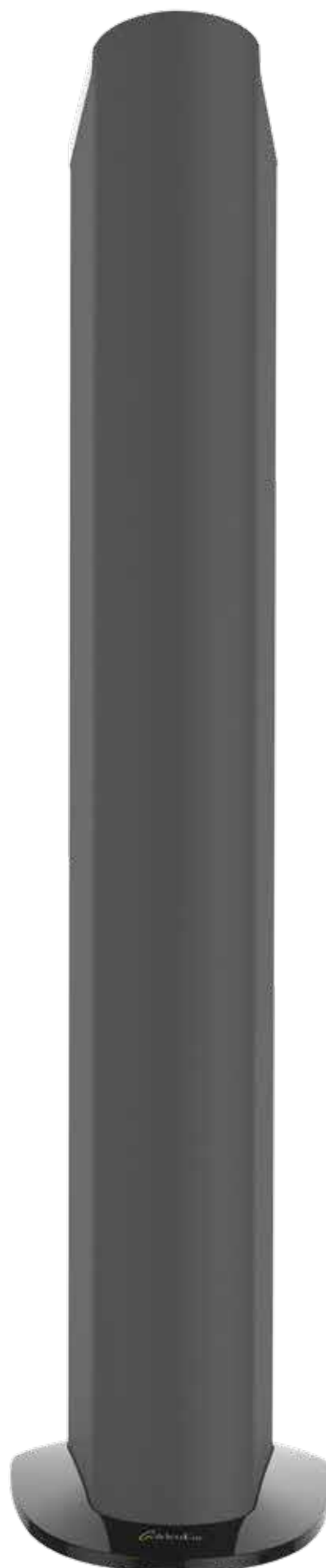
by Chris Martens

H *i-Fi+* normally doesn't run taglines as lead-ins to its review articles, but if we did the tagline for this review of GoldenEar's Triton One loudspeakers it would probably read as follows: "Great for the price of Good." Allow me to explain.

GoldenEar's founder, Sandy Gross, is regarded as a legend within the audio community because he has had a hand in founding not just one but three successful loudspeaker companies: Polk Audio (co-founded with Matthew Polk and George Klopfer), Definitive Technology, and now GoldenEar Technology. While all three firms have very distinct identities, one common denominator that links them is a shared passion for building loudspeakers that provide serious, high-level sonic performance at down-to-earth, Everyman prices. Sandy Gross is the sort of fellow who stays up late at night dreaming up ways to give listeners ever more sound per pound and the man's passion and commitment to value shines through in virtually everything his company makes.

Still, the denizens of the high-end audio universe can be almost perversely difficult to please, so that for some the term 'value' has become a double-edged sword. On one hand, 'value' is taken to mean that an audio product is generally good, affordable, and worthy, but at the same time the term is sometimes thought to carry a certain stigma—denoting a good product that somehow falls short of true greatness. Thus, high value audio products are perceived as desirable, yet typically are thought not to provide quite the stuff of which audio fantasies are made. Until now. Sandy Gross is enough of an iconoclast and visionary to force a question many audiophiles and music lovers have pondered over the years: Shouldn't it be possible, through careful and clever design, to create value-minded loudspeakers that also deliver truly extraordinary sound quality? Mr. Gross certainly thinks so, and by way of proving his point he offers us GoldenEar's new flagship Triton One floorstanders, which are priced at £5,000 per pair.

At first glance, the design of the Triton One might appear similar to that of earlier Triton-series models, but the closer one looks, the more obvious it is that the Triton One breaks new ground in terms of design and—especially—sound quality. Where earlier GoldenEar models tended, conceptually and sonically, to have one foot in the world of high-end audio and the other in the arguably less demanding (or at least differently prioritised) world of home cinema, the



new Triton One is, by design, a true connoisseur's high-end loudspeaker, with no ifs, ands, or buts about it. What did GoldenEar change or do differently in order to achieve this result? Read on.

The Triton One is a tall, slim, three-way floorstanding loudspeaker that combines a passive tweeter-mid/bass section positioned near the top of its enclosure with an active subwoofer section down below. The passive section consists of a Heil-type HVFR (high velocity folded ribbon) tweeter flanked above and below by a pair of 130mm, low mass, wide-bandwidth, long-throw mid/bass drivers, each of which loads into its own dedicated enclosure chamber. The active subwoofer section, in turns, occupies roughly the lower three-fifths of the enclosure and consists of three, forward-firing, oblong 125mm x 225mm bass drivers supplemented by two pairs of side-firing, horizontally-opposed, oblong 175mm x 250mm passive radiators. This bass driver array is fed by a 1600-watt, Class D subwoofer amplifier that is controlled by a distinctive, hybrid passive/active, balanced mode subwoofer crossover that is implemented, in part, through a new 56-bit DSP engine that is more powerful than any GoldenEar has used in the past.

When you look closer, the Triton One shows new thinking in several key areas. First, the T1's mid/bass drivers leverage everything GoldenEar has learned through the process of developing its successful line of passive loudspeakers (including, the Aon 2 and 3 bookshelf monitors reviewed in issue 92 or the Triton Seven floorstander reviewed in issue 104). From these award-winning passive models, GoldenEar learned how to make mid/bass drivers that simultaneously provide extremely wide-range frequency response, excellent dynamic range, high resolution, and remarkable transient speeds.

Applying this know-how, GoldenEar created new mid/bass drivers for the T1 that deliver a terrific combination of transient agility, powerful and expressive dynamics, and—importantly—authoritative bass response down to below 100Hz. This means the T1's passive tweeter-mid/bass section covers the lion's share of the entire audio spectrum, while the powered subwoofer section handles only low frequency content from 100Hz on down (by comparison, the earlier Triton models used noticeably higher 160Hz subwoofer crossover frequencies).

GoldenEar's new subwoofer crossover network is arguably the most precise that the firm has ever built and the only one that meets the critical objective of having the subwoofer maintain absolute phase coherency with the mid/bass drivers above. Together, the new passive/active crossover and powerful woofer amplifier do a terrific job of preserving bass transient speed, focus, and pitch definition. Finally, the subwoofer section itself benefits greatly from having an elaborate array of both active and passive bass drivers to share the low frequency workload.

Although it probably goes without saying, GoldenEar's decision to give the Triton One an active woofer section carries several key benefits. First, having a built-in amplifier to shoulder all

low-end duties means that, despite its very impressive performance envelope, the T1 really doesn't need to be driven by particularly powerful amplifiers (unless listeners simply want to use the speaker with high-powered amps). Second, the active woofer section sports a rear panel-mounted output control that allows listeners to dial in the amount of low bass support appropriate to the size and acoustics of their listening space. In practical terms this means that the Triton One is one of the very few genuinely full-range loudspeakers that, with the twist of a knob, can as readily be adapted for use in small rooms as in larger spaces—or anything in between.

All in all, the Triton One's design elements coalesce in a synergistic way, giving the speaker a far more taut, well-focused, and coherent sound than any of its earlier-generation Triton-series predecessors could have provided. As a result, the T1 is able to maintain a very high level of continuity from top to bottom. Indeed, first time listeners (even ones who are finicky audiophiles) might never guess that the speaker even has an



- ▶ active woofer section, except for fact that the speaker possesses phenomenal low-end reach, impact, and definition.

Put all these design elements together and you get a loudspeaker that sounds far more sophisticated, expressive, expansive, and refined than its mid-level price would lead you to expect. As you listen, you might find as I did that the Triton Ones fairly beg for comparisons with top-tier loudspeakers—the kind known for their steep, five-figure-per-pair price tags. The astonishing part is that when the T1 is subjected to such comparisons it does not embarrass itself, nor does it sound overmatched by the competition. On the contrary, the Triton One is so good that at times it can expose pricey high-end contenders (or pretenders?) as self-important sonic ‘emperors’ wearing not nearly enough clothes. To illustrate these points, let me offer some musical observations.

Probably the two sonic qualities that most dramatically signal the seriousness of GoldenEar’s intentions with the Triton Ones would be the related characteristics of resolution and focus, both of which these speakers exhibit in spades. To appreciate precisely what I mean, put on Diana Krall’s famous cover of the Joni Mitchell song ‘A Case of You’ from Krall’s *Live In Paris* [Verve] and start taking notes on the speaker’s overall presentation. First, note that the GoldenEars effortlessly capture even the subtlest of inflections and variations in the micro-textures of Krall’s voice, as on the line where she sings of sketching a map of Canada on the back of a napkin, “with your face sketched on it twice.” On that line, and many others, one has less the sense of listening to a recording being reproduced through speakers and more the sense of being physically present on or near the stage as the recording was being made.

Next, note the sheer vividness and presence of the recording, which again gives much of the feel and sensation of sitting in on a live event. Third, note how believable and realistically three-dimensional the soundstage is—qualities conveyed through faithful reproduction of myriad small yet significant spatial cues in the music. Finally, observe the almost casual ease with which the Triton Ones capture various small ‘action sounds’ of Krall’s piano, such as the occasional pressing of pedals or the delicate release of sustained chords as Krall gently raises her fingers from the keys. This track is, as many audiophiles know, a veritable treasure trove of small, beautifully integrated sonic elements that add up to that elusive quality of realism, but it takes a very fine speaker to show all that the track can do. Happily, the Triton Ones are more than up to the task, delivering a sound so accomplished that it instantly brings to mind the sort of sound one might expect from speakers carrying much steeper price tags. In short, the GoldenEars demonstrate early and often that they are ready, willing, and able to play alongside the ‘big boys’.

Explosive and expressive dynamics are another of the Triton Ones’ strong suits. With many speakers, listeners sometimes tend to do a bit of subconscious “gain riding”, meaning that they instinctively turn levels down in anticipation of loud passages on familiar discs so as to prevent speaker overload. With the GoldenEars, however, almost the opposite seems to be the case. Figuratively speaking, the Triton Ones seem to whisper to their listeners, “C’mon now; don’t be shy. Go ahead and turn the music up to realistic levels; we’ve got you covered.” And remarkably, they generally do (except, perhaps, for scenarios where listeners seek to play, say, Death Metal at ridiculous, ear-bleed levels, ▶

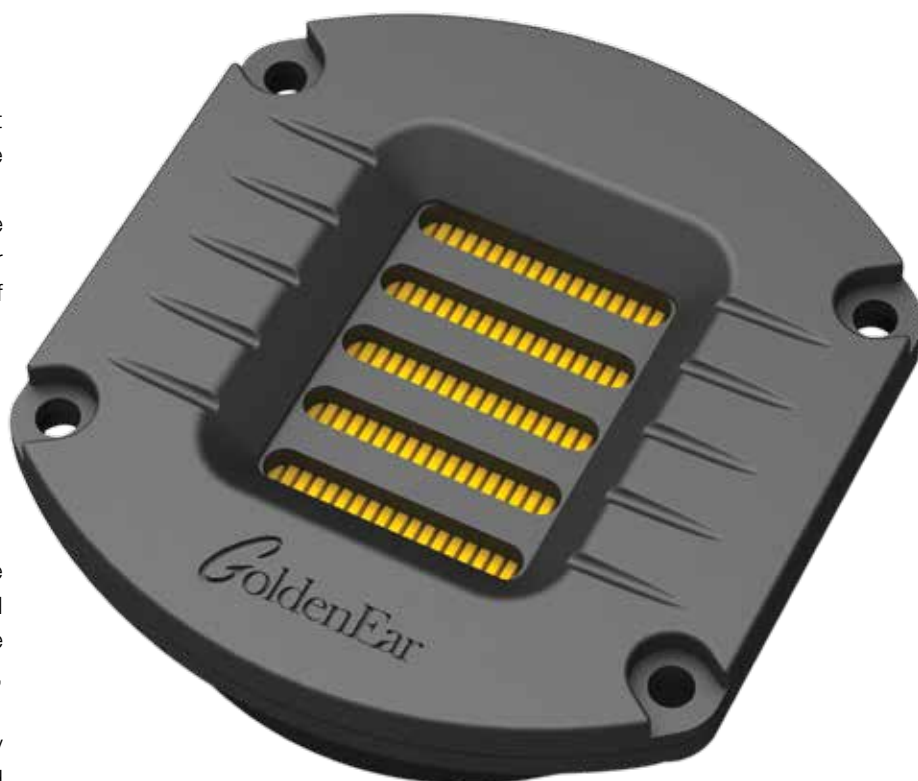


▶ which we wouldn't recommend in the first place). Consider the following example to see what I mean.

Prof. Keith Johnson's Reference Recordings are justly famous for their wide, realistic dynamic range and one of my favourites is the track 'Moten Swing' from trumpeter Clark Terry's *The Chicago Sessions, 1995-96* [Reference Recordings, HDCD]. On that cut, listeners initially hear the DePaul University Big Band playing at somewhat throttled-back and subdued levels as the band gently establishes the song's lilting, swinging groove. But as the track unfolds, Terry (sometimes accompanied by the band's full horn section) puts the proverbial pedal to the metal for brilliant, momentary, full-on brass blasts.

What's impressive is not just the way the explosive brass passages are handled (although they certainly do seize one's attention in a compelling way), but also the way the GoldenEar's continually reveal subtle dynamic shadings and nuance, whether they are playing softly, loudly, or somewhere in between. For many loudspeakers such dynamic contrasts seem hard to handle properly, leading to moments where the speakers sacrifice resolution and focus on quieter passages or lose composure on the explosive ones—or both. The Triton One, however, manages to sound effortlessly nuanced and expressive (and three-dimensional), whether it is playing just above whisper levels or cranking along at full-song. This faithfulness to the shape and contours of the music's dynamic envelope, regardless of playback level, is again one of the hallmarks of great, top-tier loudspeakers.

Finally, we come to the matter of the Triton One's full-range frequency response, especially as that term pertains to low-end response. Going low with serious authority was never a problem for either the earlier Triton Two or Triton Three loudspeakers, but one criticism sometimes levelled at them was that their low-end was not as seamlessly integrated as some might have wished. Happily, it's in



this specific area that the Triton One has taken huge steps forward, so that the T1's not only offer superb bass extension and impact, but also a heaped helping of pitch definition and finesse. I became convinced of the Triton One's prowess in these areas when I listened carefully to Barres Phillips and David Holland's *Music From Two Basses* [ECM]. On this disc, Phillips and Holland create duet performances where one bassist occasionally plays pizzicato style while the other plays with a bow, unleashing a veritable rainbow of variously textured bass tonal colours. Frankly, the disk can represent a trial by fire for bass transducers and not all make the grade; happily, though, the Triton Ones, passed the test with flying colours. Through the GoldenEars, there is never any uncertainty as to which bass is playing which musical line, because the timbral differences between the two are captured with rare focus and precision. So, instead of a potentially muddled-sounding bass 'mush', the T1's give listeners an 'up close and personal' view of two master bassists having an intricate yet perfectly lucid musical conversation.

Sonically, the only aspect of the T1's design that gives me pause is the fact that the speaker's HFVR tweeter deliberately presents a gentle (not 'spiky') point of elevated treble lift in the region between 10-20kHz (which Golden Ear strenuously asserts is not a resonance peak). According to GoldenEar this design choice directly resulted from listener feedback gathered during the Triton One's development process. Fortunately, the tweeter sounds very smooth so that the treble lift usually is not a problem, but on some tracks it can add a touch of treble 'sheen' that might not necessarily complement all recordings. For this reason, smooth (but detailed-sounding) electronics are definitely the order of the day for best results.

The only other 'wish-list' item I would mention is that it would be nice to see a future iteration of the Triton One fitted with a wireless remote control for the ▶

▶ active woofer section. In my experience, fine-tuning of the speaker's bass output levels had a huge impact on overall sound quality, so it would be a blessing to be able to adjust those levels from the listening chair.

Overall, GoldenEar's Triton One stands as a highly effective and surprisingly affordable alternative to some of today's more inaccessibly priced (albeit excellent) top-tier loudspeakers. As I mentioned near the beginning of this review, the Triton Ones give us a big taste of true sonic greatness—and yes, I am referring to the genuine article—for the price of good, which is a simply remarkable achievement. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, six-driver, floorstanding speaker with quad passive radiations and a built-in active subwoofer system.

Driver complement: One Heil-Type HVFR (High Velocity Folded Ribbon) tweeter, two 130mm mid/bass drivers, three 125mm x 225mm bass driver, four horizontally-opposed 175mm x 250mm passive radiators, 1600-watt Class D subwoofer amplifier fed by a hybrid passive/active balanced more crossover network implemented via a 56-bit DSP engine

Frequency response: 14Hz – 35kHz

Impedance: 8 Ohms

Sensitivity: 92dB/W/m

Dimensions (HxWxD): Speaker: 1372mm x 146mm (front width) – 203mm (rear width) x 420mm; Plinth: 313mm (wide) x 502mm (depth)

Weight: 44kg/each (shipping weight)

Finishes: Black fabric with gloss black trim

Price: £5,000/pair

Manufacturer: GoldenEar Technology

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