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GOLDENEAR TRITON REFERENCE



MONSTROUS sound and **ASTONISHING** value

By Scot Hull

They're big. That's the first impression one gets sitting in front of the GoldenEar Triton Reference loudspeakers. Physicality, writ large. Turning them on (and up) only reinforces that impression. The disconnect comes immediately: "Wait, how much did you say these things cost!?!?"

Modern marketing tells us, repeatedly and relentlessly, that "the more expensive a thing is, the better that thing is". At this point, consumers have completely accepted this – so much so that we are invariably drawn by any claim to upend the Standard Value Equation. The most common line used by a salesperson in today's high-end? Probably goes something like this: "[Product X] is as good as/even better than competitors priced x-times as much!"

The temptation to this particular hyperbole is something many high-end reviewers are vulnerable to, too – I've "sinned" this way, repeatedly. Over my time at *Part-Time Audiophile*, I've had the peculiar pleasure to review loudspeakers that cost absurd amounts of money. 'Absurd', of course, being a relative term. Given that the average American

has next-to-no savings and less than \$5,000/month in disposable income, the line between "affordable" and "laughable" tends to be drawn in uncomfortable places. Yes, reviewing such lofty and aspirational products is my job, but even so, I simply cannot afford the upper-end loudspeakers from most of the brands I see at the regional audio shows. I mean, I certainly wish I could, and that's why I play Powerball. Truth be told, I would make an excellent rich person. So, while I'm waiting for a call from the Lotto Fairy, I continue the hunt for the ever-elusive and ever-alluring "bargain". That is, I am particularly vulnerable attempts to solve the "Standard Value Equation" for personal affordability.

What I'm looking for in a pair of "reference" loudspeakers is pretty simple – I want an experience. Yes, I want great imaging. Yes, I want great bass. But perhaps more importantly, I also want something that makes me want to use the system. That last bit is worth mentioning because the compulsive pursuit of "the best" tends to do something really weird to high-end lovers – we love the idea of the hobby more than we love the experience that the hobby promises. That is, we're in it for the gear and not the music. And no, for the record, fetishism is not necessarily a bad thing.

It's just something that I, personally, am trying to overcome. Anyway, the point – I want my gear to make me want to use it, and more specifically, to make sound I want to hear. I don't necessarily want high-resolution. I don't necessarily want freak-of-nature frequency extension. I don't want a spec sheet. I want an experience.





I like to think Sandy Gross of **GoldenEar Technology** agrees.

His products are known for a couple of things. The first is “imaging”. For Sandy, imaging is the holy grail of the hobby. Sandy wants to invoke, in his listening room, the original experience, and imaging is the key to do that. The second is value. For Sandy, it’s not enough to make a great product if no one can afford it – it’s not a “product” at that point, it’s something else. Vanity, maybe? Anyway, if Sandy is all about value, then the Triton Reference is his monument because this speaker is bananas. For \$9,000/pair, what you get is fully on par with the very best loudspeakers available at 5x the price.

See? I just can’t help myself. Anyway, the point is that this speaker succeeds on both counts.

I had GoldenEar Triton Reference in my “big room” for the summer, bracketing the fireplace. The speakers are big, almost 5’ tall, 9” wide and double that in depth. And very black. Very. I think some alternative color options would have been nice. Maybe a veneer for an extra cost? Sure, the piano black is a classic, and straight out of the Henry Ford model T school of design (“You can have any color you like, as long as it’s black”), and I get the cost-effectiveness of the limited choice, but still, that finish in that makes me think of the opening scene in the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey. All of which is to say that Tritons may be totally okay with your décor – I have a massive TV credenza that’s painted in black, for example, and it matches the Triton Reference reasonably well. But it’s something to keep in mind because there is absolutely nothing that you’re going to be able to do to hide speakers this massive, and yes, they do better when given a bit of room to breathe. Unlike rear-ported speakers (which tend to be finicky about it), I had luck with the Tritons in a variety of placements – but my preferred setup was 6’ off the back wall, some modest toe-in, and over 8’ between the speakers.

The Triton Reference have a powered bass cabinet, which has upsides and downsides. On the “plus” side, the speaker is 93.5dB, so you can hang a tiny amp off of it and still get great results. The Tritons



spent their time here hooked to a Pass Labs INT-60 integrated amplifier, not quite flea-watt, but no certainly no Big Iron Schwarzenegger, and I had zero issues with “strain” on the amp. My guess is that I probably only ever asked a total of 10 watts out of that amp, tops, and got stunning returns. The “downside” of that powered-bass competency, of course, is having to dial it in. The temptation is to go “too loud”, which muddies the presentation; my recommendation is to start “modest” and work up to “awesome”. Oh, and don’t forget that you’re going to need outlets and/or power distribution run to where the speakers will end up living. Again, just something to keep in mind.

The Triton Reference, from first turn-up, impressed wildly. The size of the speakers translated directly into the size of the soundfield, which in my room was just enormous. I like to joke about 2-D vs 3-D presentations, but this was ridiculous. The Triton Reference didn’t so much recreate a concert hall in my living room as transported me to a concert hall. That was a weird feeling. But the sense of scale I was hearing was clearly breaking some natural laws. The soundstage swept left and right of the speakers, and I could “see” down the orchestra rows in



Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man*, past the strings, opposite the brass, and over to the tympani, where the strikes exploded into the surface of drum, warping time, space, my face, and stopping my heart for several beats. At that point, I chose life, and turned the volume down. I’m happy to report that it only took a few days to stop walking into walls. I should mention at this point that the bass features 1800

watts of DSP-customizable configurations. The upshot was that I was able to achieve a more or less “flat response” in my living room with some moderate fiddling with the knobs, positioning the speakers, and adding the usual amount of room treatments.

Getting back to the sound. The “high-velocity folded ribbon” tweeter (“air motion” by another name) is extremely natural-sounding, with excellent lateral dispersion and extension. I’ve never found this type of driver to be the last word in detail retrieval – a pair of Piano G2 loudspeakers from German loudspeaker maker Tidal Audio, for example, feature a “diamond” tweeter that is perhaps the best I’ve heard in this regard. Of course, those tweeters alone are more expensive than the entire speaker from GoldenEar. But the comparison here is still in scope and fairly apt – because the performance of the Triton Reference freely invite comparisons to all comers, regardless of pedigree or lofty pricing. Anyway, what I did find is that these tweeters are exceptionally friendly to the human voice, and overall, I found the voicing of the Tritons to be very balanced and linear-sounding.

I started with some intimate stuff with the lovely Canadian trio, the Wailin’ Jennys. “One Voice” is an exercise in harmony, and as each voice entered, creating more layers into the music, the hairs on my neck tried to escape my skin. Eerie, and haunting. Moving to the Good Harvest cover of the Joni Mitchell song, “Woodstock”, the duos harmony-crescendos was like being trapped in the eye of a golden tornado.

Party speakers? Yes, with a bang. “House-filling” is not a common high-end audio-review designator, but in this case, it was still true – planted in my living room, there was really nowhere in the house to escape the sound. My birthday party mix of 1990’s “flannel bands” (Nirvana, Mudhoney,



Dinosaur Junior, Pearl Jam, Screaming Trees) was a huge hit. My dog howled. My kids howled. I howled. The guests fled. It was marvelous.

Assuming that the simple GoldenEar aesthetic will work, and that the buyer has the suitable space to leverage them, the Triton Reference are easily the best-value in reference caliber loudspeakers that I know of. Sure, the \$9k/pair price is beyond the reach of the average American

– I got that. But. Seriously, the experience that these speakers can effortlessly create in your home has historically been the reserve of the very, very rare and the very, very expensive. Said another way, the Triton Reference offers Porsche driving for Mazda pricing. In my book, that’s the very definition of “good value”, and like their much-more-expensive peers, these speakers are just as capable of doing utterly unhealthy things to your free time, to your familial relationships, and to your local sound ordinances.

The Triton Reference play loud, they play majestic, and they play for keeps. This is an end-of-the-upgrade-road loudspeaker, and the challenge they represent to the market

and to your wallet is crystal-clear: if you can do better for less, do it. And good luck with that. (Saying

that, I should mention that the new GoldenEar Triton One.R, at \$5,998/pair, do promise

to come close.) In the meantime, my recommendation is to save yourself some time and money and go check out Sandy Gross and his magnificent GoldenEar Triton Reference. They knocked my socks clean off, and that’s only one reason why they won an Editors’ Choice award.

For more information: www.goldenear.com/products/triton-series



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