

GoldenEar Technology Triton Seven Loudspeaker

Overachiever!

Chris Martens



I enjoy *über*-high-end audio equipment as much as the next fellow; nevertheless, I have an abiding fondness for overachieving products that deliver high levels of performance for reasonable sums of money. I suppose this has to do with my conviction that the enjoyment of music is (or in an ideal world should be) something for all to enjoy—not just for an elite, well-heeled few. My wish is that high-end audio could be less a “rich man’s game” and more a sport for the common man. Happily, at least a few worthy high-end audio manufacturers share this wish and have developed products that are affordable yet offer compelling and, in the best cases, downright brilliant sound quality. One such product is the GoldenEar Technology Triton Seven floorstanding loudspeaker (\$1399/pair) that is the subject of this review.

Let me begin my supplying a bit of background. As most of you know, GoldenEar Technology is a loudspeaker manufacturer co-founded several years ago by Sandy Gross, who was also the co-founder of Definitive Technology and a co-founder of Polk Audio. Mr. Gross enjoys a well-deserved reputation as a serious, dyed-in-the-wool, high-end audiophile, but what has made him a legend is his unflagging commitment to producing speakers that offer audiophile-worthy sound at down-to-earth prices (actually, a hallmark of each of the speaker companies Gross helped create). Thus far, GoldenEar has offered several ranges of products, many of which have gone on to win critical acclaim and numerous industry awards.

In view of Sandy Gross’ enviable track record over the years, you might expect the Triton Sevens would simply be “chips off the old block,” and in some senses they are. The Triton Sevens stand, at present, as the smallest and least expensive of GoldenEar’s Triton Series floorstanders, and a casual stroll through the technical specifications pages at GoldenEar’s Web site conveys the impression that, while Triton Sevens share some design features with the large Triton Twos and Threes, they are in essence “Triton Lites.” This impression, however, is misleading because somewhere between the preparation of the specifications page and the creation of the actual product a wonderful thing happened: Namely, the Triton Sevens wound up sounding different from and *better than* their bigger siblings in many of the ways likely to matter most to audiophiles. Let’s get this straight: The Triton Sevens are smaller, less complex, and less expensive than their stablemates, yet actually sound all the better for it. How can this be?

In trying to assess what makes the Triton Sevens superior performers, I reflected on a line attributed to the late, great British sports car designer Colin Chapman (of Lotus fame). When asked how to make racing cars go faster on a consistent basis, Chapman is said to have quipped, “Simplify, and add lightness.” Well, if asked what makes his new Triton Sevens sound so very good, Sandy Gross might smile and say that they “simplify and add (sonic) transparency”—and we are speaking, here, of transparency delivered by the bucket full. As a result, the

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Triton Seven sounds remarkably open, articulate, and revealing—ridiculously so for its modest price.

At first glance, the Triton Seven seems disarmingly simple. It is a compact tower-type speaker that stands only 39.75" tall and that sports just three active drive elements: a small Heil-type HVFR (High Velocity Folded Ribbon) tweeter flanked by two wide-bandwidth, high-excursion 5.25" mid/bass drivers (for more on which, see below). For the necessary low-frequency reinforcement the Triton Seven also provides a pair of side-firing 8" "planar sub-bass radiators" (i.e., passive radiators). The speaker is housed in a svelte, gently swept-back, black-fabric-clad enclosure with a gloss black trim cap on top and a matching black floor-plinth embossed with a soft gold-colored GoldenEar logo. If this capsule description seems a little underwhelming, it helps to bear in mind that with the Triton Seven, as with so many other great loudspeakers, the genius is in the details.

As I suggested above, the Triton Seven combines several difficult-to-meld sonic virtues. It offers plenty of resolution and high degrees of transparency, and demonstrates impressive transient quickness, yet also sounds smooth. GoldenEar achieved this result by carefully doing its homework in blending the output of its lightning fast Heil-type HVFR tweeters with the output of its also very fast, wide-bandwidth piston-type mid/bass drivers. The result may well be the most accomplished hybrid mix of Heil-type and piston-type drivers that I have yet heard in any loudspeaker, regardless of price. GoldenEar has succeeded where many others have tried and failed, partly by banishing apparent speed and textural discontinuities between the disparate driver types, but also—more importantly—by getting them to sing with one coherent voice.

What is more, GoldenEar has fitted the production-version Triton Sevens with all-new, long-throw mid/bass drivers—ones that dramatically up the performance vis-à-vis the firm's previous mid/basses. Audio journalists and dealers who heard the prototype Triton Sevens at CES 2013 are in for a real surprise, because the difference these new mid/bass drivers make is a large one. They offer audibly higher resolution and quicker transient response than GoldenEar's previous mid/basses did,

which is saying a mouthful given that the original drivers were already quite good.

Second, the mid/bass drivers also offer superior dynamic performance across the board, not just in the sense of being able to play more loudly (although they certainly can do that), but also in the sense of revealing far subtler shadings of dynamic expression.

Third, the new drivers have significantly higher excursion limits than their precursors did, which means they not only play gracefully at higher output levels but also offer much more extended bass response than before. Unbelievable though this may seem, when augmented by the Triton Seven's passive radiators, those little mid/bass drivers produce authoritative (and I mean really authoritative) low-end response that extends well down into the 30Hz range.

Finally, the Triton Seven enclosure is special. The slender towers are designed to provide the desirable damping characteristics of a transmission-line enclosure with the low-end weight, power, and efficiency of a sophisticated passive radiator-equipped

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Two-way, three-driver floorstanding speaker with passive radiators

Driver complement: One Heil-type HVFR (high velocity folded ribbon) tweeter, two 5.25" cast-basket mid/bass drivers, two 8" passive radiators

Frequency response: 29Hz-35kHz

Sensitivity: 89dB

Dimensions: 7.25" x 39.75" x 11"

Weight: 42 lbs. (shipping), 32 lbs. (unpacked)

Price: \$1399/pair

player/DAC; Oppo BDP-105 universal/Blu-ray player/DAC; AURALiC VEGA digital processor (DAC/preamp)

Media Server: Lenovo ThinkPad PC with Intel i5 processor, 8GB DDR, 128 GB SSD, and outboard 2TB Western Digital music library drive; dBPoweramp ripping/format conversion software, jRiver Media Center 19 media management software, JPLAY digital audio output software

Amplifier: Rega Osiris integrated amplifier

Speakers: Magnepan 1.7 Cables: Furutech Flux-series Evolution-series interconnects, speaker, and power cables;

Power Conditioning: Furutech Daytona 303, PS Audio Soloist in-wall line conditioner

Racks and Isolation: Solid Tech Reference Racks of Silence with associated isolation accessories

Room Treatments: Auralex StudioFoam panels, RPG Binary Abfuser Diffusor (BAD) panels

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog Sources: Nottingham Analogue Systems Space 294 turntable/Ace-Space 294 tonearm; Benz Micro ACE L moving coil cartridge, Fosgate Signature phono stage
Digital Sources: Rega Isis CD



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system. To this end, GoldenEar strategically positions what are said to be very effective though costly damping materials directly behind the twin mid/basses in the upper part of the tower. The damping materials give the speaker excellent driver control through the midrange, upper bass, and midbass regions. But, as frequencies descend, the damping materials allow the towers to “open up,” permitting back-wave energy from the mid/bass drivers to couple with their associated passive radiators in an extremely efficient way. The result is bass that is taut, tuneful, and rhythmically correct, yet offers the kind of low-frequency weight and slam typically associated with much bigger speakers. Not a bad day’s work for a pair of 5.25” drivers, eh? (Hint: You can probably win wagers among audiophile friends by daring them to guess the size of the Triton Sevens’ “woofers.”)

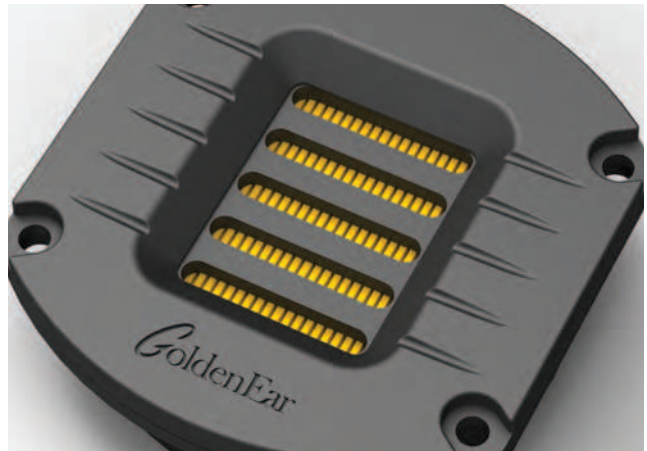
Put all of these factors together and you get what I think is—dollar for dollar—the finest affordable high-end loudspeaker I’ve yet heard (and I say this from the perspective of being an enthusiastic user of Magnepan 1.7 planar-magnetic loudspeakers, which many of my colleagues and I consider the greatest single bargain in all of high-end audio). Let me offer some observations based on real-world listening experiences to help support that statement.

One of best qualities of the Triton Seven is its almost eerie sense of focus. This became clear for me as I listened to a series of tracks from Anne Bisson’s *Portraits & Perfumes* [Camilio Records]. Ms. Bisson has a distinctive voice that is light and breathy yet full of underlying richness and hints of wry humor just waiting to be released. If you have ever heard Ms. Bisson speak or sing, you might agree that her voice is unforgettable. When I played *Portraits & Perfumes* through the Triton Sevens there was *that* voice—sounding palpable, present, richly textured, and real—looming between the loudspeakers and positioned just a few feet behind them. One might expect (or at least hope for) such moments of realism from loudspeakers carrying steep price tags, but it is a real rarity to hear them served up by speakers selling for just \$1399/pair. But with the Triton Sevens, moments of realism like these seem to occur early and often.

Next, the Triton Sevens offered remarkably good imaging and three-dimensionality thanks, in large part, to their ability to retrieve very low-level textural and transient details and thus to capture subtle spatial cues in the music. To hear these qualities in action, try Jamey Haddad, Lenny White, and Mark Sherman’s *Explorations in Time and Space* [Chesky], which was recorded without compression or equalization in the Hirsch Center for the Performing Arts (formerly St. Elias’ Catholic Church) in Brooklyn, NY. The album features a series of highly inventive interchanges between three master percussionists, who perform on an impressive array of instruments. On *Explorations*, the GoldenEars generated exceptionally wide, deep, and precise soundstages, revealing the exact locations of each of the percussionists (and their various instruments) on stage. Even sounds emanating from the far rear corners of the soundstage remained beautifully focused, stable in their positions, and dynamically alive.

Finally, the Triton Sevens proved to be remarkably dynamically expressive—much more so than their size or configuration would lead you to expect. A good example would be the Gerard Schwarz/Royal Liverpool Philharmonic performance of

Alan Hovhaness’s *Mount St. Helens Symphony* [Alan Hovhaness, *Mysterious Mountains*, Telarc, SACD]—a piece that paints a vivid symphonic picture of the events leading up to the violent eruption of the Mount St. Helens volcano. When heard under ideal circumstances, this recording offers up moments of delicate beauty juxtaposed with majestic but at times quite explosive mood swings. Frankly, many speakers turn the composition into a compressed dynamic muddle, but the Triton Sevens did not. Instead, they effortlessly captured the depth and breadth of the orchestral sections arrayed upon the stage, rendering quieter passages with deft dynamic shadings. Yet when the eruption passage came along, the Sevens shifted dynamic gears instantly, reproducing the full, fierce, percussion and brass blasts that represent the sheer power of the volcano’s eruption. If I hadn’t experienced this with my own two ears, I would never have thought speakers fitted with just two 5.25” mid/bass drivers and a Heil-type tweeter could ever convey so much weight and grandeur. Maybe less really *is* more.



Are there downsides here? Well, for those who want speakers that can serve double-duty in music and home-theatre systems, or that can play rock or other forms of “power” music at high volume levels, GoldenEar’s larger Triton Two and Three towers might be better choices than the Sevens—largely because they feature built-in powered subwoofers that extend bass depth and clout while making the speakers easier to drive. I would also say that for those who prize uncanny top-to-bottom coherency and realistic image height and scale, the Magnepan 1.7s (or the new Magnepan Super MMG system) might be a better choice. But on the whole, the Triton Sevens can easily go toe-to-toe with any like-priced competitors and can also handily outperform any number of higher-priced speakers. One last thought I will offer is that a “downside” of the Triton Seven is that it will make you want to acquire the best associated electronics and source components you can afford (but then, that’s always been the way of things with truly great loudspeakers).

Here’s the bottom line: If you want to find out just how much high-end goodness \$1399 can buy in a pair of loudspeakers, then you absolutely must audition the Triton Sevens. I consider this speaker a masterpiece of value-oriented audio engineering—one that sets a performance standard that will not easily be matched or surpassed. **tas**