

995: SOUND THAT WON'T BREAK THE BANK

# A Small Surprise

## GoldenEar's Aon 3 Bookshelf Monitors

By Jeff Dorgay

**S**mall speakers and small rooms usually mean not much bass. A well-thought-out subwoofer will usually add LF content, but it also lightens your wallet. If you're looking to outfit a small listening space with a pair of compact speakers that combine the imaging of a mini monitor with bass you'd expect from a floorstander, try the Aon 3s from Maryland's GoldenEar.

The opening bass riff of Paul McCartney's "Let Me Roll It" immediately confirms that these speakers rock. The weight, texture and sheer growl of what is arguably one of the best-known bass lines in rock and roll forces you to take notice and, perhaps, search for the subwoofer in the room. But there isn't one. Taking advantage of room gain in room two (13 feet by 16 feet), the Aon 3s easily dip down to the upper 30-Hz range, with the ribbon tweeter offering a level of transparency that, along with the massive bass response, is something rarely heard—and even less rarely heard from a pair of speakers priced just under \$1,000.

**Easy to Drive**

Tom Waits' "Don't Go Into That Barn" (from his *Real Gone* album) further confirms that these speakers have plenty of heft, as they easily handle the chorus of low-pitched grunts that linger in the background behind Waits' wailing. Keeping the mood heavy and dark, with Tool's *Undertow* album conveys just how much punishment these little speakers can take and still deliver the goods. The 20-watt-per-channel Carver Black Beauty was able to push the Aon 3s further than I expected. But, not wanting to blow a tweeter, I switched to my BAT VK-60 monoblocks and twisted the volume knob a *lot* further. Make no mistake: These speakers can rock with the best of them. The Aon 3s never miss a beat when Tool goes from slow motion into overdrive.

An 89-dB sensitivity rating and nominal 8-ohm impedance means the Aon3s work well with amplifiers great and small. The Conrad-Johnson MV-50C1 (recently updated at the factory with CJD Teflon caps throughout) with EL34 output tubes proves magnificent, providing just the right balance between midrange magic and dynamics, and offering up the most musical combination of the review sessions.

It's not that I didn't have great luck pairing the Aon 3s with solid-state electronics—amplifiers from Pass Labs, McIntosh and Channel Islands were all good matches—but my first experience with the GoldenEar speakers was with tube power in the living room of GoldenEar founder Sandy Gross. The experience, needless to say, really stuck with me. Even with a low-powered tube amplifier at a modest listening level, these speakers fill the room with a highly engaging sound.



Tripping through Hawkwind's "L.S.D." feels so psychedelic and dimensional that a black light was in order. For those of you not familiar, the massive ball of sound on this track extends way beyond the speaker boundaries, with layer upon layer of synthesizers, sound effects and equally driving bass and drums occasionally infused with somewhat guttural vocal chantings. A little time spent with Can's *The Lost Tapes: 1968-1975* was equally mind-expanding, with multiple levels of distorted guitars that would blend together on a lesser speaker, but that are each easily discerned when played through the Aon 3s.

**Further Explorations**

While wacky electronic music doesn't reveal much about a speaker's ability to accurately reproduce music, it does disclose the speaker's presentation, dynamics and soundstage. Some speakers just sound *small*, but the Aon 3s do not fall victim to this. I make no bones about having the "big-speaker sound" as one of my hot buttons, and the Aon3s deliver.

Going up the audiophile hierarchy of needs (your order may be different)—knowing the Aon 3s can produce a soundstage much larger than their small size would suggest, along with sufficient weight and dynamics—the last mountain to scale is tonality. Not only do these speakers sound remarkably neutral for their modest price tag, they do a great job with male and female vocals, each of which presents a unique challenge.

The subtlety of female vocals can expose a speaker's inability to recreate micro dynamics. Patti Smith's recent album *Banga* creates a dreamy, surf-like, (dare I say happy) mood, closing with Smith taking on Neil Young's "After the Gold Rush." *(continued)*

The end of the track has a chorus of young girls accompanying Smith as they sing "Look at Mother Nature on the run in the 21st century." The Aon 3s keep the vocalists separate while brilliantly maintaining the pace of the track.

Rachel MacFarlane's *Hayley Sings* provides more traditional yet sultry tunes. Her performance of "Makin' Whoopee!" slides out of the speakers in a highly convincing manner, so those having a taste for more traditional female vocals will be very satisfied with the GoldenEar speakers. However, the female voice doesn't tell the whole story. Typically, if there are problems with the crossover point or the drivers don't meld properly, the additional body of male vocals fails to come through, so that vocalists like Tom Jones, Johnny Cash or Brad Roberts appear to lack bulk. Again, the Aon 3s do not suffer from this problem. The speakers splendidly reproduce Robert's vocal on the *Crash Test Dummies'* album *Give Yourself a Hand*, as he goes from his trademark baritone to a newfound falsetto on this record.

#### Back to the Lab

Perusing the spec sheet for the Aon 3s shows that these little speakers mean business. GoldenEar designed these puppies with a 7-inch woofer and a pair of side-firing passive radiators, allowing the Aon 3's to move serious amounts of air.

The Aon 3s are a snap to set up. Listening to them in room two, with the Aon 3s about 7 feet from

my listening chair and about 4 feet from the side and rear walls, provides the best balance of bass reinforcement and midrange clarity. Getting the tweeters as close to ear height as possible will provide the maximum soundstage in both dimensions. As with any small but high-quality speaker, the Aon 3s have the maximum room interface if you place them on a high-quality, high-density speaker stand and use some Blu Tack or similar compound to couple the speakers to the stands. Minor tweaks like this will pay huge dividends.

Thanks to the wide dispersion of the Aon 3s' High-Velocity Folded Ribbon tweeter (and a GIK diffuser installed at the room's first reflection point), no toe-in is needed, as these speakers have a naturally wide sweet spot. Unlike my favorite pair of panel speakers, the Aon 3s also have wide vertical dispersion, with the image suffering very little falloff when you rise from the listening chair, making these great speakers for listening to music with a lot of friends.

This is the same tweeter used in GoldenEar's top-of-the-range Triton speakers, which provides multiple benefits. The obvious quality aspect of getting the flagship tweeter in a small package is great for those with smaller rooms and smaller budgets, but it also makes for a beautifully integrated sound, should you decide to incorporate a pair of Aon speakers into a multichannel system with Tritons as front speakers. *(continued)*



While GoldenEar has taken advantage of overseas assembly, it's still garbage-in, garbage-out if you can't design a great speaker. The secret sauce here is between the ears of Sandy Gross himself, who was one of the original partners in Polk Audio and Definitive Technology, so the amount of time he spent in the designer chair can't be dismissed. Knowing where to pound the nail is the key, and the Aon 3s certainly benefit from Gross' decades of speaker design and manufacturing experience.



The Aon 3s have a “truncated-pyramid” shape that improves sound quality by having no parallel cabinet walls, which provides a midrange and upper-bass response unfettered by cabinet resonance or reflections. Taking the high-value concept further, GoldenEar makes the cabinets from MDF and covers them on four sides with a tight-weave grille fabric, leaving the top and bottom surfaces bare except for the finish. Less money spent on the cabinet means more money for drivers and crossover components—yet another advantage for the GoldenEar speakers.

I've heard a lot of uninvolved loudspeakers in the \$1,000 range, but I'm happy to report that the GoldenEar Aon 3s are anything but. Construction is first-rate and the amount of music that these speakers reveal is nothing short of a miracle considering their size and price. Those looking to assemble a high-quality, high-value system should make a GoldenEar dealer their next destination. ●

**The Golden Ear AON3  
Speakers**  
**MSRP: \$499 each**  
**[www.goldenear.com](http://www.goldenear.com)**