

GoldenEar Technology Reinvents the Bookshelf Speaker

GoldenEar Technology's new Aon 3 bookshelf speaker boasts a number of design innovations, and sounds all the better for them.

by Steve Guttenberg

First a confession: a lot of audiophile speakers can't rock out. They're "voiced" to sound best with acoustic jazz or classical music. Nothing wrong with that, but when you want to party some of them can't cut loose. The new GoldenEar Technology Aon 3 is very much an audiophile-oriented design, so sure, it sounded clear and clean playing Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue."

But what really made me sit up and take notice was the way the Aon 3 knocked out the Drive-By Truckers' "Go-Go Boots" album. This CD sounds like the guys are just kicking back, the way I imagine the band sounds at 3 a.m. when they're just playing for themselves. I listened at fairly loud volume to feel the band's energy, and the Aon 3s didn't hold anything back. These bookshelf monitors are \$500 each; they're just 14 inches tall, but sound like towers. The smaller Aon, the 2, goes for \$400 each.

GoldenEar speakers don't use dome tweeters, in their place you'll find a lower distortion alternative, a "Folded Ribbon" tweeter. The Aon 3 also features a 7-inch cast frame bass/midrange driver and 8-inch, mass-loaded, low frequency radiators mounted on the speaker's side panels. Clearly, the Aon 3 is not your typical bookshelf speaker.

The Aon 3's truncated pyramid shaped cabinet reduces internal standing waves, and its wraparound black cloth grille covers the sides and front of the speaker. The top and bottom surfaces are finished in gloss black. The rear panel hosts a pair of sturdy, all-metal binding posts that accept speaker cables terminated with banana plugs, pins, spades, or bare wires. Build quality is first rate.

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The Aon 3, shown without grille



The Aon 3 speaker

"It combines audiophile refinement with a gutsy, powerful sound"

I compared the Aon 3 with my Dynaudio Contour 1.1 bookshelf speakers, with DJ Krush's "Jaku" CD and it was immediately clear the Aon 3 was superior in every way. The Dynaudio sounded less dynamically alive, with less bass, coarser treble, with a more closed-in soundstage. The improvements in stereo imaging were breathtaking; the Aon 3 can project a huge, nearly three-dimensional soundstage. The Dynaudio is no slouch, so I was taken aback by how much better the Aon 3 was. It combines audiophile refinement with a gutsy, powerful sound. DJ Krush's fast beats sounded remarkably precise over the Aon 3s, and the bass extended to the 40 Hertz range in my large room. That's very deep bass for a small speaker.

I used the Aon 3s in a stereo system with my big Pass Labs power amplifiers, and to keep it real, a \$219 Emotiva Mini X A-100 integrated amplifier (review to come), but the Aon 3s would also be terrific in a home theater, teamed up with a GoldenEar SuperSat 3C center channel speaker, SuperSat 3 speakers as surround speakers, and a ForceField subwoofer.

Granted, for the price of a pair of Aon 3s you could buy a pair of tower speakers, but for buyers looking for a small, wall-mountable alternative, the Aon 3 offers bona-fide audiophile sound from a reasonably compact speaker.

I wrote about the GoldenEar Technology SuperCinema 3 system two years ago, and that compact 5.1 channel home theater package set a new, higher standard for sound quality for a \$1,750 system.