



G3-Lite

Avantgarde's Trio G3
still offers an active option
– but does it make sense?

by Roy Gregory

Avantgarde's Trio G3, fully active horn system is as Revolutionary (in terms of its amplifier implementation) as it is Impressive (in terms of its musical accomplishments). Only the very best conventional systems can live with the immediacy and clarity of its musical insight – and it's no slouch when it comes to the hi-fi niceties either. All of which makes it both expensive and an enormous bargain. But in saying that, you should note that it's not just the performance/value equation that's sky-high. Anyway you slice it, the full Trio rig is BIG. The main horn arrays stand almost a metre wide – which is pretty much twice the width of the largest conventional boxes – and the dual-driver SpaceHorn subs ain't exactly compact either!

So what do you do if you want Trio performance but you don't have the cash or you don't have the space? You could buy a bigger place, but as Avantgarde don't sell property, they've come up with their own, rather less dramatic solution, a system that from their

perspective represents the first rung on the Trio system ladder but which I think of as Trio G3-Lite.

While there's nothing you can do to reduce the size and visual impact of the main horn arrays, you do have options. The Trio G3 horn arrays will cost you €76,000 a pair, to which the iTron active drive modules will add another €26,000, with a second up-charge for the wireless connectivity module once that becomes available. I'm guessing that the thinking here is that there will be customers who want to keep a much-loved amplifier in their system and for that reason, don't want to go active. But what it also means is that you have the option of driving the Trio G3 passively, from an existing amplifier, saving you a chunk of change in the process. At the same time, the product remains fully upgradable, so you could add active drive and even wireless connectivity later, if you choose, without any cost penalty.

The same issues of cost and size confront the subs, although in this case, there is actually something that



►► can be done about their size and potentially intrusive presence. Almost every photo of a fully loaded Trio rig shows the horn-arrays standing either side of a centrally placed bank of sub-woofers. There are plenty of reasons for that, mainly related to the issues of integration and the fact that with somewhere between two and six active and horn-loaded subs, low-frequency extension and level simply isn't a problem. But, if you want to make the subs less intrusive, then getting them out of that central location is going to be high on the list of priorities. In this case, moving them to the corners behind the horn arrays also means that you can exploit the increased room gain provided by the extra boundary reinforcement.

At this point it is worth pointing out that the dual-driver SpaceHorns are an integral part of the G3 system/package, making a significant contribution to that huge step up in performance over the older, XD set up. If Avantgarde had just improved the horn arrays/amplification, without upgrading the subs in line, then the discontinuity in quality would have made integration significantly more problematic and it certainly would have limited the system's ultimate

performance. One option might have been to use the Sub 231, the conventional and more affordable, sealed box sub from the existing XD model line. At €18,800 a pair compared to €69,000 for the dual-driver SpaceHorns they would tick the cost and space-saving boxes, but not only would ease of integration and overall performance suffer (substantially?) the XD models are being run down and availability of the Sub 231 is now almost non-existent. There will likely be a replacement model in due course, probably built around the electronics and crossover/EQ module from the SpaceHorn, but one suspects that that is a way off. Instead, Avantgarde wanted to offer users a more compact solution that retained G3 levels of performance and modularity.

Thus was born the single-driver SpaceHorn. At first glance, the benefits might seem minimal. The footprint is exactly the same while at 492mm, it's almost exactly two-thirds the height of the dual-driver version and at €52,000 a pair, three-quarters of their price. So, on the face of it, the sums don't look too clever, but thankfully, the design concept is. The whole point of the single- ►►



▶▶ driver SpaceHorn is that, stood on its side, it is narrow enough to place in a corner location without taking up too much floor space, while the common footprint (and comparable performance parameters) allows it to be stacked with the dual-driver version, maintaining the modularity and upgradability. The electronics package, the driver and the length and flare of the folded horn are all identical, so the versatility, tunability and quality of the single-driver SpaceHorn remain undiminished. What will suffer is ultimate bandwidth – but the corner placement compensates for that, albeit at the expense of somewhat trickier set up.

The end result is a Trio G3 that can be shoehorned into a smaller budget, a smaller room – or both.

The monetary saving runs out at as much as €46,000, if you opt for passive speakers

and single-driver subs – which is certainly not to be sniffed at. The question is, how much of the big, fully-active system's performance do you lose along the way?

Trio G3-Lite loses out in two specific areas, when compared to the fully-active, dual driver SpaceHorn rig. One you can't do anything about, but the other you most certainly can. As I've already suggested, augmenting the single-driver subs' output with boundary reinforcement delivers no shortage of weight. The challenge is balancing the electronically EQ-ed extension against the corner reinforcement – and that means working with the distance from the side wall and the rear wall, as well as the level and crossover setting on the sub's amplifier. Fortunately, the small digital control panels mounted on each sub, backed up but some seriously clear instructions makes the process as straightforward as it's ever going to be. Just be prepared to spend some time working on

achieving an initial physical position and then refining it over a period of weeks.

Once you get the subs properly integrated, you'll hear it in the pace and rhythmic agility of the playing, but also in the coherent sense of space generated by the system. Instruments should step away from and behind/between the speakers, voices should generally gain body/presence and separation from the instruments around them. Too much bass and

tempi will slow and dynamic range will collapse. Too little and the horns will start to shout at you as the instruments lose body and weight. In my room, with the subs stood around 40cm forward of the rear wall and with an initial level set, I opted for a subtly equalised downward slope in the output, balanced against moving the sub in and out relative to



The single-driver SpaceHorn sat on top of the dual-driver version demonstrates both the smaller frontal dimension of the single-driver sub, and the modular nature of the system.

the side-wall. Adjustment proved surprisingly easy (physically and sonically) and with a final tweak of 0.5dB on the level, I was ready to rock. Over the review period I ended up moving the subs a further couple of cms from the side wall, as with time the bass filled out and slowed, but the glides on which the subs sit make it easy to check whether an adjustment improves things – or not.

Opt for passive Trios and what you can't do is compensate for the incredible temporal precision, attack and natural rise-time of the iTron amplifiers. I know that there are a lot of Avantgarde dealers and distributors desperate not to upset or exclude customers who already own a favourite, probably seriously pricey amp. Those resellers all demanded a passive option to avoid alienating their existing customer base. What Avantgarde has done is respond to their wishes, but they've also allowed those customers the opportunity to hear just what the



▶▶ iTron drive can do. Believe me, in the context of this speaker, I can't think of a single conventional amplifier, driving the passive crossover, that's going to match the special qualities of the iTron package, while the only really serious contenders that even get close cost around twice to three times the price!

How you react to that reality depends on how you are approaching the problem. If you really love the amp you have, then the Trio G3 let's you keep it. But if it is a case of budgetary constraint then the chances are that you'll be using the amp you already own – or trading it for something more suitable – at least in the short term. Top of the list of alternatives has to be the AvantGarde XA Power (€13,500) although I'm not sure how long that will still be available. Otherwise, more eclectic choices like DNM's PA3S or the Konus Audio Robusto Mono spring to mind. But spend upwards of €20K – which is hardly excessive for amplification in the context of a €120,000 speaker system – and you'll be flirting with iTron prices. It's an acute economic question: how do you realise the necessary quality without busting the budget? Just don't think that some affordable SET will do the trick. Trios have always responded to quick, clean power (and VERY low noise) and that means solid-state, while the likes of the Lamm's ML2.2s more than bust the budget. Avantgarde loaned me an XA Power along with the speakers, but I tried a few alternatives too...

The really good news is that the Trio G3's passive crossover is both beautifully integrated and brings a relaxed, holistic quality to the sound, making this the most forgiving Trio yet. There's no way the passive speaker is going to match the sheer immediacy and

dynamic range of the active version and sensibly it doesn't try.

Visit a hi-fi show and all too often you'll find the rooms featuring horn speakers also featuring blues and big-band, girl and guitar. It's programme material designed to play to the speaker's strengths (their clarity, immediacy and uninhibited dynamics) rather than their weaknesses (integration, overall coherence, imaging and bandwidth). A quick bit of air guitar, a lisping female vocalist on some audiophile recording

and it's job done. I can't really blame the exhibitor for making the most of his wares, but buyer beware... Ask that same exhibitor to play something classical, preferably something orchestral and the hot-mess that results will likely have you leaving the room in a hurry – unless perhaps, that exhibitor is using Trio G3s. If you really want to understand this speaker's strengths and what makes it so special, reach right for the material with which you think it's least likely to succeed.

The Benedetti
Michelangeli concert

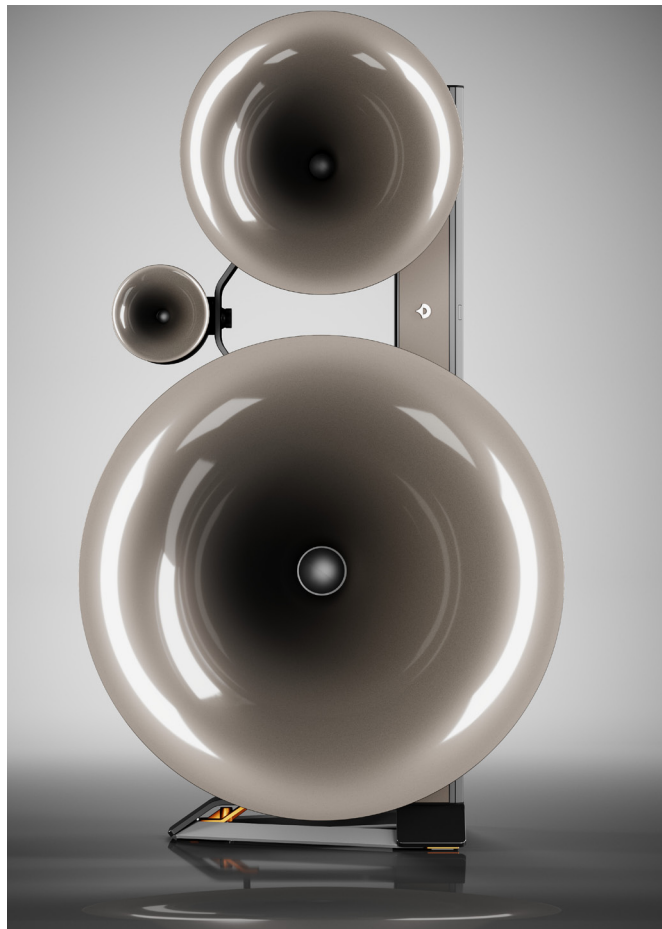
performance of the Beethoven *1st Piano Concerto* (Giulini, Wiener Symphoniker, DGG SLPM2531 302) is a perfect example, redolent with atmosphere, a well-developed acoustic space and credible perspective. With the Trio's you'll hear the microphones come up and reveal the extent of the hall, the rustling of the audience. You'll hear Giulini's masterful direction of the orchestra and his control of pace and level. You'll feel the expectant tension of the (unmistakably live) audience and the drama of the uncompressed, steadily building orchestral density and power, as they prepare for the piano's dramatic opening....



▶▶ All of which is to be expected – just not from a speaker that looks like this! Driven with the XA Power, the Trio G3s and the smaller, single-driver SpaceHorns deliver the sort of spatial and temporal coherence that few systems can match, regardless of type. It's not just that the subs integrate so well with the main horn arrays. That continuity extends into the seamless integration of the three spherical horns. Defying the evidence of your eyes, the four (or should that be eight?) separate elements of the system meld into a single musical whole, devoid of discontinuities or padded frequency bands. The top to bottom evenness of the tonal and energy spectrum is impressive by any standards, but a major step forward for Avantgarde and the Trio. No doubt, the new tweeter, with its longer horn, improved driver and sliding mount (to allow for correct time alignment) plays a significant role in this. But the sheer continuity between the separate horns also suggests considerable improvements in the quality of parts and execution of the crossover. You hear it in the poised precision of the piano, the effortless sense of scale to the instrument and separation of left and right hand. You hear it in the utter fluidity of the playing, the continuity of the phrases and extended runs. Above all you hear it in the perfect weighting of the notes, the even energy spectrum, from the bottom of the keyboard to the top. Few systems are as dynamically comfortable or consistent as this and combine that consistency with serious efficiency and dynamic headroom and you've got the makings of something very special indeed.

The secret of any exceptional system is balance and the Trio G3s are no different. It's not just that

they have wide dynamic range and bandwidth. It's not that they have a 109dB rating for sensitivity or that all of the drivers are horn loaded. The key to their performance is that those attributes apply irrespective of frequency. The lower registers generated by the SpaceHorns are capable of exactly the same resolution, transparency, micro-dynamic discrimination and macro-dynamic 'jump', no matter the pitch of the voice or instrument making the demand. The result is a system that doesn't just establish a soundstage,



it maintains it: a system that holds the instruments on that stage stable in space, no matter how loud things get: a system that gets loud and can shift density without hardening or congestion. If you want to experience the stability of the Trio's sonic presentation, reach for the Barbirolli/RPO *Sibelius 2* (Chesky CR3, one of the label's first re-issues and probably still the best thing they've ever done!) The composers habit of constructing his musical edifice, patchwork fashion with interjections from this group of

instruments and that, layering the contributions to build ever denser and higher orchestral structures is a challenge to the temporal, dynamic and spatial stability of any system, but it's a challenge the Trios meet head on, bringing just the right sense of irresistible, slowly building power to the piece, allowing the levels to ebb only to build them higher still, with more level and even greater intensity. The Fourth Movement *finale* rises and falls only to keep rising again, ever higher until you think it can't get any more intense, that the soundstage must congeal and collapse, the sound harden and glaze over – but the





▶▶ Trios never take a step back, cresting the shattering peak with a majestic confidence.

It's that absolute temporal and spatial security that allows the speakers to be so rhythmically articulate, to shift pace, accent and density with such uninhibited ease; the smaller the scale of the recording, the more apparent the freedom from constraint. Again staying within the classical canon, rather than reaching for something more obvious, try the Shostokovich *String Quartet No. 11 in F Minor, Op. 122* (The Fitzwilliam String Quartet, L'Oiseau-Lyre DSLO 28). The Trios hold the different instruments separate – in space, tonally and in terms of texture. The different and sharply contrasting parts are kept perfectly in balance, maintaining the rhythmic tension, pace and (where appropriate) the explosive dynamic contrasts and shifts in musical energy. But what is perhaps most impressive is the way that the system maintains the central role of the viola, so often a forgotten element or bit part player. Here, the instrument is central to the structure as a whole, very much (and unmistakably) the core around which all else happens. It's a balance that heightens the drama and impact of the more flamboyant violin and cello parts, one that's central to the music. This dramatic tension, this expressive cut and thrust is what makes string quartets, especially later string quartets, so fascinating live and so difficult for systems to emulate. Yet the Trios capture that quality effortlessly, their presentation full of the dynamic tension and drama, colour and texture that most other systems compress.

So far, I've only used musical examples that are both classical and acoustic. Does that make the Trios a 'classical speaker'? The answer to that is an emphatic "No". Indeed, listeners familiar with the original Trios might well be bemused by the proposition, given the speakers' attack, dynamics and low-frequency qualities, attributes that really come to the fore with rock and pop. But what the classical recordings reveal (or at least reveal more clearly) is the extent to which the Trio G3's overall integration, coherence and subtlety have improved over the previous models, elevating the speaker to a completely different performance level, keeping it more than competitive with conventional speakers at anything near its price. With more bandwidth and considerably more headroom, it also manages to match those speakers in terms of colouration levels while challenging their harmonic and textural capabilities. Far from being confined to classical recordings, those benefits are just as relevant to pop, rock and jazz.

Play a track like 'Games Without Frontiers' (from Peter Gabriel's third solo album, RealWorld PGLP03) and the almost clock-like precision of the rhythms and parts is explicitly stated, the metronomic quality almost hypnotically fascinating, while the different layers of the complex 'Biko' are both distinct and compellingly coherent. The addictive hooks and ear-worms that Birdy seems to generate so effortlessly (*Young Heart*, A&M Atlantic 0190295089603) work their magic with an almost indolent ease, her central



▶▶ piano and distinctive vocal phrasing both benefitting from the speaker's easy rhythmic articulation and sense of not-to-note spacing. This intelligent, carefully crafted pop thrives on the expressive range and absolute separation and stability generated by the Trios. The huge, synthetic soundfields extend waaaay back beyond the rear wall, the incidental birdcalls and other noises that populate them, the elongated bass drone that underpins the music are reproduced with a clarity that at once reveals them and makes them an integral part of the whole.

But the album that really illuminates just how secure a musical grasp these speakers have, how stable a sense of pace and

side is never even considered. I wanted to know how the Avantgardes would handle what is (at least for me) so often a difficult album. I wanted to dip in and test the waters, but I ended up sinking in for the duration. That's what these speakers can do. I've spent a long time describing the 'how', trying to communicate the difference between these and so many other speakers, including previous Avantgarde models, but as always, it's the end result – the 'what' – that really matters.

Ask almost anybody buying a €100K+ loudspeaker why they'd spend the money and the answer will invariably revolve around the love of music. It's a well-worn cliché. But if we're



pitch, time and level, is Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* (Impulse AS-77). The convoluted, elongated lines and sheets of notes can wander and meander on many systems, losing their sense of purpose, shape and direction. But not here. Rarely has the intensity of Coltrane's performance and commitment been so apparent. Rarely has this music been so captivating, the four parts following so naturally that playing only one

honest we buy expensive audio equipment for a great many different reasons: a fascination with the equipment itself; a fascination with the differences we can hear (which generally don't have a lot to do with music); self-gratification; insipient consumerism... The list of potential motivations is almost endless and much of it has precious little to do with wider (or widening) musical interests. But at the end of the day, there's only really one way that a music system can quiet the



► doubters, one justification for its expense – and that's the performance. In the same way that the Launch Control function in a McLaren sports car will leave you quite literally breathless, an audio system that costs as much as a super-car should deliver similar impact in just as short a time. Which is one box that the Avantgarde speakers certainly tick - emphatically. I might refer to this system by the slightly tongue-in-cheek moniker of G3-Lite, but let's be clear about this: it sounds just as remarkable as it looks. This is one system that you'll never find yourself apologising or making excuses for; that will never leave you (or anybody else) wondering. Not just because it goes LOUD (it does) or DEEP (it does that too), but because it clearly, unequivocally and explicitly does MUSIC. Music like most of us have never heard at home.

Whether you want a system to impress your audiophile friends, your neighbours, you really do want a system that plays music, or all three, the Trio G3 ticks all the boxes. The 'ton-and-a-half' price point is rapidly becoming the most over-populated and hotly contested sector of the loudspeaker market, with key models from old-stagers like Wilson, Vandersteen and Rockport, would-be usurpers like Magico and relative newbies like Stenheim and Göbel. But the Trio G3-Lite package undercuts them all for price, beats all but the Vandersteens on bandwidth and buries them all in terms of dynamic range. Anyway you cut it, it's a whole lot of performance and a whole lot of music for

your money: all wrapped up in a package to make an interior designer's heart sing.

And it's upgradable too!

Let's not lose sight of the fact that you can take the Trio G3 active for €29K (less the value of whatever amplifier you are using to drive the passive speaker). So, not only does the Trio trump the competition on musical grounds, but like a ladder dropping from the clouds, it promises more than a hint of far

greater things. Leaving aside the issues of size and accommodation (because even the Trio G3-Lite ain't exactly compact) and looked at purely from a performance perspective, the fact is that in terms of delivering the musical message the Trio G3 can meet and beat pretty much anything you want to put up against it, anywhere close to its price. Even more remarkable, that communicative and musical superiority is maintained, despite the performance gap from the passive Trio G3 to the fully active system, underlining just how much performance headroom the active Trio set-up has in hand. That opportunity to step up from passive to active operation, without cost penalty makes for an additional and

compelling attraction.

One size will never fit all and no speaker system at this price level will please all purchasers. But anybody shopping for speakers in the €150,000 price range shouldn't ignore the AvantGarde Trio G3 (in any of its various configurations). At the very least, it will show you just exactly what so much of the competition doesn't do!



Trio G3 Passive

Type: 3-way spherical horn array with active, horn-loaded subwoofers

Bandwidth: 100 – 20.000 Hz
 Power handling: 150 Watt
 Efficiency (1Watt/1m): > 109 dB (27 Ohm)
 Crossover frequencies: 100/600/4000 Hz
 Nominal impedance: 19 Ohm
 Recommended amp power: >2 Watt
 Recommended room size: >25 m²

Horn type: Spherical horn
 Horn opening angle: 180 degrees
 Horn diameters: 200mm, 570mm, 950 mm

Driver diameters:

Tweeter 25 mm / 1 inch
 Midrange 50 mm / 2 inch
 Mid-bass 200 mm / 8 inch

Dimensions:

Width 950 mm
 Depth 986 mm
 Height 1694 mm

SpaceHorn Single-driver

Frequency range: 20 – 200 Hz
 Active crossover: 40 – 400 Hz
 Recommended room size: 25 m²

Horn type: Expo-spherical horn
 Horn aperture angle: 180 degrees
 Horn length: 1898 mm
 Horn mouth size: 0,650 m²

Driver Type: 1 x XB12
 Driver Size: 300 mm / 12 inch
 Voice coil diameter: 153 mm
 Flux density: 1,15 Tesla / 480 mm
 Pole plate: low carbon steel
 Diaphragm Material: Paper/carbon fibre compound

Dimensions (WxHxD): 1018x1165x492 mm

Finishes

Too many to list, with over 24 finishes for the trumpets and multiple alternative wood veneers for the subs, as well as custom options to order. It's pretty much a case of, if you want it, you can have it.

Prices:

Trio G3 Passive: €76,000/pair
 (including Eu sales tax)
 Single-driver Space Horn: €26,000/each
 (including Eu sales tax)

Manufacturer:

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