



ATC SCM19A Loudspeaker

Heresy

Neil Gader



This review might not sit well with some of my audiophile friends. I'm referring to a large and ardent band of devotees who enjoy the "chase" in the high end—those who make every audio-system component choice with the deliberation of a chess grandmaster contemplating a critical move, weighing each option, mod, or upgrade and scrutinizing the results for the smallest shred of improvement. Indeed, this open-system approach is a big part of the hobby, and I don't begrudge anyone his level of enthusiasm. It's what we do. Truth be told, once upon a time I would have included myself in this group. Back then, the very idea of a semi-closed system that a bi-amplified loudspeaker like the ATC SCM19A represents

would have been heretical to my high-end aspirations. But, as they say, that was then.

Here's the backstory: I've owned a couple versions (passives) of the ATC SCM20SL over the years. I recently reviewed its successor, the SCM19 (Issue 245), which proved to be a better overall speaker than my SCM20's in most every way. The idea of an active loudspeaker intrigued me but what really sparked my interest was an ATC demonstration of active versus passive at CES 2015. It was a shootout between the SCM40 and its active cousin the SCM40A—otherwise identical three-way, acoustic-suspension floorstanders. The latter, however, was equipped with an internal electronic crossover splitting the signal into tri-amplified power. The former was the traditional passive design and received comparable power from ATC amplifiers and traditional speaker cabling. The differences were startling. Improved imaging, a vastly greater sense of dimensionality and immersion, and a level of low-frequency control that said to me in no uncertain terms "there is no going back." When I was informed that ATC had plans for an active version of the SCM19, I told them I was all in. Would the differences I experienced at the CES demo translate into my own listening room with the two-way version?

A brief history: ATC of England began producing custom transducers for the professional sound market in 1974. Active monitors and electronics soon followed. Since then it has developed a worldwide reputation not



only for speakers that will play loudly but also for the bulletproof reliability the pro market counts on. The consumer market has been a tougher reach for ATC in part because it's a company that doesn't engage in smoke and mirrors or eye-catching derring-do. Rather it lets its products do the talking. Thus its look and cosmetics speak to solidity and permanence. Fit and finish are always seamless but not indulgent. However, with the advent of the new Entry Series that comprises three décor-friendly, passive, stand-mount models and a trio of floorstanders (two are active), plus a flurry of excellent reviews and word-of-mouth, ATC seems to be gaining a well-deserved, consumer-based foothold in North America.

The SCM19A is a two-way, acoustic-suspension floorstander but it's probably more accurate to think of it as the standard SCM19 fused atop an extended cabinet designed to house the electronic crossover and bi-amplification. Therefore the actual internal volume that the transducers "see" is identical, although—and this is of no small importance—the passive crossover network com-

Affordable Speaker Focus ATC SCM19A Loudspeaker

Specs & Pricing

Type: Two-way, acoustic-suspension floorstanding

Drivers: 1" soft-dome tweeter, 6.5" mid/bass

Frequency response: 54Hz–22kHz

Integral amplifier power:

150W (woofer), 32W (tweeter)

Dimensions: 14.4" x 38.6" x 13.5" (includes plinth and amp)

Weight: 68 lbs.

Price: \$9995

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ponents have been removed and thus are no longer subject to vibration from the internal back wave of the drivers. To increase floor stability for the slender tower enclosure, ATC provides a wooden plinth “outrigger” stabilizer with threaded floor spikes. The ATC-engineered Class AB MOSFET amplification is installed in the bottom half of the tower. The biamplified system powers the mid/bass drive with 150W, and sends 32W to the tweeter. The second-order crossover slope at 2.5kHz incorporates phase compensation. Keep in mind that because it is an active design, the frequency spectrum is split by the crossover at line-level *prior* to amplification. Consequently, all this power is available to the drivers without the significant power losses of a passive network. Heavy aluminum heatsinks rise vertically above the power button, balanced input, and IEC plug.

The SCM19A tweeter (model SH25-76 in the ATC catalog) is a 25mm soft dome. It’s a short-coil, long-gap, dual-suspension design that mirrors ATC’s highly respected 3" soft dome midrange. This design enables the use of a narrow magnetic gap and negates the requirement for ferrofluid—and the potential negative effect of the fluid drying out over time. The tweeter is set in a resonance-free, machined-alloy waveguide that’s been designed to optimize dispersion and allow for the flattest possible on-axis frequency response. Midrange and bass frequencies are handled by ATC’s 6.5" Super Linear mid/bass unit—a driver recognizable by its sophisticated diaphragm structure that integrates the profile of a traditional cone with that of a 75mm soft dome. Per ATC tradition, the mid/woof features a short coil in a long gap, a massive ceramic magnet, and a long-throw suspension for linearity at extreme dynamic levels. The ultra-rigid basket construction appears sturdy enough to support an eighteen-wheeler. Per ATC practice these drivers have been designed and manufactured in-house. They are not off-the-shelf items from a third party.

Once plugged in and warmed up for about a half an hour or so, the SCM19A resembles the passive SCM19 in tonal balance and overall sonics, which is to say it is highly neutral through the midrange and presence range. There’s a warmer tinge to its overall character thanks to its weighty lower mids and up-

per bass—major pluses in a compact two-way. There’s excellent high-frequency extension and air to keep winds and brass satisfied. For vocal articulation, sibilance is naturalistic but never to the point where it tips over into snippy edginess.

Far and away its biggest asset (and this was also true of the SCM19) remains its fast, dynamic, and transparent midrange—one that anchors images, from vocals to violins, and establishes their palpable presence in the room. Whether it’s the gravel and grit of a Tom Waits’ vocal or the soothing, silvery soprano of Alison Krauss, the SCM19A is a “voice” speaker that is addictive in its verisimilitude. Its resolution of internal harmonies like the Buckingham/McVie backing vocals to Stevie Nicks’ lead during “Gold Dust Woman” is definitive in the way it reproduces each vocal nuance. Particular credit goes to the newly designed tweeter, which integrates perfectly with the midrange and bass rather than sounding like a separate sound source. The result is a near-ideal point-

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source coherence matched by transducers that seemingly speak with one harmonious voice. This trait can be heard with every piano note, or the draw of a violin bow across an E string.

The key differences, and I do mean differences with a capital D, are the 19A’s improved imaging, immersiveness, and tight-fisted low-end control. The active version sounds like a stronger, more muscular version of the passive one—as if the little SCM19 has spent the last few months at the gym. It now resolves more ambient cues, and with a broader and more colorful palette of timbre and texture to draw from. Listening to Arimasa Yuki’s “Forest” solo piano from an MQA high-resolution file is a prime example of the way



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mid- and low-frequency dynamics emerge from the keyboard with captivating and authoritative detail. The touch of the player and the gradations, impact, and surface quality of the piano's hammers striking the strings are hypnotizing.

Image placement is fastidious; at times almost startling in the way musicians inhabit their own space with authority, clarity, and specificity. In the same way an Olympic gymnast “sticks the landing,” there is a grounding to the orchestral soundstage that once heard is difficult to forget. This characteristic is on display during Harry Connick, Jr.'s cover of the classic “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square,” where he's joined almost note for note in duet with Branford Marsalis on tenor sax. This recording captures the two voices in time and place with almost geo-tracking precision and a level of timbral specificity and intimacy that still leaves this listener breathless. In general, reproduction of low-level details is beyond reproach with the SCM19A but I do not mean to imply that the ATC was behaving like a cool and clinical studio-monitor, either. That is, unless transparency and resolution have somehow become very dirty words. But it also doesn't flatter average recordings. If a vocal is mixed a little hot, the ATC is there to expose it in all its gritty and false hyper-detail. Likewise a stellar recording takes on an otherworldly and soaring luminance that makes it seem as if it couldn't possibly be coming from a loudspeaker in the first place.

Keep in mind the SCM19A does have limitations—both in output and in extension. It is still a two-way after all, so that while midbass into the 40–50Hz range is solid, you'll need one of ATC's

larger models, like the SCM40, to catch a glimpse of the bottom octaves. (I know of no two-way compact that authentically reproduces a pipe organ.) Also some may quibble over the qualities of acoustic-suspension bass compared with bass-reflex configurations. They both have a house sound—the former requires more power and leans toward tightness and pitch control, while the latter is more efficient but tends toward a looser, fuller presentation. The bass drum, timpani, or rock 'n' roll kickdrum are good examples. On a ported loudspeaker, bass resonances decay more slowly, as if being released in a deep exhalation. With acoustic-suspension bass like that of the ATC, the decay “exhalation” is more precise. Both can work, and the differences become more superficial in the

more expensive segments of the loudspeaker world.

Passive versus active is an argument that is anchored deep in audiophile culture. Though active loudspeakers will likely remain a relative rarity in high-end circles, it is heartening that hybrid designs outfitted with powered woofers (Vandersteen, MartinLogan, Paradigm, for example) have gained some well-deserved prominence. Ultimately, it comes down to implementation. Whether passive or actively powered, does it do the job of reproducing a musical performance in a way that approaches the authenticity of the live event? Well, some may accuse me of heresy, but I won't be passive in my appraisal of the SCM19A. There is no two-way loudspeaker that I would recommend more highly. **tas**

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