

# ATC SCM20ASL

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## REVIEW

Although widely adopted in professional audio applications, as studio monitors for example, active loudspeakers are rather more niche among hi-fi enthusiasts. The familiar set-up of an amplifier driving loudspeakers via long speaker cables is much more common in most markets, although there's also the alternative of having a preamplifier in the equipment rack feeding a power amp – or several of them – located nearer to the speakers.

Active speakers are different, however. With all the amplification packed into the speakers themselves, it's possible to have an amplifier dedicated to each drive-unit, thus optimising each part of the amplification to its task. Add in an active crossover before the amplification, so that each amp/driver combination is only handling a specific range (simpler 'powered' speakers

have just one amplifier onboard, and a conventional passive crossover), and the benefits of this kind of speaker are maximised.

The move towards streamed audio is a major opportunity for designers of active speaker systems. Quite apart from all-in-one streamer/speaker systems (such as the [KEF LS](#) range), there are now more network players incorporating preamps and their own volume controls, making them ideal for use straight into active speakers. It's something that hasn't gone unnoticed by speaker manufacturers, and it's hard to ignore the appeal of a system using just one unit to play the music, coupled to a pair of active speakers. Suddenly that rack of anonymous-looking black boxes looks a little old-fashioned.

British manufacturer ATC, based in rural Gloucestershire, has been making active speakers longer than most. With a major presence in both pro and domestic hi-fi, what's coming as new thinking to some speaker companies is mature, established technology for the ATC designers and engineers. The company celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year with a limited run of the SCM20ASL speaker finished in corporate dark blue, and now is opening up the model to a wider audience with a 'standard' version, available in a range of finishes: real wood veneer, painted satin and high gloss lacquer.

The SCM20SL is already the company's flagship two-way standmount speaker in its £3999 passive, to-be-driven-by-an-external-amplifier, version. The '-ASL' active version, starting at £6495 (depending

on finish), adds the company's 250W 'Amp Pack' module, which has a 50W amp for the treble drive unit and 200W for the mid/bass unit, plus the active crossover. As such, it represents the entry-level model in the company's active speaker range, which runs all the way up to the massive SCM300ASLT floorstanders that start well north of £50,000 a pair.

The SCM20ASL may be relatively compact, standing around 45cm tall, but it's as solid and chunky as you might expect given the presence of the amplifier package - it tips the scales at 24.3kg for each speaker. And the feeling of solidity from this handbuilt design that uses thick panels with internal bracing for rigidity, and damping pads to stop resonances, is complemented by the quality of the finish. My review sample comes in what the company calls 'Pippy Oak' – an £800 option – and is as well-presented as any speaker I've encountered.

Magnetically attached grilles are provided, but the speaker looks somewhat anonymous with them fitted - I happen to quite like the purposeful appearance of the two ATC-made drive units in the matte black front baffle. Those drivers are a 25mm soft-dome tweeter and a 15cm mid/bass unit, and the cabinet is a sealed design - the lack of a port makes it easier to position, due to less interaction with any walls around it. Connections are provided in the form of an IEC mains input and a three-pin balanced XLR socket, while the amp module also has controls for sensitivity and a bass shelf adjustment. This allows a little increase or decrease of

the bass level to tune the speaker to the room, and to personal tastes.

## SOUND QUALITY

For listening, the speakers are set up on hefty Atacama SE24 stands, half-filled with that company's Atabytes metal chips. Having experimented quite a bit with balanced cables in the past, my chosen connections are 10m runs of pro-use XLR-terminated cables, costing all of about £35 for the pair, and the source is EverSolo's DMP-A6 Master Edition - just to show how well these new-generation streamer/preamps work with active speakers. Of course, if you wanted to spend a lot more on a streamer front-end, there's no shortage of spendy options out there - or you could go all conventional with a preamp into which you plug your other source components. But I quite like this combination of over-achieving network player and top-notch active speakers.

And top-notch the ATCs definitely are. They may only claim bass down to around 55Hz, but that proves more than adequate for a huge range of music given the dynamics and definition on offer here, which are respectively massive and really sharp-focused. What's more, these aren't speakers that only respond well to demonstration-quality music, fabulous though they sound with the finely-recorded audiophile stuff. Play Lady Gaga's *Abracadabra* from her *Mayhem* album and the speakers deliver a hard-charging, superbly weighted sound while keeping both the vocal and the multiple layers of the mix crystal clear, right from the opening percussion and bass. They

sound big and fast, thumping the track along in perfect Europop style, and prove willing to be cranked hard to fill the room with music. True, you wouldn't want to be using them to fill huge spaces - but, as already noted, the ATC catalogue has more than a few bigger, even more powerful designs.

With the immaculately recorded recent release of Mozart piano sonatas by Angela Hewitt, the ability of the speakers, when they're set up with a slight toe-in, to create an entirely convincing image of the instrument, with both scale and finesse, is wonderful. That sense of the instrument in the room with you, and the walls of the listening space pushing out to represent the recorded ambience, is as impressive as the clarity of each note in the *Ah! vous dirai-je, Maman* variations, really bringing out the brilliance of both scoring and playing.

Go into crossover territory with the inestimable organist Anna Lapwood's take on *Angels*, from her *Firedove* album, and that sense of an ethereal instrument filling a huge space – in this case Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim – is conveyed thrillingly, as are the vocals of Lapwood's Pembroke College Choir and the organ in Bob Dylan's *Make You Feel My Love*. Chalk up another magical album from Lapwood, and a fine showcase for the ATC speakers.

The same goes for the stunning location recordings on Billy Bragg and Joe Henry's *Shine a Light: Field Recordings from the Great American Railroad* album, with its ambience and simple miking. Again, the ATCs are all

about presence and resolution, really bringing the performances to life, something they do time after time, displaying their appeal as a unique twist on the small(ish) speaker solution.

## LIVING WITH THE SCM20ASL

One of the big advantages of active speakers is that the amplification is already perfectly matched with the speakers, so apart from ensuring the speakers are on good solid stands able to take their weight and plant them firmly, all the work can go into the rest of the system.

As already mentioned, decent – but not necessarily expensive – balanced interconnect cables will be needed, and preferably a network player or preamp with balanced outputs (although adapters to convert standard RCA outputs to balanced connections aren't expensive).

As I say, that means you can run these speakers from any network player with a variable output level – which means most of them. For example, the [Naim NSC 222](#) streaming preamp would make a fine partner for the ATC speakers, and could be later upgraded with an NPX 300, while the HiFi Rose RS151 is another good choice. In each case, once everything is connected up - think all of ten minutes - it's just a matter of driving the system from a simple, slick app.

## CONCLUSION

ATC has been making active speakers for ages, but the SCM20ASLs couldn't be better suited to the streamed music

age. There's an appealing purity to speakers such as these, connected to a network player via a relatively simple interconnect run. The look of the speakers may be classic, especially in those real-wood finishes, but this is in every way a very modern system solution.

## LISTENING NOTES

Magdalena Kožená & Mitsuko

Uchida *L'extase*

Unusual, perhaps to find the great pianist Uchida cast in the role of accompanist rather than soloist, but this set of songs by Debussy and Messaien, sung by mezzo Kožená, has a glowing transparency, fabulous detail and a real sense of ambience and presence

The Communards *Don't Leave Me This Way*

Inspired by a recent visit to Rev. Richard Coles's one-man, I loaded up this classic from The Communards' self-titled 1986 album, with the Rev. on keyboards, and was amazed by the power and sheer vitality of the sound through the ATCs, as well as the magic of Jimmy Somerville's voice

Dire Straits *The Man's Too Strong*

Old enough to remember when every CD player came with a copy of *Brothers In Arms*? Even if you're not, the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary – yes, really! – edition sounds fabulous, with huge dynamics and the closest of focus. As is made clear by this track delivered by the mighty little ATCs



# WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

No, they're not budget-priced, but remember you're getting almost a complete hi-fi system in two exquisitely-finished handmade speakers, almost dripping with all that studio heritage. Forget all those weirdly shaped speakers out there: this is serious craftsmanship, with a finely-honed sound to match.