



Supply and demand

30 years after the birth of CD ATC has launched its first player, **Jason Kennedy** discovers if the wait has been worth it

When I asked ATC founder Billy Woodman why he has waited 30 years to produce the company's first CD player he explained that it's a case of demand. His customers, especially in the Far East are still keen on the silver disc and want a player that lives up to ATC's reputation for building solid, long-lasting and revealing products. Apparently the company has inherited swathes of Quad's market since it was bought by Chinese-owned IAG, and you can see why. ATC still makes everything at its facility in Gloucestershire and it eschews gimmickry in favour of solid engineering practice, that and an in-depth knowledge of how

recordings are made. A very good proportion of its business is in professional audio, as Billy illustrates with his most enthusiastic response to my questions in the Q&A (overleaf).

The CDA2 is not merely a CD player, it is also an analogue and digital preamplifier with an onboard DAC that can be used to convert signals from sources with an S/PDIF output. The eschewing of new-fangled technologies means that the CDA2 is devoid of a USB input, which is a pity but something that will apparently be put right in future versions. It's not a complete commercial disaster because if you want to play from a computer there are plenty of good USB to S/PDIF converters around for

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ATC CDA2

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
CD player/DAC/
preamplifier

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
450 x 95 x 320mm

FEATURES

- Supported sample rates: 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 192kHz
- 2x RCA line inputs
- 2x optical/coaxial digital inputs
- Rear mounted, full-size headphone output

DISTRIBUTOR
ATC Loudspeaker Technology Ltd

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reasonable prices and by the sounds of things most of ATC's customers are not this way inclined anyway. But ATC is clearly aware of the popularity of this connection because it is included in the SIACD, a one-box CD player and amplifier launched at the same time as the CDA2. The SIACD is, however, a completely new, ground up product whereas the CDA2 is based on the CA2 preamplifier, which it closely resembles in appearance and in terms of its design on the analogue side. For instance, it has single-ended and fully balanced outputs the latter capable of producing up to 15V and able to drive very long cable runs. This will appeal to owners of ATC, or anyone else's, active monitors who want a preamp by the listening seat. Who wouldn't want such a thing? Even with full remote control it's nice to be able to have the system at your elbow where you can change CDs with ease.

The back panel sports two analogue inputs, a minijack and 'two' digital inputs split into Toslink or coaxial types, there is also a headphone output – seems like an odd place to put one, but at least it's available.

ATC doesn't specify a great deal about the CD player or digital section save that the latter has a Wolfson DAC that supports most of the sample rates up to 192kHz, 176.4kHz being left out. The warranty on the majority of



the CDA2 is six years, but this does not cover the CD mechanism, as is usually the case with such devices.

Construction is solid and not unattractive thanks to a half-inch thick aluminium front panel that's machined with black styling bars inlaid on either side. The volume control could be more ergonomic, however, its attractive domed shape leaving little but the indicator to get a grasp on. The remote handset lets the side down somewhat, it takes quite a bit of staring at to find next and last track buttons – this at least is partly because it uses words rather than symbols for this action – but it sticks to symbols for fast forward and

Eject button aside, this is a well-designed box of tricks

backwards. I also search for an eject button in vain as the only one is on the player, underneath the disc drawer with the other transport controls, which are hidden when the drawer is open! An inconvenient but all too common state of affairs that requires the drawer to be nudged closed, which may not help its chances of long-term reliability. The handset does have track access buttons and direct input access for all but the digital inputs, which you have to scroll through with the general input button. This is the same handset that ATC supplies with the CA2 preamp, which has no digital inputs.

Set up is very straight forward if you are familiar with preamps or DACs. Just connect the power amp or active speakers to the outputs and hook up any analogue or digital sources to the appropriate inputs. Although the spec states that it has two digital inputs, in fact it has two optical and two coaxial, which can be separately accessed, so in practice there are four.

Sound quality

I kick off by using the CDA2 as a CD player and preamp via Valvet A3.5 monoblocks and PMC Fact.8 speakers and discover just why ATC has so many jazz and classical fans. The CD is Shostakovich's *Gadfly* (National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine/ Kuchar), a recent purchase that is still not very familiar, but one that the CDA2 reveals to be an excellent recording. The dynamics in particular are laid out in stark relief and prompt several semi expletives of surprise. This player is clearly extremely adept at revealing the contrasts and energy of an orchestra and might well lead those who have yet to discover the power of classical music to become more acquainted with it.

Getting back to more familiar material in the form of louche jazzier John Lurie's *Legendary Marvin Pontiac*

makes it clear that the ATC can deliver real solidity in the bottom end and very strong presence from vocals. It also reveals a slight brashness from certain instruments, especially at higher frequencies. This is a very matter of fact, fat free disc spinner and does nothing to smooth over the shortcomings of a recording. Put another way it's starkly revealing. There is little in the way of finessing going on as you might find with valve

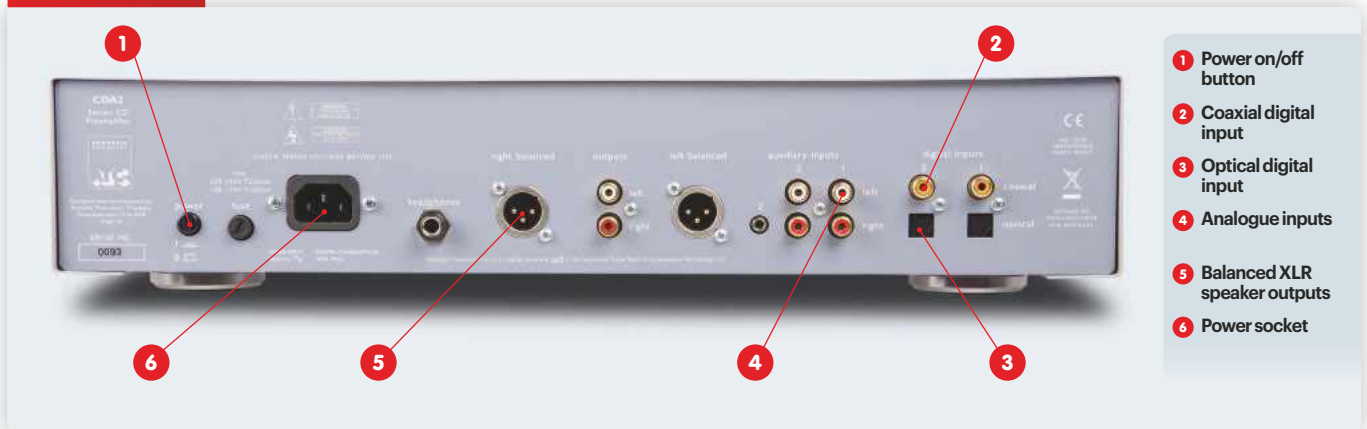
You can appreciate the attack of the instruments and the glory of the music

products and quite a few high-end transistor ones to boot. ATC's take is very much like that found in the studio, the ones where it makes acoustic recordings that is – let as much through as possible. This works like a dream when the recording is clean and preferably devoid of digital processing and the like, but can be a much less comfortable experience with music that has been produced to have a certain sound through less explicit equipment.

Timing-wise it's even handed, not as quick as the best, but by no means lazy, again it adds very little and all that you can hear by comparison with more transparent kit is a slight sense of the electronic. I use it as an analogue preamp and contrast it with a Townshend Allegri, which reveals greater image focus, slightly more tonal contrast and better definition of leading edges. But bear in mind that the Allegri is passive and nearly as expensive as the ATC, but has no DAC nor CD player onboard.

As a DAC with a Naim UnitiServe providing the signal you immediately hear the gravitas that the CDA2's unrestricted bottom end delivers

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Power on/off button
- 2 Coaxial digital input
- 3 Optical digital input
- 4 Analogue inputs
- 5 Balanced XLR speaker outputs
- 6 Power socket

Q&A

Billy Woodman

ATC founder and managing director



JK: Why have you waited until CD's 30th anniversary and the apparent autumn of its life to release your first player?

BW: ATC has a significant customer base with large CD collections, mainly classical and jazz, to whom this product is directed. We also offer RIAA equalisation in our preamps for those still using vinyl.

Have you found a transport mechanism offering the longevity ATC products are renowned for?

The market for transports available to small manufacturers is very limited and to my knowledge everyone buys from the same sources. We will, of course, provide the best possible service should a transport ever fail in the field.

Why no USB input when it's the latest must-have feature and there's one on the SIACD?

The CDA2 has two digital inputs, but no USB. It is our intention to incorporate a USB, as per the SIACD, on the first upgrade or mk2 version of the CDA2.

The CDA2 looks like a CA2 preamp with a CD player and DAC built in, is that the case?

Yes.

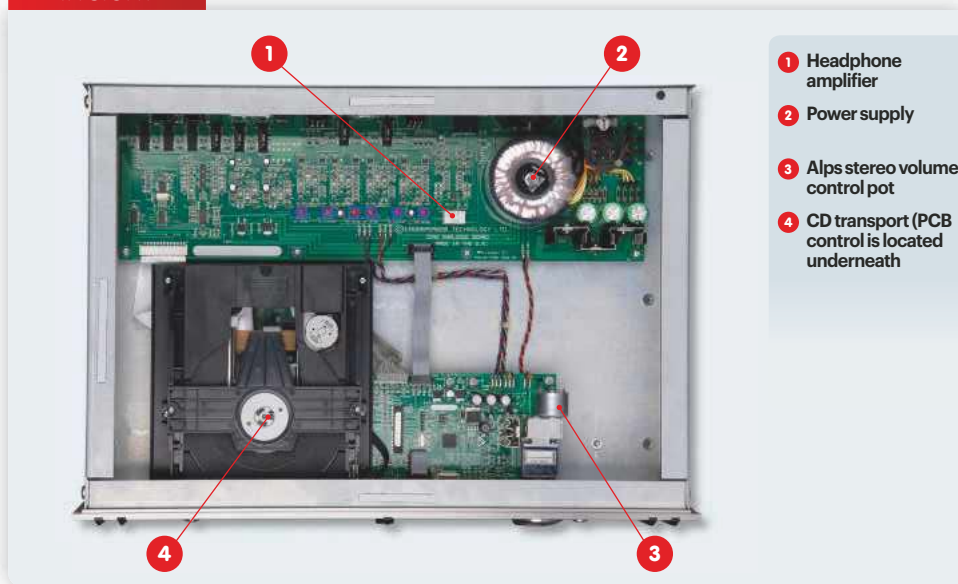
Why is the headphone output on the rear panel?

Good point. We'll look at moving to the front panel on the first upgrade.

Have you been doing anything interesting in the pro world of late?

A new auditorium at Stanford University, The Bing Auditorium, was completed in January with the electro-acoustics (sound reinforcement) designed and supplied by ATC based on the products we design for recording studios. We are in the manufacturing stage of an electro-acoustic system for the new auditorium for the Shanghai Symphony also designed by ATC and we are also currently submitting preliminary designs for two further performance auditoria, one in Germany and one in Korea.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Headphone amplifier
- 2 Power supply
- 3 Alps stereo volume control pot
- 4 CD transport (PCB control is located underneath)

alongside the unerringly warts and all midband. This sounds a bit hard edged with Samuel Yirga's Ethiopian jazz when instruments like the vibes come to the fore, but you always know plenty about the character of the instruments in the mix, which makes me think it's the recording not the converter that is the limitation. Beethoven's *Late String Quartets* (Alban Berg Quartett) on the other hand plays right into its hands and sounds totally real. Where there are

of dynamics and tonal variety seems to suggest that there is plenty of colour available.

Conclusion

The ATC CDA2 is a lot of very solid British audio for the money, as the *How It Compares* box (left) reveals no-one else builds a product like this, on this island for the price. This is partly because it's a rare breed, but largely because ATC has always had a knack for putting together excellent value products. The remote handset leaves a little to be desired and is pug ugly, but the CDA2 itself is superbly crafted and should last a lifetime, CD mechanism allowing. It also sounds superb, not the most pacey, it has to be said, but if your tastes include acoustic music – be it classical, jazz or world – it delivers a revealing and engaging result that you will have little difficulty appreciating. With a pair of ATC active speakers such as the mighty SCM150ASLs on the end, it punches well above its weight, USB input or not! ●

This is a very matter of fact disc spinner. Put another way it's starkly revealing

no hard edges in the recording, just the rich tonality of instruments, the music comes to life and you can forget about its method of delivery. This DAC clearly likes to call a spade a spade even though it doesn't hail from Yorkshire. Essentially it is uncompromising, which means that you can appreciate the attack and decay of the instruments as well as the power and the glory of the music, complete with all its subtleties and shifts in mood. You can also hear the shuffling and page turning even though it doesn't strike me as the quietest piece of electronics ever to have graced the system.

There are times when it seems a shade on the dry side, that would explain the forwardness of some recordings, but my comparison with the Allegri doesn't really back this up. It's certainly dryer than some preamps, but its excellent resolution



Resolution Audio's Cantata Music Centre, has all the features of the CDA2 plus USB input and the ability to stream via UPnP. It's beautiful and costs three times as much, so it's not a practical competitor. Naim's UnitiLite (£1,650) is also an integrated amp that eschews USB. It has a network streamer, however, and rather a good one at that. The Cambridge Audio 851C (£1,195) is a CD player with a digital preamplifier that has USB as well as AES/EBU inputs. I had hoped to find a transport and DAC/pre combo in the Cyrus range for a similar price, but its current DAC/preamps alone start at more than the ATC.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Very revealing and tremendously dynamic with genuine low-end power

DISLIKE: cluttered remote; lack of pace; no USB input

WE SAY: A heck of a lot of CD player, preamp and DAC for the money

