

AN EXCLUSIVE REALREVIEW OF THE ACTIVE ATC SCM 19AT by Richard Bowles (Rabski)





First impressions

A development of the company's well-regarded SCM19 stand-mount passives, the SCM19ATs are the result of ATC applying their experience with professional monitors to produce a pair of compact, domestic, fully-active towers. In the world of hi-fi, heavy is good. In which case at over 30 kg each, these should indeed be good.

Out of the packing, first impressions are positive. The cherry laminate of 'my' pair has an attractive matt finish, which gives them a modern, 'designer' feel. The second pleasant surprise is the grilles. Rather than cloth, these are a metal mesh, with a contemporary, almost industrial look. A matter of taste, of course. Kevin McCloud would love them, Enid Blyton would chunder, but they are pleasantly different. The only small negative (OCD hat on) is that the drivers have cut-outs where the allen mounting bolts go. In one or two places, this leaves a very small piece of the underlying wood visible, which is notably lighter in colour. Most would not notice this, and a few seconds with a bit of wood dye during manufacture would sort it. There are also things I can only describe as thin, red metal mushrooms sprouting from each corner of the rear-mounted electronics. Possibly they are there to stop you from placing the heatsinks right against a wall but they look a little odd. Lastly, the ATC logo frankly makes the badges look a bit nasty, though they are mercifully small.

At almost exactly a metre in height with spikes, the 19ATs are relatively compact. The width is 370mm and the sides are attractively curved. The cabinets are multi-layered and internally braced, so the weight is certainly not just the electronics. They are also sealed, so with no porting should not be fussy about closeness to rear walls: a major plus for most people. Tech specs are near the end and there is loads of info on the ATC website, so I will not waste space with details. However, as an overview, they have a soft-dome tweeter and a 150mm soft-dome mid/bass driver. Each is separately driven by its own on-board amplifier, fed by an active second-order crossover. The mid/bass amplifier outputs 150W and the treble, 32W. There are various forms of overload and fault protection. The drivers and crossovers are designed to provide seamless integration, excellent on-paper performance and long-term reliability; backed up by ATC's six-year warranty. Of particular note, in the company's words: "The advantage of active crossovers is that their response remains unaffected by variable voice coil impedance, while the use of phase compensation enables phase coherency at the crossover points, improving the SCM19AT's tonal balance and enhancing imaging for a pin-point stereo field". I cannot say I disagree. As is normal for actives, signal connection is fully balanced.

Initially, I placed them roughly, without spikes. Although less than perfect sonically, this is ideal for messing about without wrecking carpets. Ye Gods, they're silent! All connected, no source, pre-amp flat out. Nothing. Zero. No hum, hiss or anything. A fair bit of shifting around with various tracks and they seem to work best here close to a perfect triangle, but slightly wider spaced and very slightly toed-out. ATC suggest an equilateral triangle and directly facing, but this is always room dependent. Time to get the spikes out and get down to it.

A proper listen

Although I ended up playing countless albums and CDs, for the review I've picked three genres that are likely to cover a reasonable range of tastes. I've also avoided excessively 'kind' tracks, so no perfectly-recorded female vocals here...

A little jazz to start with. Keith Jarrett on vinyl: *Personal Mountains*. Now that the ATCs are better positioned and spiked, the first obvious thing is that the soundstage has become massively wider and the bass far-better defined. They are excellent at instrument placement and dynamics. Jan Garbarek's sax is clean with a perfect 'edge' and is right there in space. The piano harmonics are also very good (I played *Koln Concert* a lot, and again the piano was lovely). Going back a while in time, to possibly the ultimate LP, Miles Davies, *Kind of Blue*, and the ATCs excel in a surprising way. The presentation is quite forward, but really captures the atmosphere and mood. 'Presence' is an overused word, but it suits here.

Let's rock. Led Zeppelin, and *Kashmir* from the remastered CD. The 'wall of sound' production comes across, but the band is nevertheless located spatially. This one is possibly a little short of the deepest bass, but what there is, is tight and fast. Possibly also a little 'small' in the image. However, it 'feels' right. Drums in particular are visceral in their attack. OK. A little more up to date, and while I did say 'no female vocals', I added this, because it can be difficult to get right: Imogen Heap, *Ellipse*, again on CD. Of all the tracks, *Little Bird* has Imogen's voice verging on the hard-edged at times. Some of the lowest bass notes are again lighter than I'm used to, but they're as tight as a duck's fundamental. There is a perfect attack to the vocals and Imogen is forward spatially. Very, very enjoyable.

Classical next, and Itzhak Perlman's *Elgar Violin Concerto*. Vinyl. I have a few recordings of this, but my favourite is the Barenboim Chicago Symphony. It's Deutsche Grammophon, which I often find to be more hype than quality. Nevertheless, this one is a good recording, and here it works beautifully. There is again a real feeling of space and placement. It's almost relentlessly accurate, but suffused with intimacy and emotion. One of the best three renditions of this I have heard, and the others were on systems costing (massively) more. Another treasure, *Tintagel*, Arnold Bax, and the LPO under Boult. A bit more of a mixed bag. With the really big passages, the ATCs seemed a little constricted. Not quite the wide open feel I normally get from this. On the other hand, once again, excellent placement in space, and with superb dynamics. The ATCs just breeze through the massive transients, which translates into an enjoyable 'edge of the seat' listen. To be fair, my listening space produces almost no reinforcement, and in many rooms it's likely that bass will be deeper.

A pattern is apparent here. There is a temptation to regard actives as some kind of domestic PA system, designed to give massive SPLs without much subtlety. The ATCs are almost the polar opposite. At sensible listening levels, the lack of colouration, massive dynamic range, ability to reproduce transients, and accurate imaging are beguiling, though that's not to say they can't go loud. They certainly can, but still retain the 'being there' feeling. They produce a real feeling of width and depth, and a lifelike presentation. In particular, lead vocalists seem to be in space front of the speakers.



Boring (to some) tech stuff

Drivers: HF, ATC 25 mm dual suspension tweeter. Mid/LF, ATC 150 mm SL

Matched response: +/- 0.5 dB

Frequency response (-6dB): 54 Hz–22 kHz

Dispersion: $\pm 80^\circ$ coherent horizontal, $\pm 10^\circ$ coherent vertical

Max SPL: 108 dB

Crossover frequency: 2.5 kHz

Connectors: male XLR

Input sensitivity: 1 V

Filters: second-order critically damped with phase compensation

Overload protection: active FET momentary gain reduction

Fault protection: DC fault protection and thermal trip. Fault indication on rear panel mounted LED

Amplifier output: 150W LF, 32W HF

Cabinet dimensions (HxWxD): 980x370x344mm (spikes add 25mm to height, grille adds 34mm to depth)

Weight: 31kg

Conclusions

The ATCs work incredibly well in a domestic setting, regardless of how loud you run them. They are accurate, but that does not imply unpleasant. They do not make bad recordings sound worse than they are, nor do they make them sound better. They do not flatter to deceive, which means they pull the best out of good (and average) recordings. They are not clinical, sharp, etched or bright. What is on the CD or LP is what you get, and if it's well recorded, you get it massively. Mids are spectacularly clean, and vocals are really centre-front. Top end is clear and sparkling, and there is never any apparent step between frequencies. Cymbals have a beautiful metallic 'sheen', drums have real 'bite' and impact, and bass notes are tight and fast. These are, however, not 'drum and bass' or reggae bakeoff speakers. If ill-defined, bloated, window-rattling bass is your thing, then look elsewhere. In that sense, and in other ways, they remind me of the very best electrostatics. There are real 'hair on the back of the neck' moments to be had with these, and equally so at late-night, low-volume playing. They do loud, but if anything, they do quiet better, which encompasses most of our listening in real life. They are usable all of the time. Play intimate jazz late at night, and belt out rock at ear-bleeding levels when nobody else is at home.

The SCM19ATs are in a difficult area in terms of retail price. At close to £5000 they are not cheap, and there is a lot of serious competition. However, there is no need for power amps, which means that either you save, or you can devote funds to a better front end. To get the equivalent quality, you would need to spend more (possibly a lot more) overall on a passive system, and that doesn't take into account the serious benefits of active crossovers, certainly when they are as good as this.

Some may find them a little forward (at first), some may find them a little modern aesthetically, some may find them a little bass light. However, to my ears and eyes, they are 'right'. It took a day of listening to 'get it', but I now do. I find them quite hard to classify, because they don't really suit any particular sort of music. This, of course, is what good equipment should do. If you are looking around this price range, I would more than thoroughly advise an audition.

The obvious test of any piece of equipment is its ability to make you keep listening. As I start the first draft of this review, we have most of the family arriving for Easter on what was tomorrow but is now today. It is three in the morning and I am being moaned at, not unreasonably, for carrying on pulling things off the shelves to listen to. That, in a nutshell, is the ATCs. They make you want to keep finding things to play. A number of tracks are probably the best I have ever heard them sound.

A few days on, and I am now at the final version of this. The ATCs have not tired me at all. The listening room is a pile of CDs and LPs out of their boxes and sleeves, and I can't stop. What surprises is not the ability to belt it out, but also to do subtle; lovely imagery and big dynamics at low volume. That's a very hard trick to pull off, but the 19ATs succeed. I will be unhappy to see them go, and to be honest, I never expected to be writing that.

Plus

- Excellent dynamic range and 'speed'.
- Very good soundstage, with palpable depth, width and placement.
- Superb integration between bass/mid and treble.
- Incredibly lifelike at 'normal' listening volumes.
- Sensible size and relatively unfussy about position.

Minus

- Very accurate, so unforgiving of really bad recordings.
- A little forward with vocals.
- Light on very deep bass.
- A little constricted on really big works.
- Looks might not suit everyone.