



ATC CDA2 Mk2 | CD player/preamp | £2950

Something special for CDs

FOR Detailed, expressive sound through all inputs; solid build

AGAINST Headphone jack and 3.5mm input are on the back



It's a long held belief in hi-fi circles that companies can either make good electronics or good speakers, but not both. There's a fair bit of evidence to support that idea, even though a number of brands still attempt it. As with any such rule there are exceptions, and it looks like ATC is one.

Regular readers will be familiar with the ATC brand. Its almost-legendary SCM 11 standmounters have dominated the £1000 price point for over a decade, and have picked up more *What Hi-Fi?* Awards than any other speaker in our 40-year history.

Then there's the high-end £10k SCM 50s, our long-serving reference speakers, and our go-to box when we want to hear what a source or amplification component is really doing. So it is with some trepidation that we approach the CDA2 Mk2.

The CDA2 Mk2 packs a CD player, fully featured digital-to-analogue converter and a high-quality analogue preamp, so how should it be judged? It's not a particularly common combination of abilities, and while the obvious path is to compare this ATC with separates components that add up to the similar overall price, this doesn't seem wholly fair. Going the separates route triples the box count and adds the cost (and mess) of additional cabling, but potentially, at least, delivers a better quality of sound. Or so we thought.

While ATC is best known for its speakers, the company has made electronics for years. The power modules in its active speakers and its range of standalone amplification have gained plenty of praise, but never quite held on to the limelight.

Quality features

The CDA2's digital-to-analogue section uses a premium 32-bit AKM DAC chip, chosen for its low noise and distortion. This means the ATC can cope with music files up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256, though the latter drops to DSD128 if you're using a Mac. In practice, the scarcity of worthwhile DSD music files at the higher rates is such that, in real terms, the lower output from a Mac is not a huge loss. What's more, Apples don't need special driver software to interface with the DAC.

Connectivity is good with USB (Type B), coax and optical available alongside two pairs of stereo RCA analogue inputs and a 3.5mm jack. It's a shame the designers saw fit to hide the 3.5mm input as well as the 6.3mm headphone output on the back panel. This makes them awkward to use.

Professional roots

Given ATC's pro heritage it doesn't come as a surprise to find the inclusion of balanced XLRs as an alternative to the usual RCA analogue outputs. Both of these connections work through the CDA2's volume control. Just add a power amplifier or a pair of active speakers to get a sound. The CDA2's output stage is generously specified, delivering no less than 9.2V through the RCAs and double that out of the XLRs. This means it should have no trouble driving long cable runs and the most insensitive of power amplifiers.

We use our reference Gamut D200i power amplifier driving our pair of ATC SCM50s speakers throughout, moving to Neat's Xplorers floorstanders on occasion to find out how the CDA2's balance

KEY FEATURES



CD player



Digital inputs



Analogue preamp

works in different set-ups. We're pleased to discover that it works just fine.

We start with Stravinsky's *The Rite Of Spring* on CD and the ATC sounds at home. Its TEAC-sourced transport mechanism is slick, quiet and responsive. With this recording the CDA2 delivers a large-scale sound underpinned by a strong sense of composure. This is a player that never gets ruffled no matter how demanding the music gets. That sense of organisation isn't bought at the expense of dynamics or excitement either. The ATC sounds thrilling when the music demands, but can also soothe when required.

Impressive transparency

Its tonal balance is as even as you like, with no part of the frequency range gaining undue emphasis, so the natural tone of instruments (and voices, as we find out when we listen to Nina Simone) come through undiminished. As with the company's speakers, the CDA2 is impressively transparent to the source material. It's not one to fudge things with coarse or aggressive recordings, so any flaws are easily heard. Equally, it won't go out of its way to make such recordings unlistenable, such is its refinement and lack of overt distortion.

We switch to our Macbook (loaded with Audirvana Plus music-playing software) and try out the USB input. The CDA2 continues to impress with good detail levels, expressive dynamics and a firm, surefooted grip on rhythms. We listen to a range of music from Olafur Arnald's *Found Songs* and Kate Bush's *Hounds Of Love* right through to Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* and the ATC continues to please. It can



charge full-throttle with a track such as Lamar's *King Kunta* delivering a full dose of punch and drive yet change down a gear and render Bush's *Under The Ivy* with all the sensitivity it deserves.

Input consistency

The story remains positive through both the optical and coax digital inputs, with the CDA2 proving a consistent and well engineered performer. We wish the front-panel display were better though - it's too small to show much information. The remote handset isn't quite right either. It's designed to control a complete system and invariably such ambitions mean that some of the buttons are redundant when using just the CDA2. The button placement is less than intuitive too.

We're pleased to report that the sound through the line-level inputs is excellent, showing a degree of insight, warmth and finesse that is unusual in such a digital-centric product. The controlled

ATC has shown its expertise is not limited to speakers

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and detailed presentation we hear from CD and the digital inputs is present here.

The headphone output - compatible with headphones in the 30-600 ohm range (almost all of them) - is equally admirable, echoing the impression given by the fine line-level outputs. If only the headphone socket were on the front. We hope ATC sorts this on the next version.

We've no complaints about the overall build. While lacking the slickness of premium products from the industry majors - ATC is tiny in comparison to the likes of Marantz - there's little to complain about when it comes to solidity or finish. The CDA2 Mk2 feels as though it's engineered to last for years.

How does the CDA2 compare to the best separates combinations available for similar money? The answer is very well for the most part. By the highest

standards, it could do with a touch more rhythmic drive and dynamic expression, but the shortfalls are small. On the plus side, it's a single box, packed with features without the mess of interconnects. For many people that will be enough to tip their preference. Truth be told. We'd be tempted too.

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★

VERDICT The CDA2 Mk2 is well equipped, sounds great and reduces your system's box count and wires. What's not to like?