



ATC SCM11 Version 2

List Price: \$2,199

Review by
Dr. John Richardson

So, when did you first realize that there was this unique entity called the audiophile?

I recall that as a young graduate student I liked to visit high-end audio salons and dream of what could be. I was of course mainly a window shopper, as I had little to no disposable cash at the time. Even if I couldn't afford the gear I did drop a few bucks once in awhile on a cd. In one such shop, I randomly picked up a disc that looked interesting and asked the sales person to tell me about it. With an upturned nose and a pout he informed me that such discs were bought by "audiophiles" who used them to help make their very expensive hi-fi systems sound good. What I held in my hands was a so-called demonstration disc that these strange people played on their fancy stereos to impress (or annoy) their friends, neighbors, significant others, or anyone else who would listen. My curiosity piqued, I got the disc home and played it, and sure enough, it did make my modest system sound like a million bucks. Soon after, however, the disc was relegated to the scrap heap of the past because the music on it *sucked* - it was some weird amalgamation of 1980s pop and Kenny G-type smooth jazz with lots of bass and electronic effects that held no interest to me on a musical level. But it did make my system sound good, and I'd like to think it helped me impress a few of my friends!

Why recall this little vignette from my past? Well, it got me to thinking that maybe we audiophiles like our audio playback to sound a certain way. If we are going to lay out big bucks on fancy gear, we certainly should have the right to expect it to sound good, right? And to make that happen, our music also has to sound good in whatever way we decide to define "good."

Let me illustrate with another example. There are lots and lots of excellent sounding audiophile reissues of jazz, blues, rock, and classical recordings, at least according to those spicy catalogs we all get in the mail from the likes of Acoustic Sounds and Music Direct. Unfortunately, I still can't afford a lot of the audio candy offered by these purveyors of aural nectar, but I do occasionally get to hear certain of these reissues (typically borrowed) on my system and on those of friends. I'm always impressed, as they are quite good at conveying a musical message and making the stereo system sound mighty nice at the same time.

My audio buddy Mike Peshkin once asked me whether I preferred original Blue Note jazz pressings to the pricy reissues. I didn't really have an answer since I'd never made such a comparison. Sensing my confusion, Mikey led me in for the kill like a moth to the flame, producing several examples of both the original pressing and the expensive reissue. We sat down and listened, and of course we heard differences.

In the end, both of us had to admit that we somehow preferred the original pressings to the reissues when played back to back on the same system. Why? To me the originals preserved a sense of creative energy, grit, and electricity that somehow placed the listener more directly in the presence of the actual recording session. With the reissues some of this quality had been removed or lost, perhaps partly due to degradation of the master tapes over the years. However, I don't think this was the only culprit. I suspect that when these releases were reissued, some tweaks were made during the remastering step to make the recordings more listenable on today's audiophile rigs. I'm not complaining, as the reissues sounded prettier and more polished, and one can't really begrudge the marketing folk for trying to satisfy a certain niche customer.

Lately, we have seen much more of an interest among critical listeners in gear that is more commonly used in the recording studio. Yep, I'm referring to the pro audio side. These folks have a bit different focus than we audiophiles, as they want to know exactly what is on a recording and that doesn't always result in a pretty picture. Music and sound are not always euphonic and pleasing and audio/mastering engineers need to know what is really going on in that recording booth or on that master tape. Accuracy and transparency are the order of the day in their world. Low distortion is also important because it leads to ear fatigue and when your job is to sit in front of speakers for hours upon end, a speaker that tires your ears get tossed fast.

So which is better, the absolute truth to the source, or a euphonic worked up version of it? Pro or audiophile? Ah, the eternal conundrum of the audiophile... Back to that question in just a bit.

One company that began as a pro audio operation and then crossed over into the consumer side is ATC, which is short for Acoustic Transducers Company and this is Stereomojo's second review of one of their speakers. James Darby reviewed the SCM 50ASL, a world's first review of the self-powered \$20,000 floorstander. It was one of, if not the first, audiophile reviews in the world of the then well established ATC recording studio monitors. He started the review by stating, *"If you are not familiar with the ATC brand of speakers, you are probably not involved in the recording industry. ATC speakers and electronics are as common in recording, mixing and mastering studios as rainy days in Seattle. According to their website, artists who use ATC speakers include Pink Floyd, Mark Knopfler, Tom Petty and the Rolling Stones to name just a few. The people who make those artists sound good are the engineers and the list there is even more impressive with names like Doug Sax, George Massenburg and Bob Ludwig among them. Sony uses ATC's in their New York SACD studios. So does Abbey Road, Warner Brothers, Polygram and Naxos among many others."*

ATC makes both active and passive monitoring speakers and operates out of Gloucestershire, England where all of their products are built by hand using internally sourced components. Like a very few other speaker manufacturers, they even design and build their own drivers in-house, thus making them about as vertically integrated as a modern audio company can get. As such, ATC builds and supports both pro audio and consumer grade lines of speakers and amplifiers.

I happened to see a press release that looked interesting and decided to get in touch with their new U.S. distributor, Lone Mountain Audio, who immediately shipped out a pair of the brand new SCM 11 (Version 2) passive monitors for audition. As a quick introduction, this improved SCM 11 is part of ATC's Hi-Fi Passive Series, which are intended as entry level products. The SCM 11 is one of the smaller stand mounted speakers in the line, with only the diminutive SCM 7 weighing in below it. But rest assured, as we shall soon see, there's nothing diminutive about the SCM 11's sound.

Upon arrival and unboxing, I found that each speaker was individually clothed in a nicely fitted fabric bag. The review samples boasted a beautifully finished cherry veneer on all four faces, and the cabinets themselves displayed artfully curved sides to minimize internal reflections. I also found the grilles interesting and attractive- these were made of dark gray painted steel and consisted of an open chicken wire-like (read: hexagonal) pattern. They also attach magnetically to the cabinets

and are curved to reduce edge diffraction. I thought the grilles added enough of a visual statement that I chose to leave them on throughout my audition period. Each speaker was equipped with dual sets of binding posts, making them amenable to bi-wiring or even bi-amping, but the supplied jumpers were the order of the day for me. I was a bit bummed that the posts didn't appear to accept bananas, as these have become the termination of choice for me from a convenience perspective. I later found out, however, that the metallic posts contain plastic plugs that can be removed to accommodate banana terminations.

As I mentioned before, the drivers were developed and built in-house by ATC. Reading the manufacturer's description of these drivers would indicate that a great deal of effort went into designing them, resulting in such improvements as a non-ferrofluid wave-guided soft dome tweeter (the fluid stuff dries up eventually, or so they say) and a mid/bass driver sporting a huge magnet. The speakers are heavy; in fact somewhat heavier than my comparably sized Fritz REV 7s. Much of this mass is said to result from the oversized magnets, especially in the larger of the two drivers. Spec-wise, these speakers are kind of interesting. They are an easy load to drive from an

impedance standpoint, with a nominal impedance value of 8 ohms; however, they are quite inefficient by modern standards, clocking in at only 85 dB/watt/meter. Such numbers suggested to me that these speakers were probably going to be somewhat amplifier sensitive. Frequency range is stated to be -6 dB at the low and high limits of 56 Hz and 22 kHz, respectively, and recommended amplifier power ranges from 75 to 300 watts per channel. I will say that the frequency range concerned me a bit, as 6 dB down at only 56 Hz suggested that



these pups were going to be a bit shy on bass. Just what I need, so thought I: another set of bass-anemic monitors that require me to patch in a subwoofer. So much for preconceived notions...

While I found the SCM 11's to be remarkable performers across the whole audible frequency band, I was blown away by their bass. Never have I heard such fast, tuneful, and well defined bass from a speaker. And that's not all. The bass went low, or at least it seemed to. Maybe it's a sleight of ear, but I'd swear these speakers were pumping useable bass down below 50 Hz with no problems at all. Whatever was



missing in the lower octaves, I didn't notice, nor did I care, because what was there was just so there! I was never tempted to add my subwoofer for fear of screwing up the magic that I was hearing, and to be honest, I never missed it. With regard to reproduction of natural bass (within reason), these ATCs are the reigning champs at my house! I will note that I had the speakers up on stands to get the tweeters right about at ear level, and well out into the room, so they were getting no room reinforcement.

I had suspected that these speakers would be amplifier sensitive, and I was right. My first thought was to pair the SCM 11s with my Threshold SA/3.9e amplifier, which puts out 60 watts per channel into eight ohms, full class A. While less than the manufacturer's suggested wattage, I felt that the Threshold could still hold its own, as it's a monster of an amp boasting some serious headroom, grunt, and current output. I was right, as the Threshold never missed a beat with the speakers, controlling those woofers like the proverbial schoolmarm thrashing her weak-willed husband. No, I couldn't see the cones flapping in the wind, but I didn't need to- the sound spoke for itself. Further, the Threshold imparted just a bit of warmth and burnish through the midrange and treble that really seemed to complement the buttoned-up neutrality of the speakers' admittedly flat frequency curve. This was a combination to die for, as we often like to say in the audio world, and I stuck with it through most of the review period. Over the course of about a week I did swap the Threshold out for another high achieving semi-vintage amp: a PSE Studio V stereo version, which puts out around 100 watts per channel. While very nice, the PSE just couldn't keep up with the Threshold on the SCM 11s. It's a cooler sounding amp, so it didn't mate as well with the natural frequency response of the speakers, nor did it seem to exercise the same degree of control or depth down in the bass region. I always seemed to want to turn the volume up to get more bass response, but then the mids and treble became overpowering and a bit sibilant. Not too bad, PSE, but still no cigar, even with 40 watts more power per channel than the Threshold. Dear reader, take note: output published specs in watts per channel are not the true measure of an amp's performance. That's why honest publications like Stereomojo exist; to give you the real story on how stereo products perform in real situations.

As a monitor with a distinctly pro audio heritage, the SCM 11 (as I've hinted previously) has a very flat in-room frequency response curve, and this is where I need to revisit that "what does an audiophile really want?" thing. In years past many audiophiles and music lovers alike have shied away from true studio monitors because of their flat response across the frequency spectrum, which is truthful to what's on the media source, but not always all that pleasant. I know, as I'm guilty as charged, in that I've had gear (speakers included) that tends to make everything sound good, at least to a certain extent. But do I really want my music homogenized to that point? Maybe, maybe not; it sort of depends on my listening mood and whether I have my reviewer hat on or not. However, it's speakers such as the SCM 11s that really make me appreciate what a truly transparent monitor can do. But these ATC speakers somehow seem to pull a rabbit out of the hat- they're pretty darn transparent to source and accompanying equipment, but with the right gear always manage to sound really good.

I've read that ATC speakers supposedly like to be played loud, as they don't add volume-induced distortion, but that they can also sound dull at low volume. I didn't find that to be the case at all with the SCM 11s. In fact, I thought these speakers performed beautifully at low levels, which is important to me since that's where most of my listening happens. The bass was there, the detail and resolution were there, the sense of punchy dynamic was preserved (albeit to a smaller level), and the harmonic texture remained

intact, all at volumes not much exceeding that of a few people speaking in the room at a normal level. Not that I minded turning up the volume once in awhile, as they perform awfully well in that case too- just don't think that you have to exclusively play them loud to enjoy them.

To say that I have been impressed with these ATC monitors would be an understatement. In order to get a better feel for them, I thought it might be instructive to compare them directly with another favorite monitor of mine: the aforementioned Fritz REV 7. I've had the Fritzes in-house since early last summer and can't seem to get enough of them. How, then, would these favorites stand up to the ATC onslaught?

First off, these are quite similar speakers in terms of design and execution. They are both stand-mounted two-way monitors of reasonable proportion that use high quality drivers (I'd even daresay state-of-the-art in both cases). And they both come in at similar price points- the Fritzes run right around \$2500. The major difference between the two designs is that the Fritz is ported whereas the ATC design relies on a sealed box. The general difference here sound-wise is that the Fritzes go lower in the bass (down to 40 Hz at least) while the ATCs are tighter and more controlled in that region while sacrificing extension and weight below 50 Hz or so.

In somewhat non-audiophile terms I'd say that the Fritz REV 7s remind me more of the experience of sitting wrapped in a blanket in front of a roaring fire on a seriously cold day, while the ATC SCE 11s put me more in mind of a crisp, clear early spring day where you can see for miles across an atmosphere totally unobstructed by smog or other man-made impediments. Both are pleasant and memorable experiences, but just different, and that's how I come down on trying to describe the differences between these transducers.

Alright then, it's on to the specifics...



Let's start with the bass and work our way up from there. While the Fritzes obviously excel in the area of bass extension, I really can't seem to get over the magic of the ATC bass presentation, which I've already outlined. Since bass is the rhythmic propulsion of most of the music we listen to- the underlying foundation, if you will- we need both satisfying extension and definition. That sense of definition and speed, with no overhang, sloppiness, or artificiality is in my mind the very strongest attribute of the ATC SCM 11. Yes, the ATCs do give up some extension to the REV 7s (which are quite remarkable in terms of how low they actually do go), but my nod has to ultimately go to the



ATCs here. Moving up to the midrange shows a tighter competition. Listening to Oliver Nelson's "Stolen Moments" from the album "Blues and the Abstract Truth" (24/96 download from HDTracks.com) highlights the lovely sense of burnish on Nelson's horn through the Fritz speakers. Likewise, the flute has a wonderfully lush and organic tone that sports the harmonics of a real instrument in real space. Even with the warm Threshold amplification behind them, the ATC speakers sound a bit leaner and meaner through the mids on this same cut, with a bit less harmonic texture. I found the REV 7s to be "prettier" in a sonic sense with this recording, making it more pleasurable to hear. However, the ATCs brought a sense of openness and ultimate sense of truth to the game through the midrange that the Fritz speakers didn't quite capture. So maybe a draw in this category, recognizing the concept of "different strokes for different folks." At the treble end, I'd have to say both speakers are excellent, and I didn't perceive more than the most subtle

differences. Both had excellent, open treble extension without ever sounding hard or brittle, maybe even exhibiting a bit of welcome sweetness. This observation makes sense when we recall that both speakers make use of highly sophisticated soft-dome tweeters. No complaints from me

regarding the treble performance of either speaker.

As an interesting aside, I had fellow reviewer John Fritz over not too long ago to hear both speakers. He asked to hear "Stolen Moments" as the evaluation cut. First we listened on the ATCs and then to the Fritzes. John's first impression was that he preferred the presentation through the Fritz REV 7s for their overall sense of warmth and body. Then, as an afterthought, he asked me to put the ATC speakers back in. Interestingly, after hearing the cut on them a second time he changed his mind, ultimately slightly preferring the "truthfulness" of the ATCs (using his own words).

A recording I've been enjoying lately is Lyle May's 1988 effort "Street Dreams" which I picked up recently in the dollar bin of a favorite vinyl shop. I knew of Mays as Pat Metheny's keyboardist, so I figured his own stuff should be pretty good as well. Also, his sidemen got my attention as well: Bill Frisell, Peter Erskine, and Steve Gadd, just to mention a few; pretty much A-list folks to have backing you. While the album (LP, Geffen) sounds a bit cheesy and dated at times, there are some real nuggets here as well. Several of these include "August," a dreamy piece that reminds me of a lazy summer day, as well as "Possible Straight", an upbeat and punchy tune with some serious low brass punctuation.

"Street Dreams" in its entirety sounded quite luscious through the Fritz REF 7s, which excelled at digging into the lower registers of Mays' synths, as well as the low brass foundation of the cut "Possible Straight." These speakers pretty much let me sit back and lose myself in the performance with nary another thought.

I found that I was a bit more engaged and analytical in my approach to the album when listening through the ATC SCM11 speakers. I felt a bit more alert to the sense of timing of the music; its natural beat and rhythm. I found my head bobbing a bit more, and my ears were perked up as if hanging on for the initiation of the next upbeat. I'd always thought of the REV 7s as having an excellent sense of timing (and they do...), but the SCM11s had me in a vice grip- I couldn't shake myself loose, nor could I allow my attention to drift off to something else. In general, I've found that if I put on an album or listen to a digital playlist through the ATC speakers, I'm pretty much committing to the duration of the thing, as I'm actively involved and sucked into the listening experience. It's ultimately that sense of clarity and transparency that makes these speakers so intriguing; it's like staring at something either incredibly beautiful or profane that you almost feel guilty looking at but just can't turn away from! My real take on the ATC speakers is that they have a way of laying bare the essence of a musical performance or recording through sheer lack of editorializing. They just don't seem to add (or subtract) anything of their own, but let the good, bad, and the ugly flow as it was intended. Audiophile approved? Well, maybe not, but ultimately truthful to the source and anything else you happen to have in the audio chain...

Finally, I'd be remiss if I didn't comment on the SCM11's ability to re-create audio space. They're smallish two-way monitors, so we'd expect them to get out of the way and disappear, which they most definitely do. I've commented in a previous review on how well the Fritz REV 7s disappear in the soundstage, and I'd say the ATC speakers are every bit their equal in accomplishing this feat. Stereophonic imaging is every bit as precise as we would expect, and the soundstage is satisfyingly deep and wide. In Oliver Nelson's "Stolen Moments" each instrument holds its own place, front-to-back and side-to-side in the aural soundstage. In this sense, the ATCs are as good as anything I've had in my listening room.

So where do I ultimately come down on the ATC SCM 11 monitors? I think they're marvelous speakers, but with some caveats. First, they will need to be carefully matched to appropriate amplification. They'll most appreciate an amp that can give them the power and headroom they deserve (don't forget their low efficiency) as well as the current to move those woofers and really come alive. Also, these guys are extremely transparent, so you're more likely to hear potential problems upstream in your audio system that may drive you crazy down the road. But get it all right, and these speakers have the potential to do some real magic that allows the listener to settle down and partake in some long-term audio intrigue and enjoyment.

There you have it, folks. The audiophile conundrum. Absolute truth or enhanced beauty? Only you can (and should) decide... But if truth is your goal, I haven't experienced a better speaker to provide it than the Version 2 of ATC's SCM 11.



These ATC SCM11 (version 2) speakers are real firecrackers: they're guaranteed to give their owners lots of excitement in the listening chair. I'm stunned by their clarity, resolution, and definition across the audible band, but especially in their ability to reproduce accurate bass down to about 50 Hz. They don't dig down as deep as some other contenders of similar size, but the bass that is there is textbook good.

Is the SCM11 going to satisfy every audiophile? Probably not. No speaker will. Pair it with a hardy, clean, neutral amp and sources and you will hear very much what the artists, producers and engineers heard in the studio when they made the recording. But, like Jack Nicholson snarled to Tom Cruise, "You can't handle the truth!" may be the real truth. Pair it with a powerful but slightly warm amp (think vintage Krell or Threshold) or even a tube integrated of at least 60 wpc, and you've got an instant classic on your hands! Or, if you have a tube preamp and a solid state power amp, that might be ideal. Habit forming, to say the least.

You may or may not yearn for more bass. Place it closer to a wall and you'll get a little bass reinforcement which may be enough. Now, to have the opportunity to hear it with an ATC subwoofer....

SPECS

New soft dome HF unit with precision alloy ATC wave guide.
New "CLD" driver technology with 45mm integral soft dome.
In-house, hand-wound precision flat wire coil.

Precision undercut bass pole.
Massive optimised motor assembly.
Flat impedance curve allowing easy load for amplifiers.
HF 25mm Neodymium, Mid/LF 150mm
Matched Response: $\pm 0.5\text{dB}$
Frequency Response: 56Hz-22kHz ($\pm 6\text{dB}$)
Dispersion: $\pm 80^\circ$ Coherent Horizontal,
 $\pm 10^\circ$ Coherent Vertical
Sensitivity: 85dB @ 1W @ 1metre
Max SPL: 108dB
Recommended Power: 50 to 300 Watts
Nominal Impedance: 8 Ohm
Crossover Frequency: 2.8kHz
Connectors: Binding Posts/4mm Plugs, bi-wire
Cabinet (HxWxD): 381x232x236mm
Weight: 10.9kg



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