

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



ATC CDA2 MK2

Monday, April 16, 2018
Jason Kennedy

ATC aren't into change for changes sake, they won't revise the range every year or so just to refresh its profile in the market, indeed even when they give something a major overhaul as is the case here the appearance remains much the same. The only external difference between the new CDA2 and its predecessor is the addition of a USB socket on the back panel, but inside nearly everything has been overhauled, and you can hear it.

It's an odd product though, how many other CD player/DAC/preamps are there on the market, there are plenty of DAC preamps but the notion is that people have stopped buying CD players. Presumably ATC's market still wants them or it has figured out that with the supply drying up they can meet the demand that exists. And lets face it, we all have plenty of CDs that should be played and quite large segments of the worldwide audio market have yet to adopt streaming. The disc drive mechanism on the CDA2 Mk2 is from TEAC who are pretty well the only supplier of CD specific transports on the market, I must admit that it didn't get a lot of use in my system but proved itself to be a useful source for instant access to unripped discs.

The more significant upgrade to the CDA2 is a new DAC board to which the aforementioned USB input connects and which can convert PCM up to 384kHz and DSD up to four times or DSAD256, which is quite a big number for a company that doesn't usually compete on specs. ATC's schtick is tried and tested engineering but this product proves that this ethos fits alongside audiophile ambitions like high resolution. You can stick a hi-res DAC chip into any converter and get it to work but to make it sound good you need to make all the supporting electronics that much quieter and more precise. Electrical noise is the enemy of digital audio as products like the Innuos Zenith SE prove and ATC have paid close attention to keeping it as low as possible by building a new power supply with nine extra voltage regulators above those in the original CDA2.

ATC has also refined the in- and output gain stages with discrete op-amps that provide buffering of inputs and a true balanced output from the XLR connections, the output stage itself being biased in Class A. There's plenty of technical explanation on the company's website so I won't go into it here save to say that the results back up the spiel, this is a remarkably revealing DAC/preamp. Unlike a lot of the competition it comes in a full width case with a nicely machined front panel and proper buttons for all functions, there is also a remote control that mirrors most of these and adds track access buttons for CD, it doesn't have buttons for all inputs however. It's not obvious but there is also a headphone jack, it's hidden on the back of the box so fine if you can access the rear panel but a fiddle if you can't.

Sound quality

Just because we reviewers are a perverse lot I started off listening to this not with my usual ATC P2 power amplifier but with an AVM called SA 8.2, a 450 Watt per channel beast that happened to be in the system at the time. ATC like power after all, how bad a match could it be?

Not so bad at all it turned out, positively musical in fact when I put on Macey Gray's 'Annabelle' where the brushes on the snare drum had lots of texture and presence and the high guitar notes were beautifully open and airy. Michael Wollny Trio's *Wartburg* is a live album that I've been enjoying a lot lately, it's got really deep bass and lots of detail in a recording with an unusually low noise floor, here the CDA2 revealed itself to be an unusually transparent DAC (using a USB input from the Zenith SE) that is also very well timed. That's what got me engaged, in the past ATC DAC/preamps have been good but a little conservative, hard to criticise but lacking the power to engage, this is different, it's a thriller.



It's still very even handed and devoid of the tonal sparkle that many add to give their products a polished sound, what you get in exchange is wide dynamic range and fabulous bass as the Michael Wollny proves by making all inclinations to move onto another track undesirable. This is quite an intense performance at times, one that can get a bit challenging on some converter/preamps, but not here this is a highly coherent piece of kit that delivers the full impact and musical diversity of the experience in a precise and exciting fashion that makes you want to keep listening.

Switching to the P2 power amp increased the entertainment value by projecting the sound into the room more effectively and revealing depth and texture, it also exposed just how good the double bass playing of Christian Weber is. In the name of science I forced myself to move on musically and found crisp cymbals, cavernous reverb and grumbling bass on Bark Psychosis' *Dust Sucker*. Then Bert Jansch's two guitars on 'Jack Orion' came on and revealed just how perfectly in sync his playing on both tracks of the recording is, not something that all systems can do especially whilst making the track musically intelligible to this extent. It's worth mentioning that I have been using USB far less than ethernet connections of late because the latter generally sounds better but here the result was very convincing indeed and proves that not all USB converters are equal.

As an analogue preamp the CDA2 Mk2 is very strong as well with excellent bass extension, a very open presentation and very good image depth. It shares the coherent demeanour of the digital input and adds a relaxed quality that helps to bring out the musical message extremely well. I also had a high end server (x-odos xo-one) with a coaxial output at the same time the ATC was in the system and got exceptional results with it, the combination producing a full bodied, substantial sound that was rich in detail and made instruments and voices sound very real indeed. Using a pair of Eclipse TD712z Mk2 speakers the results were inspiring, a combination of authority, articulation and rock solid timing made for a musical experience that was nigh on addictive.





I made a few comparisons of USB versus coax using the xo-one server and got better results with the SPDIF connection, which has a richer and more substantial sound that even seemed to have more detail, an area where USB usually excels. But previous experience suggests that with a really good source the ATC's USB input reflects as much, this contrast perhaps revealing the strengths and weaknesses of the source as much as anything. Unfortunately I ran out of time before being able to thoroughly assess the CD drive, I don't often play this format when I'm reviewing hardware but I do use it for music reviews and here it proved more than revealing enough to tell me all about the work being recorded and the style of those recordings.

The CDA2 Mk2 is well built, comprehensively equipped and highly revealing, but more importantly it makes familiar material engrossing, it makes you listen longer and dare I say it, louder. ATC has driven down distortion and noise so that more of the crucial timing and imaging cues can be heard, in the process they have delivered their finest digital product yet, it's a great pity they took it away!

Specifications

Type: CD player DAC preamplifier

Distortion (1kHz): preamplifier <0.0008% / 102dB, DAC <0.001%

Signal to noise: Wide Band >96dB, DIN >108dB, IEC "A" >112dB

Analogue Inputs: 2x RCA phono

Digital Inputs: Coaxial, Toslink, USB B

Analogue outputs: Balanced XLR, single ended RCA, 6.3mm headphone Jack

Supported Digital Formats: PCM from 44.1kHz to 384kHz in 32Bit, DSD64, DSD128, DSD256,

Maximum output voltage: 18.4 Vrms (XLR), 9.2 Vrms (RCA)

Dimensions WxHxD: 445 x 90 x 330mm

Weight: 7kg