

All amped up

As the active loudspeaker comes of age, **Ed Selley** sees just what a master of the art is capable of

There are times when the full benefit of a particular product cannot be totally realised until other changes and developments in seemingly unrelated areas have come to pass. In the case of active loudspeakers, the technical advantages have been known for some time in professional studio applications, but in terms of what that actually means for home audio fans constructing a system, any benefits have to be measured against the practicalities and upgrade path of a more traditional setup. In truth, you have to be completely on board with the active loudspeaker concept to go to the effort of constructing an audio system around it.

The blurring of where source ends and amplifier begins has recently started to make the active speaker look like a much more enticing concept. With a large swathe of source equipment now sporting a volume control, the ability to

One of the very best implementations of active speakers that I have spent time with

construct a compact but capable system using active loudspeakers has become a much more practical proposition. If you happen to be a bit of an expert in the field, this is very good news and, make no mistake, ATC is a specialist in active speaker design, and its SCM40A is the flagship of its Entry Series.

In the CDA2 Mk2 CD player/USB DAC/preamplifier (HFC 436), it has a product that's able to harness its active loudspeakers in a thoroughly modern way. At its heart, it is a Class A preamp sporting a pair of line inputs that pass through a conventional analogue potentiometer to a choice of balanced and unbalanced outputs. Where things really start to get interesting, however, is the other ▶



COMPONENTS

ATC CDA2 MK2 £2,950

This updated multi-functional player combines a high-specification analogue preamp with a DAC, offering analogue and digital inputs and a CD mechanism.

ATC SCM40A £6,800

This design takes the three-way sealed cabinet SCM40 and adds a hefty 242W Class A/B tri-amped module to each cabinet for fully active operation.

Picture credit: Shutterstock.com



inputs available. Thanks to the inclusion of an AKM DAC, there's also a coaxial, optical and USB-B connection, the latter being able to handle everything up to and including DSD256. Then, because ATC is pragmatic, there's a CD mechanism built in for good measure.

This means that combining the CDA2 Mk2 with a pair of active speakers like the SCM40A ensures you have a system that allows you to enjoy the benefits of active speakers and keep the box count down.

Have it large

As the name suggests, this is the active version of the SCM40 (HFC 389) floorstander, the largest member of the Entry Series and, while it is identical from the front, around the back instead of there being a trio of speaker terminals, there's an amp plate sporting a single XLR connection. The amp delivers a hefty 242W into the three drivers, one of which is an example of the distinctive and enormously capable dome midrange offerings that ATC is synonymous with.

The combination of the CDA2 Mk2 and SCM40A is rather stylish in a pragmatically business-like way. The SCM40A has a unique aesthetic. It's

finished to a very high standard and it doesn't take up any more room than most rivals, but there is a sense of purpose to it that is plain from the moment you heft it out of the box. This is a feeling that grows the more you spend time with it to the point where even though almost every pair will lead the pampered life of home audio equipment, if you suddenly need it to take the feed off a mixing

This is a collection of equipment that will play anything with a palpable sense of joy

desk for an impromptu gig, it can do so without breaking sweat. It's the same reason that people persist in buying Land Rovers – you're unlikely to climb every mountain and ford every stream, but it's nice to know you can.

The CDA2 Mk2 by contrast is rather more stylish, although it still exudes a no-nonsense air. It fits into the context of the current crop of capable all-in-one systems with the caveat that the amplification is living elsewhere. It would be foolish to describe it as out-of-the-box thinking

Above left: ATC's dome midrange offers fabulous coherence

Above: The CDA2 Mk2 is a clever combination of source and preamp

Above right: The SCM40A's 242W of amplification really allows it to sing

given it is in fact a box, but it is the perfect answer to how to get the most out of a pair of active speakers in a compact and aesthetically pleasing way.

Down to business

Of course, you don't buy products from ATC simply because they look nice, and the moment that you ask this system to get down to business, it reminds you of this in no uncertain terms. With a Melco N1A 4TB NAS drive (HFC 397) connected to the USB input of the CDA2 Mk2, what is most immediately arresting is what a difference going active makes to the SCM40. The passive version of the speaker is supremely capable, but mated with ATC's own amplification it feels like the whole presentation has been turbocharged. This is a startlingly immediate system. The 44.1 rip of Emiliana Torrini's *Gun* has a presence and visceral 'she's right there in the room' quality to it. Her staccato intakes of breath are vivid and absolutely real, while the gradual increase in scale and volume to the track is handled with absolute imperiousness.

And the bass... the low end on offer here is exquisite. The technical arguments for why active speakers

can generate better bass than an equivalent passive design are worthy and entirely accurate, but are no substitute for listening to what this system is really capable of. The sledgehammer low-end of Scratch Massive's *Waiting For A Sign* is simply awesome. If you want bass that you feel as much as hear, there's very little else available anywhere near this price that can out slam this setup. What sets it apart further is that there's nothing I've ever heard anywhere near this price that combines this gut-wrenching impact with the agility this system possesses. As a combo, it is utterly addictive.

The right stuff

The role that the CDA2 Mk2 plays in all this is subtle, but effective. It gets all of the basics right with a wonderfully linear volume control and a total absence of unwanted noise, but beyond that the quality of the digital-to-analogue section is entirely noteworthy. It takes a little time to appreciate quite how good it is because it is so natural and unobtrusive, but it allows this system to demonstrate truly lovely tonality at times. Nils Frahm's *Hammers* is handled with a wonderful sense of



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space and richness, but it's the detail that really makes the difference. At the crescendo, Frahm can be heard singing along. On some systems, it's barely distinguishable. Here, it's as clear as a bell.

No less important is that beyond the technical capability – and this system offers it in spades – is a collection of equipment that will play anything and play it with a palpable sense of

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joy. Roots Manuva's *Witness (1 Hope)* played at the sort of volume where you can start to see air move is arguably not a hi-fi pursuit. It is, however, some of the most fun you can have with your clothes on. When you're done being a hooligan, you can wind the volume back several notches, select the utterly wonderful *Spirit Of Eden* by Talk Talk and revel in a presentation that is as spacious and natural as you could hope for.

This ability to shift gear and change seemingly every aspect of its behaviour

to suit what is being played at the time is something that goes beyond the active aspect of this system and simply constitutes part of its DNA. At times, I have fallen into the trap of looking at ATC's products and the sheer engineering heft that goes into their construction and assumed that they couldn't possibly be capable of any sense of delicacy. I am happy to report that this duo elegantly proves me wrong. There isn't anything I can find in the cavernous storage of my Melco NAS drive that causes it to break its stride.

Special brew

This, then, is a rather special system even judged by the hallowed standards of *Beautiful Systems*. It is comfortably one of the very best implementations of active speakers that I have had the pleasure of spending any time with. It does the things we have come to expect from equipment in 2018, offering a sensible footprint, flexible inputs and elegant aesthetics. It then combines all of this with a performance that is utterly and unequivocally joyous. The active loudspeaker is no longer simply the optimal choice on paper, it's a real world champion too ●

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