

► **DETAILS**

PRODUCT
ATC SIA2-100/CD2

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated amplifier/CD player

WEIGHT
9.7kg (amp)
4.2kg (CD player)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
315 x 113 x 315mm (amp)
(WxHxD)
315 x 77 x 315mm (CD player)

FEATURES

- Claimed power output: 2x 100W (8ohm)
- Inputs: 2x stereo RCAs; 1x coaxial; 1x optical; 1x USB-B port (amp)
- Outputs: 1x stereo RCAs; 1x stereo XLRs; 1x coaxial; 1x optical (CD player)

DISTRIBUTOR
ATC Loudspeaker Technology Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01285 760561

WEBSITE
atcloudspeakers.co.uk



Mutual co-operation

ATC has expanded its range of electronics with a new amplifier and CD player, **Ed Selley** puts them through their paces



Probably best known for its loudspeakers, ATC has also made a small range of electronics for many years (see *Branching out*, overleaf). As many of the speakers it sells are active models, the company knows its way around amplifiers and has taken this expertise and constructed a range of integrated, pre and power amps that have more recently been augmented by the inclusion of digital decoding.

The duo you see here are the latest arrivals in the range and are in keeping with the company's design philosophy, while also being rather different from the norm – boasting a three-quarter width casework. The CD2 CD player is ATC's first attempt at pure source equipment and is designed to match the specification of the SIA2-100 integrated amp.

At first glance, the SIA2-100 (Stereo Integrated Amplifier, 2 channels, 100W) is fairly conventional. In keeping with ATC's design philosophy,

The assurance with which the duo hammers through crescendos is notable

it features a separate power supply for the pre and power amp sections and the output stage is comprised of MOSFET devices in a common source configuration. This is all fairly traditional practise, but it should mean that the SIA2-100 can handle most loudspeakers with ease.

As well as offering a pair of RCA stereo analogue inputs plus another on a 3.5mm jack via the front panel, it also supports coaxial and optical digital inputs and has a USB-B port that can handle files up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256 (DSD128 via Mac) through its AKM DAC.

The CD2 also uses an AKM DAC, but partners it with a TEAC transport mechanism and forgoes digital inputs of its own (as they're already on the amp). You do get balanced outputs, though, presumably to allow the CD2 to work with suitably equipped ATC amplifiers and preamps. The internals of the CD2 are also fastidiously designed. There are nine power regulators in the circuit to ensure accurate delivery and every section of the signal path is as short as possible.

This is admirable, but operationally the CD2 is rather quirky. There are five hard buttons on the front for quick control, but otherwise it shares a remote with the amplifier. This is



convenient, but operationally feels odd. There is no marked pause button (you press play again on either the player or remote) and pressing the large button on the remote that looks like a track skip button will in fact scan the track currently playing. It all works perfectly once you are wise to it, but takes a little getting used to. The amplifier does without direct input selection, instead there is a single button that cycles through the inputs. As there aren't many inputs it's bearable, but not as good as having dedicated source buttons.

Both units are handsome and well made. The slight curve to the side cheeks is a rare flourish that looks elegant and the rest of the product feels extremely well assembled. I especially like the arrangement of the connections across both units. Nothing feels crowded or poorly located and it makes connecting up both components very easy.

Sound quality

I initially focus on the SIA2-100. Connected to Bowers & Wilkins hugely revealing 805 D3 standmount from this month's *Beautiful System* (p88) and an SotM SMS-200 Neo network audio player (HFC 449) running into the USB port, it impresses from the off. With a background in professional audio, ATC has never been about anything other than tonal accuracy and the new amp doesn't let the side down. *Familiarity* by Punch Brothers from *The Phosphorescent Blues* album feels utterly and unambiguously real. The

pared-back instrumentation alternates with big but brief orchestral interludes that explode into life and vanish as fast as they appeared. Lead singer Chris Thile's vocals have the weight and space they need to be the soul focus of your attention.

One consistent aspect of the performance is that the SIA2-100 doesn't seek to modify the material it plays. This does mean that if the equipment it is partnered with tends towards being soft or uninvolved, it

A fabulous combo that manages to thrill and cosset in equal measure

won't do anything to correct it, but with the composed yet joyous B&W 805 D3 the effect is to let the speaker lead the character of the presentation. This is not to suggest it is completely neutral, though. Via the USB-B port, there is the slightest sense of the AKM DAC making itself felt. In comparison with the more commonly encountered ESS DACs, it feels tonally sweeter, trading a little detail for a refinement that isn't always present with the Sabre family.

None of these qualities come at the expense of sounding ballistic when called upon to do so. The pulsating digital fury of Orbital's *Monster's Exist* sees the duo in its element. The assurance with which it hammers through the crescendos of the track is notable and while there are some

HOW IT COMPARES

Naim's Uniti Star (HFC 433) is £500 cheaper and offers a similar spec and performance. As a dedicated CD player the CD2 is more pleasant to use than the Star, which uses its drive for ripping. The Naim counters by having streaming built in and a slicker remote interface and control app. When it comes to sonics the Naim is more propulsive and energetic in its presentation, but lacks the ability of the ATC duo to flatter poorer recordings while still accurately reflecting their content. For CD users the ATC combo is the better option.

The slight curve to the chassis affords the ATC combo a touch of elegance

rivals that can feel a little lighter on their feet, the composure – even at anti-social levels – impresses. There are notionally more powerful amplifier designs available at a similar price, but the ease with which you can exploit the power that the ATC makes available takes some beating.

Given that the CD2 is built around similar decoding hardware, it should not come as much of a surprise to find that the performance mirrors the amplifier's digital section. There are some intriguing caveats, however. Listening to Santigold's *Master Of My Make Believe* with the CD connected to both the RCA and coaxial input of the SIA2-100, the riotous *Go!* has a little more bass weight and force via the CD2's own decoding than when using the amplifier. It's not a night and day difference, but it's certainly worth using an analogue connection out of the CD2 if you can.

Once again, the overall balance of the CD2 is clearly targeted towards a calm and reasoned take as to what is on the CD, but if that extends to something fun it has little trouble reproducing it. The euphoric *Waiting For The 7:18* by Bloc Party is delivered with all of its joy firmly intact. The balance between Kele Okereke's heartfelt lyrics and the stomping urgent percussion is beautifully judged and notable because this disc is not a recording for the ages. The CD2 manages to open it out and deal with some of the rougher edges without compromising the feeling you are listening to an unembellished version of the music.



CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA stereo outputs
- 2 2x stereo RCA analogue inputs
- 3 USB-B port
- 4 Coaxial and optical digital outputs
- 5 Balanced XLR output (left channel)
- 6 RCA stereo outputs

BRANCHING OUT

The arrival of the CD2 as ATC's first dedicated piece of source equipment comes over 20 years after it first moved into making electronics. Its original reasoning to do so was simple enough: it had already amassed a considerable amount of experience in the design and manufacture of the amplifiers used in the active versions of its speakers. By making the amps available as a standalone component, owners who had chosen passive versions of the loudspeakers had access to amplifiers designed specifically to work with them. This range has grown over the years to feature pre and power models, integrateds and active modules.

The decision to start offering decoding has been a more recent development and has happened in stages. The CDA2 (HFC 376) combined preamp functionality with a CD mechanism and digital inputs so it could connect to a pair of active speakers and form a complete system with minimal box count. The move to using AKM decoding began with the Mk2 version of the CDA2 preamp (HFC 436), launched last year. This replaced the Wolfson chipset that the company had been using previously as ATC felt it offered considerably higher performance. AKM's 4490 chipset is now employed throughout all of ATC's decoders.

As a duo it's greater than the sum of its already capable parts. The forgiving element to the CD2's presentation means it will handle a collection of rough diamonds with an even handedness and consistency that rivals can lack. It also proves a happy partner for a vinyl front end and my Michell GyroDec and Cyrus Phono Signature MM/MC phono stage (HFC 408) setup, maintains its character and benefits from the neutral presentation and effortless headroom of the SIA2-100 integrated amplifier.

Conclusion

Even if you aren't looking to buy the ATCs as a pair, individually they have

much to offer. The SIA2-100 amp and SotM SMS-200 Neo networked audio player partnered up together comes in at a price that keeps many similarly specified all-in-one setups honest, the SotM giving the amp the streaming functionality it otherwise lacks. The CD2 silver disc player is arguably more compelling as a solo purchase. It has a genuinely lovely sound that flatters discs that need to be flattered and gives free reign to those that don't. As a pair, this is a fabulous combination that manages to thrill and cosset in equal measure. ATC doesn't introduce electronics very often, but these two are worth the wait and worthwhile seeking out ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - SIA2-100

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful, even handed sound; good spread of inputs; build
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks a little outright excitement; quirky controls
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A capable all-round amp that offers excellent performance with a wide range of setups
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - CD2

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Wonderfully sweet and lively presentation; build
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Some operational quirks
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A genuinely engaging disc spinner that will get the best from any CD collection
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

Q&A

Richard Newman
ATC transducer/R&D engineer



ES: How did you decide on the three-quarter width casework for the new units?

RN: We wanted it to appeal to a wider customer base and affordability and a compact chassis were two features highlighted to achieve this goal. The three-quarter size is large enough for the 100W stereo power amp (that could not be compromised) and has a significantly smaller footprint than the traditional 430mm case.

The SIA2-100 uses an evolution of a long-running ATC amplifier circuit. Are you still finding improvements and refinements to the basic design even after all this time?

The ATC output stage is continually in development and small improvements are always being investigated. Aside from the DAC, major leaps were mainly made in the input and output gain stages. These are made up of our own discrete op-amp implementation, which we invested many hours optimising to deliver incredibly low distortion and noise figures.

Given the same DAC is used in both components, did you consider building the combination as a CD transport and amp?

We thought about it, but in the end we decided to build a separate player because of its greater versatility. A proper analogue output stage alongside the digital outputs ensures the CD2 can also be used with any other analogue pre/integrated amps, including our own SIA2-150, and it serves customers in countries where demand for a high-quality CD player is still robust. Quite apart from the added utility of two discrete models, the decision avoids the challenge of building a transport within the confines of the SIA2-100's compact enclosure, already packed with a very large heatsink and linear power supply.

Are there any plans to use this new casework size elsewhere?

Perhaps, but only if there is a product that is ideally suited. The casework can't drive product development.