



Active duty

ATC's smallest active speaker could well stop the need to upgrade dead in its tracks, as **David Vivian** discovers

Long, long ago, a Greek philosopher called Zeno of Elea (circa 490-430 BC) posed a paradox. To reach a destination, he observed, you must first cover half the distance. If you then halve that distance and continue by halving the distance previously travelled, you keep moving forwards, but (think about it) never reach your destination. Remind you of anything? How about an audiophile's system building quest for high-end nirvana and the law of diminishing returns? That never-ending journey requiring ever larger sums of money to proceed in ever smaller steps, a 'destination' something floating hazily on the horizon rather than a practical full stop.

Some, of course, wouldn't have it any other way. The journey's the craic. Others, perhaps of a more pragmatic persuasion, might decide to take the off-ramp at a certain point

and arrive with a definitive thump, wanting for nothing more than their chosen, forever system. This is sometimes called the 'exit level', 'end game' option or perhaps an 'arrival' believed by the hard bitten to be nothing more than an easy cop out for the terminally weary.

Over the years, on a purely personal level, I've been torn between the two camps – to upgrade to infinity and beyond or settle for a high level of satisfaction and hope to make it last. For various reasons, not least the continued new kit-led stock in trade of *Hi-Fi Choice*, I've gravitated towards the former. But, during this review, my 'off duty' personal stance has flipped. Why? Allow me to introduce ATC's active SCM20ASL.

There's nothing new about the Gloucestershire-based company's two-way, 20-litre offering. The passive SCM20 made its debut way back in 1990 and is still part of ATC's lineup

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ATC SCM20ASL
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
2-way active standmount loudspeaker
WEIGHT
24.3kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
250 x 450 x 411mm
FEATURES
● 25mm soft dome tweeter
● 150mm Super Linear mid/bass driver
● 250W MOSFET Class A/B amplification
DISTRIBUTOR
Loudspeaker Technology Ltd.
WEBSITE
atc.audio

today, albeit with tweaks and upgraded drive units. It first went active in 1998, serving both the professional and domestic sectors with an unwavering tell-it-like-it-is honesty that surely led ATC to choose it as the flag bearer for its 50th anniversary celebrations, producing a limited-edition version with a special paint finish and leather-clad baffle, distinguishing it from the somewhat more affordable but otherwise identical £6,500 SCM20ASL you see here. Not that the standard Cherry,

The most potent antidote to chronic upgrading syndrome I've yet encountered

Black Ash, Walnut, Oak, Satin Black and Satin White finishes should limit the potential for domestic harmony. If it does, there's always the premium options, which include Rosewood, European Crown Cut Walnut, Burr Magnolia and Pippy Oak veneers. The friction-fit removable grille frame is wrapped in black acoustically transparent cloth.

Although it's ATC's smallest active speaker, the SCM20ASL is a chunky customer, 450mm tall and weighing in at a robust 24.3kg. Distinctive is the extra-thick front baffle to anchor

its two drivers. Round the back, there are even grab handles sprouting from the amplifier pack, just in case you were in any doubt its weighty presence is a functional necessity rather than an accident of birth. On the amp fascia, adjustment controls are few. You can change input sensitivity (1 or 2V) via a switch next to the balanced XLR input. There's also a bass control that allows a few dBs of boost or cut to help tailor the output to the room.

The inhouse designed-and-made 25mm soft dome tweeter and 150mm mid/bass driver are immaculately engineered to deliver the kind of performance demanded by studios, which means a level of toughness as well as reliable transparency. The extra control provided by the tweeter's twin suspension design is a case in point. Teamed with a large 60mm Neodymium ring magnet, mechanical linearity is optimised, reducing the kind of distortion that can't be addressed through voicing.

The 8.4kg Super Linear mid/bass driver builds on the 'amply engineered' theme. It combines a

The ATC sounds less contrived than just about any speaker you're likely to hear

large 75mm dome and voice coil operating in a long magnetic gap with a 150mm fabric cone and a thumping great magnet. And, being in a sealed enclosure, it needs some driving when the inevitable urge to pump up the volume takes hold. It's no sweat, of course, for 200 of the 250 MOSFET Class A/B Watts delivered by the onboard amplification – the remaining 50W devoted to the tweeter. But, with no reflex port to massage the lower frequencies, ATC's intention is for a nevertheless powerful and accurate bass performance that leans towards the taut, textured and agile rather than pet-worryingly fulsome and extended. The company makes a matching subwoofer if you want the pooch running for cover.

There are active speakers that use DSP to contour sonics for a particular listening space or voicing preference, sometimes with very impressive results. ATC's active application, however, is purely analogue and used to swerve the limitations inherent with passive crossovers fed by a random external amp. To clarify, in an active speaker the crossover is



Like for like, the UK's other pro studio stalwart, PMC, also has active models worth considering. If you'd prefer the wireless/DSP approach, though, Denmark has a strong contender in System Audio's small but mighty Silverback 5 standmount. Another great Dane is Buchardt's A500 standmount, which closely matches the Silverback's active wireless approach, right down to the WiSA stereo hub and control panels on the back of each speaker. And, like the SA, it has downloadable DSP settings. But it is significantly more expensive. Closer in price are KEF's LS50 Wireless II (HFC 488) and Dynaudio's Xeo 20 (HFC 444), both of which should be on any shortlist. For pure sound quality, however, the ATC comfortably wins.



electronic and sits between the pre and power amp, operating at line level. It's therefore more accurate as it deals with a fixed filter load of a few thousand ohms at most rather than the dynamic variable load of a drive unit voice coil. In other words, the active crossover's characteristics (and influence on the sound) don't change with level. Also, a wider range of crossover types can be used, the choice in this case being a 2nd order Linkwitz-Riley.

ATC cites numerous other baked-in advantages to going active: greater dynamic range, thanks to the elimination of losses suffered by passive crossovers; more efficient use of the (ideally matched) power amplifiers; improved frequency response and stereo matching, thanks to bespoke speaker-amp calibration; superior control since the power amps are connected directly to the drivers with far lower electrical resistance; and, finally, lower intermodulation distortion due to reduced operating bandwidth. It all adds up.

Sound quality

Are there better-sounding speakers than these standmounts? Of course. Speakers, some vastly expensive, designed to target the sonic G-spots that arouse: a soundstage that carries on forever, so 'airy' you can almost breathe it in; treble delivered with the lightness and filigree texture of a dandelion floating on a gentle breeze;

mids so rich and palpable you can reach out and touch them; bass that sets off local seismic activity sensors. None of which, of course, guarantees long-term satisfaction. For such systems, however cosmetically spectacular, ultimate satisfaction always seems to be one tweak away.

It's an entertaining, if ultimately frustrating, way of musical life at home, all the better if your pockets are deep enough to sustain it. But then there is this ATC offering, which – when paired with a decent source – is the most potent antidote to chronic upgrading syndrome I've yet encountered. The secret? It eradicates the itch.

You probably think the reasons are obvious: studio monitor sound – accurate, honest, nothing added or taken away, completely transparent to the quality of the recording for good or ill. On that basis you'd think that all serious studio monitors sound pretty much the same as they're all aiming for copper-bottomed veracity. But they don't. There isn't a consensus, an absolute 'right'. What they do tend to have in common, however, is a dedication to core coherence, which has much more to do with timing, dynamic freedom, intelligibility, articulation and noise-floor sweeping resolution. Whatever the subjective differences in tonality and required bandwidth, these are assets that give music its spark, its life, its ultimate believability. And these are the things the SCM20ASL supplies in spades.



You'll need some long interconnects (balanced Nordost Blue Heaven XLRs do the job here) and maybe some specialist mains cables to replace the ones supplied (ditto Nordost, this time Red Dawn – HFC 475). But, to make the most of the ATCs' capabilities, a talented preamplifier/DAC combo is key, and so Chord Electronics' estimable Hugo TT2 (HFC 468) and M Scaler are pulled in to complete the system.

Yes, the compact active ATC can go to 11, possibly even 12, but ear-splitting SPLs and bass so deep it makes you feel sick are of far less interest here than musical accuracy, clarity of communication and good finger-clicking, foot-tapping tunes. Although its powers to immediately seduce aren't great, the SCM20ASL sounds less 'contrived' than just about any hi-fi speaker you're likely to hear. Forget hyped, butcher-sharp transients or a leaned-out balance for extra perceived speed. Or, come to think of it, the kind of clarity that shouts: "CLARITY!" up close and personal. Instead, given a clean, well-produced recording like Jacob Collier's haunting *Something Heavy* from the album *The Light For Days*, the result sounds extremely present and naturally detailed, as if each individual element is energised

internally rather than a variation in the general soundfield.

Further up the frequency range towards the treble where some speakers ease up to de-emphasise the crossover point weak spot while others live with the added glare and can sound a little harsh, the SCM20ASLs star quality shines through by remaining open, grainless, resolute and true, giving wind instruments a convincing timbral texture and percussive kit believable immediacy, attack and verve.

Although it's ATC's smallest active speaker, this is a chunky customer

Whether it's the stinging presence of Stevie Wonder's harmonica or the sharp, warm and sumptuous tones of Steve Laury's acoustic guitar, timing is nailed, music makes sense, bringing a larger sense of depth and subtlety to a listening experience endowed with greater incisiveness, precision and resolution. Everything is clear in the best possible sense: real music with startling life and authority. Exquisitely tuneful bass, effortless dynamic swings, beautifully judged midrange

presence, crystal clear intelligibility. Yeah, I could live with that. Period.

Conclusion

There is a caveat. Poor, compressed recordings are shown for what they really are. This level of transparency swings both ways. Rather than render them unlistenable, though, whatever goodness exists, and especially in the performance, is just as agnostically exposed to enjoy. It's this unvarnished and utterly cohesive rendition of the musical performing arts that's so consistently rewarding, so unfatiguing, so rare. The tweekers may never agree, but here's an end-game speaker to die for ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Musically convincing like little else; build; value

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Tweakers will have to look elsewhere

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: If music comes first and the urge to upgrade second, ATC's active speaker writes its own recommendation

FEATURES



OVERALL

