

ATC SCM20PSL 'Classic' Passive Standmount Speakers – Review

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Gear·Hi-Fi·Sound and Vision·Speakers

Summary

**ATC SCM20PSL 'Classic' Passive
Standmount Speakers**

\$10,995

**ANDY BAKER finally gets to properly
audition a pair of legendary ATC
speakers and details his astonishment
at their considerable charm.**

Until now, the first and only time I had heard a pair of ATC speakers in action was, scandalously, nearly 20 years ago. Obviously, I cannot remember the exact sound properties, but I do know that I stored them away in the back of my mind on my perpetually lengthening “One day I’d like to own...” list.

ATC – short for Acoustic Transducer Company – has been producing



loudspeakers for a couple of years longer than I've been breathing oxygen. Started in England in 1974 by Billy Woodman, ATC began manufacturing 12" drive units for PA systems, followed by active and passive monitoring systems for studio use. ATC systems can still be found today in many leading recording studios, but the company now also caters for the home audio enthusiast with a range of both professional and hi-fi speakers as well as amps and sources.

The SCM20s comes in both active (with in-built amplification) and passive form (P for Passive), and it's the passive version we're looking at here. This is a decent-sized standmount speaker, ideal for small to medium rooms, and it has been in production since 1990, having undergone several revisions up to now.

The cabinets – veneered in the case of the review pair in elegant real oak, though many options are available – measure 440mm x 239mm x 325.5mm (h x w x d) and weigh around 17kg, meaning they will require a good sturdy set of stands. The front baffle, made from a black material, and in which the drivers are mounted, protrudes from the front of the cabinet. Because this baffle is slightly smaller than the cabinet, we get a nice veneered “frame” around the edges, giving a very classy look.



The drivers – made in the UK by ATC – used in this 2-way design are a 1” soft dome high

frequency driver and a 6" mid-bass driver. The hand-made in-house 2-way crossover system uses "very high-quality film capacitors and ATC's own air-cored inductors" for accuracy and low distortion. Connection to an amplifier is via a set of very nice heavy-duty bi-wire terminals. The SCM20PSL cabinets are sealed, meaning there's no bass port and this, along with rigid cabinet construction and strategic internal bracing and bitumastic damping panels, is said to give "precise timing and excellent low frequency output below the cut-off", along with minimising resonance and cabinet colouration.

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This brings us to some very important specs, namely frequency response and sensitivity. Measured anechoically, ATC tells us the low frequencies cut off at 55Hz (-6dB) and the high frequencies cut off at 25kHz (-6dB). Sensitivity is 85dB (1w measured at 1m), impedance is 8 ohms nominal (5.5 Ohms minimum), and recommended amplifier power is 75 to 300 watts. A fabric cover comes with each speaker and is made to

slide snugly over the protruding baffle, which means there are no unsightly lug holes in the front of the cabinets.

The SCM20PSL is a luxurious-looking speaker with solid, reliable build quality to match. They aren't glossy, unusually shaped or cutting-edge perfect in the modern fashion, but if you like the classic wood veneered box look, these are about as good as it gets. So how do they sound?



SET-UP

First, I would like to thank Michael Ibbotson from the Auckland, NZ branch of Synergy Audio Visual for bringing these speakers out

to me to review, and for supplying the beautiful and visually matching stands for review purposes.

I connected the speakers single-wired to my Unison Research integrated, which gives around 240WPC into 8Ohms. Sources were my Wand 14/4 Turntable and Wand EQ/EV combo (another lovely visual match with the ATCs), Apparition 12 tonearm/EMT cartridge/SAC Minute SUT and Wand Plus/Hana EH/EAR 834p, Arcam CD73 player as a transport into my Electrocompaniet DAC and I also pumped Roon/Tidal into the DAC for streaming. Two pairs of speakers I had on hand for comparison were my Reference 3A Veena floorstanders (42Hz to 20kHz) and Bowers & Wilkins 703 floorstanders (38Hz to 25kHz).

Initially I placed the ATC speakers and their stands in the position my Veenas usually reside and started listening. The sound was very nice, but it wasn't quite working for me, so I spent a little time gradually moving them until I found the most pleasing sounding spot. This was quite a bit further forward than the Veenas, though similarly spaced apart, and slightly toed in towards the listening position; about 45 inches from the rear wall to the front of the baffle, 60 inches from tweeter to tweeter and approximately 28 inches from each side wall.

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fluid, layered, tonally and texturally delightful.”

My listening room is more of a listening area. Originally a single-car internal garage, it was converted into a room by the previous owners. While their painting and finishing skills were rather questionable, the garage was fitted walls and ceiling with sound-proofing plasterboard, decent insulation and good carpeting. A ranch slider replaced the garage door and a large window was installed in the side wall (both with heavy blinds which I close for critical listening sessions). I have divided the room with an Ikea 4×4 Kallax record shelving unit, giving me a roughly 3m x 3m listening area on one side and a slightly smaller area on the other where I have my office space and drum kit. (A band I was playing with last year, consisting of three guitarists, a bass player, a keyboardist and myself on drums, all successfully squeezed into the entire space on several occasions – instruments, amps and pedal boards included – for practice sessions.) There are also rugs and books and a heavy 3-seater couch as well as some experimental DIY bass absorption. This room feels completely different acoustically from the rest of the house, and in fact Garth Murray from Theophany Speakers commented on how good my room sounds. The reason I mention all this is because the room is a very important part of a hi-fi system

– principally if critical listening is your thing, and the room is often an overlooked part of the hi-fi chain.



LISTENING

From the get-go, these speakers created that wide-open window effect that we audiophiles love to talk about. There was a living, breathing world of music right there in between the cabinets with a delightful plane of layers extending well back, seemingly to outside the wall and beyond. The soundstage was decent – though not especially wide, and the speakers didn't quite "disappear" – and images were clearly defined, if not entirely lifelike in scale.

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The main caveat has to be the lack of any real sub-bass. This meant that while drum kicks and lower bass notes had good clarity, punch and texture, the low-down impact was lesser. This was not a deal-breaker by any means, but a subwoofer (or two) would be useful to help round up a bit more lower frequency information.

To my ears, the SCM20s have a midrange focus where instruments and voices sounded as faithful to the real thing as one might wish and without any colouration from the speakers themselves – at least as far as I could detect. The clarity, tonal structure and harmonic interplay between instruments was impressive. I soon discovered that what these speakers allowed me to do rather than focus entirely on whether or not instruments sounded real, life-size or “in the room”, was appreciate the harmonic interplay of the notes, chords and sounds, the melodies, dynamics and rhythmic pulses; in other words, the music itself.

Listening to the tracks ‘I Ate The Most’ and ‘Train On The Island’ from **Aldous Harding**’s marvellous album *Train On The Island* (2026, Flying Nun/4AD) I was more aware than usual of how forward Harding’s vocals were in the mix. Here, her voice had that uncanny

factor, appearing quite life-like with the speakers helping to reveal the intricacies of her different vocal styles – breathy, nasal, et cetera. The accompanying instruments – creeping synths and eerie percussion on ‘I Ate The Most’, piano, drums, etc on ‘Train...’ – had good tonal structure and texture and the ATCs allowed them to complement the vocals without drawing attention away. Snare hits had good natural-sounding snap and crack, and ride and crash cymbals shimmered nicely. The listening experience was intimate and cosy, which, for me, is the best way to enjoy Harding’s music, cryptic lyrics and (her sometimes unsettling) charm.

Another intimate affair, if somewhat more exhilarating, is **Nina Nastasia**’s ‘The Day I Would Bury You’ from her album *You Follow Me* (2007, Fatcat Records). This record has Nastasia on guitar and vocals with Jim White (The Dirty Three, among many, many others) on drums, and it was recorded by the late Steve Albini. Jim White is one of my favourite drummers and Albini one of my favourite

audio engineers. I especially enjoy his drum recording techniques – he always managed to bring the tones, dynamics and intensity (and subtleties) of the drums without overpowering everything else. On this track, White knocks out a full-blown dramatic backdrop to Nastasia's plaintive vocal and minimal but effective guitar playing. Rather than overpower, the drums intensify the voice and the lyrics, giving the listener a rush of adrenaline while simultaneously being able to hang off every word. The ATCs drew me into the drama and emotion occurring between them perfectly and without adding their own flavour or colouration. The higher octaves of Nastasia's vocals were reproduced superbly, and the drums filled up the space behind the speakers with excellent speed, dynamics and tonal balance. Even without sub bass, I thought the kick drum here had decent impact and punch. While they didn't have the full-scale imaging and thunderous assault or the "performers are in the room" magic of many larger speakers, the SCM20s have an otherworldliness where it feels like they're allowing you to put your head through the proverbial looking glass to listen surreptitiously in on a performance.

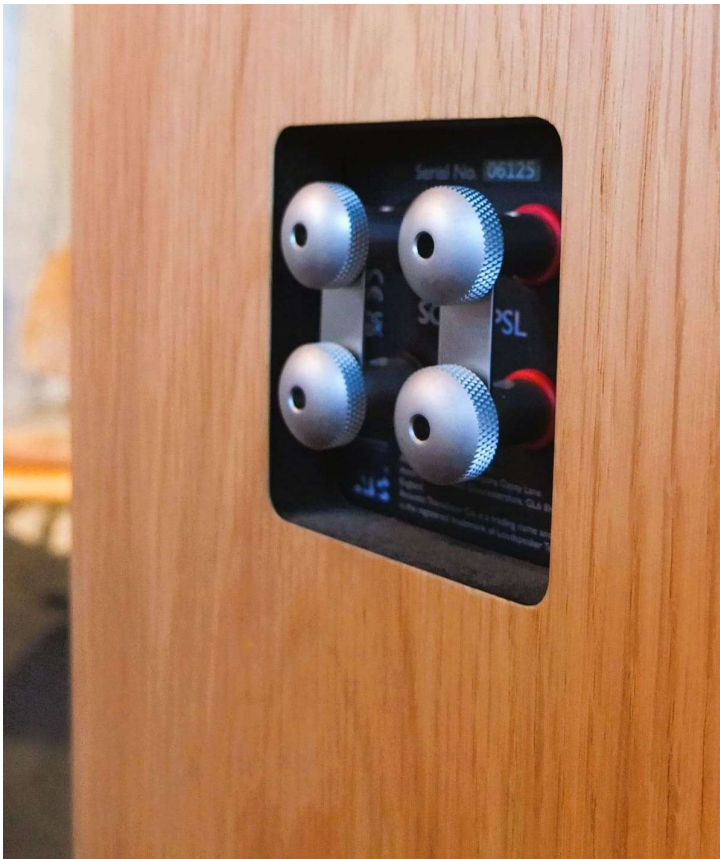
Being a fan of jazz pianist **Oscar Peterson**, I spent several sessions listening to his live album *The Trio* (1974, Pablo Records) featuring Joe Pass on guitar and Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen on bass. There is something about Peterson's playing that really gets me, which probably explains why I have so many of his records in my collection. It's joyous and expressive and easy to listen to. There isn't anything particularly special about this recording per se; it just sounds good, and I enjoy it. There are no drums, but you'd hardly notice. The ATCs reproduced the guitar and piano tones beautifully. They were naturally airy and vivid-sounding with good timbre and body. The bass thrummed away nicely, well-textured and authoritative; I didn't find myself craving more low-end weight here. I thought the treble was surprisingly forgiving, displaying good air and detail but not in a clinical or overly analytical manner. Again, I had the sense of being a voyeur – listening in, rather than the speakers expressing outward, and I found it a lovely way to experience the music.

Germany-based artist/producer **Polygonia** collaborated with drummer **Simon Popp** to produce an album of exquisite electronic textures and percussive elements titled *Candid* (2023, Squama Records), and here the ATC SCM20s revelled in delivering all that sonic information. Listening to the tracks 'Nakuku' and 'Benbut' the lowest registers may have been absent (or at the least *hinted* at), but the upper bass was definitely there, and it was clean and punchy. The midrange was swimming with textural and dynamic contrasts in a most delightful manner. This is relatively gentle electronic music that ebbs and flows, filled with life, like a body of water, and I just loved the way the speakers delicately layered all the elements separately while delivering textures that sent shivers down my spine and tickled my brain. Absolutely gorgeous.

I was delighted to discover that I could listen to my lower-fi recordings – early Flying Nun releases, early **Pavement**, et cetera – without the ATCs highlighting their inherent flaws to the extreme. The flaws were there – some of those home-recordings and even a lot of the studio recordings can sound a little on the coarse side – but the music in all its rawness and glory shined through. This showed that you really don't have to seek out only the best quality recordings to enjoy these speakers – you simply have to love music. My B&W speakers can be a little aggressive and fatiguing when it comes to these types of recordings, especially in the treble, but the Ref3As are about right for my taste. My Unison Research amplifier drove the ATC SCM20s beautifully; however, I've heard reports of certain amplifiers not quite being able to keep the mid-drivers fully under control, so keep that in mind. One thing I did notice was that these speakers did need good volume to sound their best. Not that my amp was underpowering them, but for low-level nighttime listening – you know, partner in bed, cat on your lap, lovely cup of tea, cosy lighting – they seemed just a little thin.

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Swapping the ATCs out for my Reference 3A floorstanders and listening back through all my test tracks, I noted there was now a little bit more weight behind the midrange, pushing it forward into the room more. The width of the soundstage was more noticeable, and there was a bit more lower bass presence with an added overall feeling of body and weight to each note. Yet I found myself missing the delicately reproduced tones and textures the ATCs provided, along with their clearly defined lines and layers of audio. The Ref3As are more bold and expansive, I’d say even a little less sophisticated by today’s standards, while the SCM20PSLs are perhaps more introspective, delicate and refined – giving the listener an in-depth peek into recordings. We’re not talking huge differences between the two speakers, but that ATC midrange is utterly to die for: fluid, layered, tonally and texturally delightful... my mouth is starting to water just thinking about it.



FINAL THOUGHTS

The ATC SCM20PSLs are expensive speakers, but if you value midrange accuracy (I couldn't describe them as being *entirely* accurate overall, based on their frequency response) and insight and you have good source equipment and appropriate amplification (and a small to medium-sized room), then you may well consider it money well spent. This is an age where inexpensive gear is sounding better and better, though it seems you do still have to pay more if you wish to get that last degree of magic. Not to mention that last degree of luxuriousness. That said, beautiful build quality with a bespoke air about them, along with some wonderful sonic attributes, must surely make these speakers

contenders for a place high on your high-end audition list.

I'll be genuinely sorry to see these go back and I won't forgive myself if I go another 20 years without hearing them again.