

ATC SCM40 Entry Series Speakers – Review

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Gear·Hi-Fi·Sound and Vision·Speakers

Summary

ATC SCM40 Entry Series Speakers

**Born in the studio but
built for the home, ATC's
supposedly Entry Series
passive floorstanders are
now available in NZ.**

**ANDY TURLEY gets an
earful.**

\$12,995



A few (many!) years ago, I spent an unhealthy amount of time in and around sound studios, experiencing a range of equipment I could only dream of affording on a lowly sound engineer's pittance.

But between that and working DJ/live sound on a variety of less-than-stellar club and bar systems, I also developed a life-long enthusiasm, or possibly obsession, for monitor-like clarity at home, and a short list of speakers I believed were up to the job. This list included ATC, a long-standing hero of the recording studio world.



So of course, it was an emphatic 'yes' to hosting a pair of ATC's SCM40 floorstanders for a decent length of time at home, to test just how rose-tinted my memories were.

I'll spare you the illustrious history of ATC speakers, which is well documented online, but it's fair to say that to my ears they have only got better with time, and their modern range of British-built hi-fi speakers has that same magic and clarity I remember. The range now accommodates almost any desired configuration, with a speaker for every system, from \$3K passive bookshelf speakers to \$160K+ active floorstanders.



Right off the bat, I have to say I think ATC do themselves a bit of a disservice calling the SCM series of hi-fi speakers their “Entry Series”. Sure, it draws the eyes up the available range, validates the price jump up to the Classic and Tower Series, and no doubt triggers a few bad/good financial decisions, but entry-level these are not.

Unpacking these chunky boys in the living room gave an immediate impression of just how solidly they’re built, and at 31 kgs a speaker and with a stocky and authoritative presence, they look and feel like they mean

business. Visually, they're more hi-fi than the boxier Classics and Towers, with a bit of curve and taper to the infinite baffle-style cabinets that make them very easy to assimilate into the room. Standing at just under a meter tall, they look like they can move some air, and, unsurprisingly, that turned out to be very true. Tri-wiring is possible, with separate binding posts for all three drivers. However, I opted for a traditional single-cable signal from the power amp, leaving the included post bridges in place. Thankfully, with a trio of distinct cones out front, the included semi-industrial metal grills do little to hide them behind a honeycomb screen, making them a truly classic-looking 3-way floorstander, particularly in the Cherry wood finish I had.



Once up and running, a few things were immediately apparent with these speakers. Firstly, that famous soft dome midrange driver is everything they claim it is. Voices and instruments just sound “right”. It’s a truly effortless speaker to listen to because of this; the tweeter isn’t overly bright, and combined, they make for very comfortable listening at all volumes.

Secondly, the soundstage and imaging do require some positioning play (I was able to have them placed forward into the room with the promise that it was only temporary) and I was easily able to get that holographic separation from the speakers that just never gets old.

And thirdly, and this is on me, but I have clearly become very accustomed to a solid bass sound, and would personally still recommend a subwoofer with these speakers, despite the SCM40s sporting a robust 164mm/6.5” low-frequency driver offering the lower portion of a 48Hz-22kHz frequency response.

This may sound surprising, as the bass from the SCM40s is incredibly clear and articulate, and certainly, when set up and within the optimum field for listening, they sound very complete, so this is more directly related to musical styles than the speaker’s own capabilities. Instrumental bass, mid-bass especially, sounds incredible, and the SCM40s can separate that out exceptionally

well. I often found myself just listening to albums and sinking into the music rather than analysing it or fearing I was missing something.

But I do have to admit, some of my favourite frequencies are down the lower end, and with a well-tuned sub set-up, I ultimately just can't go back. If your musical tastes don't tend to that very specific low end, though, the SCM40s will deliver a beautifully cohesive and full-range listening experience. Basically, you already know if you're a subwoofer-dependent human, but check the listening notes below.

The SCM40s are not the most efficient speakers around at a rated 85dB – a trade-off that ATC stands by in the interests of extended low frequency accuracy. They even take it a step further than my Dynaudios, meaning I had to nudge volumes up a bit from my usual levels to feed them. ATC's recommended feeding is 75 to 300 Watts, and with my Plinius KioKio power amp at the very top end of that, they really do sing, so I would tend to err on the side of *more power*.

In the time I've had these beauties, I've managed to put in well over 100 hours of listening, and I've run through pretty much every genre and quality of recording I could think to throw at them. It's been tough, and many cups of tea had to be drunk, but they kept calling me back for one more track, one

more record and quite quickly became speakers I could happily live with.



LISTENING

When listening at medium to lower levels well into the night, with the time to sink into the couch and really listen, I was blown away by the balanced and articulate nature of these speakers.

Listening to a well-worn favourite in the title track from **Gillian Welch's** *Time (The Revelator)* album, I was hearing every shift in timbre between the strings of David Rawlings' and Welch's guitars, the beautiful drift of Rawlings' backing vocals and every nuance of the space between and around them, thanks to that magical soft dome

midrange driver. This track is an absolute gem for natural sound, both in vocals and guitar, and the completely obsessive pursuit of recording perfection by Welch and Rawlings shines across this whole album. Again, natural and accurate voices are an ATC trademark, and this track really makes that apparent. (Still waiting for the vinyl release of this record. Still...)

Switching to purely electronic sounds, I always tend towards **E.R.P.'s** electro meanderings into sonic outer-space as some of the simplest but finest examples of textures and separation (that is, when I really want to nerd out), and Dallas native Gerard Hanson has been refining his art for a good 30 years now as both E.R.P. and Convexion. His track 'Ancient Light' from the *Hubble Telescope Series* has a bass synth that is absolutely three-dimensional on a great system, with a leading edge of analogue texture that not every speaker can

bring to life. The SCM40's brought it out faithfully, but not with quite as much punch as a subwoofer supported set-up can with providing that foundational bass weight. Despite this, the track sounds sublime and the haunting layers of interstellar longing still come together magically.

Looking for sonic swings and heavier slabs to test with, I can never go past Napier's finest sons in **Jakob**, and their 2003 album *Cale:Drew*, which has been in regular rotation for 20 plus years now. (I would not be mad at a vinyl release of this album also, guys...) The ATCs remained perfectly composed through the steady build of 'The Diffusion Of Our Inherent Situation' and thundered through the more complex and dense sections of guitars and drums folding back over themselves without losing grip or sounding fatiguing. There's a beautiful moment around 4m10s in when it all falls away and the trio of guitar, bass and drums become clearer and calmer for the remainder of the track. It's one of those moments of post-rock tension and release that they do so well, and what really struck me with the ATCs

was that it sounded exactly how I expected it to sound, and crucially with the extra fine detail that you tend to know after playing an album who knows how many thousands of times.

Continuing my efforts to test the limits of bass reproduction, last year's release from Rhythm & Sound alumni **Paul St Hilaire** w/ *The Producers* kicks off with a serious sub assault in collaboration with UK producer Mala, who doesn't hold back on this heavy dub excursion. 'Like It's Always Been' explores a Massive Attack-like sense of dread and deep, *deep* subs, and this is where the SCM40s really show their studio monitor DNA; the crystal clear voice of St Hilaire, floating notes of synthesis, and then layers of distant and very near-field strings in the second half of the track all sit perfectly in place.

Without listing every single album I tested, I do have to add one final word on just how 'right' these speakers sound. At the ambient end of the musical spectrum (which increasingly provides escape from the weirdness of this modern world), I fired up the spacious and delicate Global Communication *Yellow Submarine Re-Take* remix of **The Grid's** 'Rollercoaster', a track I've known and loved since I picked up a maxi-single CD in 1994 and discovered that the remix was 1000% better than the original, something of a habit for the duo of Tom Middleton and Mark Pritchard in the '90s. The original is nothing special, but the eight minutes and 15 seconds of Global Communication's reworking is absolutely sublime, and the ATCs reproduced it faithfully, teasing out every nuance and layer of sound. Lovely stuff.



VERDICT

These speakers really do sound effortless, and with a good chunk of power behind them, they deliver a beautiful, natural sound that just lets you get on with listening to the music.

Pricing for all models in the Entry Series is surprisingly reasonable, and while just shy of \$13K for the SCM40s places them squarely in a busy field of competitors, for the money, the beautifully built and sounding series-toppers might just be an easy endgame speaker for a lot of people.

It's also worth mentioning that ATC offer active versions of almost all their speakers now, and for an additional \$9.5K (\$22,495) the SCM40s are also available in the SCM40A guise, packing 242 watts of Class A/B onboard tri-amplification, although at that price difference, there's a world of power amplifiers to explore, and if you're on more of an upgrade path rather than starting from scratch, the passive version is an easy win that will sound superb and let you just enjoy your music.

Sources were a mix of lossless files via Roon/Antipodes Server and vinyl via a Technics 1200g with an honest but hardworking Hana EL cartridge. Amplification was via a Michi P5 preamplifier and a Plinius KioKio (SB301mkII) power amplifier.

SPECS

Drivers: HF ATC 25mm Neodymium, Mid 75mm ATC Soft Dome, LF ATC 164mm SC

Matched Response: $\pm 0.5\text{dB}$

Frequency Response (-6dB): 48Hz-22kHz

Dispersion: $\pm 80^\circ$ Coherent Horizontal, $\pm 10^\circ$ Coherent Vertical

Sensitivity: 85dB @ 1W @ 1metre

Max SPL: 112dB

Recommended Power Amplifier: 75 to 300 Watts

Nominal Impedance: 8 Ohm

Crossover Frequencies: 380Hz & 3.5kHz

Connectors: Binding Posts/4mm Plugs, tri-wire

Dimensions (HxWxD): 980 x 370 x 305mm / 38.58 x 14.56 x 12.01" (inc. foot plinth, spikes add 25mm to height, grill adds 34mm to depth)

Weight: 31kg

Spikes: 4 per cabinet, M8 x 1.25mm