

ATC SCM19 LOUDSPEAKER

Where The Drivers Do The Talking

by [Neil Gader](#) | Aug 12th, 2014

Categories: [Stand-mount](#) | Products: [ATC SCM19](#)



For the past forty years, British loudspeaker-maker ATC has forged an enviable reputation in recording/mastering studios, concert halls, and post-production facilities worldwide. Its professional active monitors are akin to precision tools, as faithful to the source as they are indestructible. Though not as well known in the high end, the same bloodline holds true in ATC's consumer line of mostly passive loudspeakers. The company's across-the-board excellence has never been more evident than in its latest offering, the SCM19.

The SCM19 is the largest of three two-way compacts that make up ATC's new HiFi Series. All passive, acoustic suspension designs, and affordable (by ATC standards), the line also includes the SCM7 and SCM11. The cabinets are conservatively tailored yet elegant—ATC has never been prone to flights of whimsy in its enclosure design. Viewed head-on there is no extraneous hardware; even the unique metal grilles attach via hidden magnets. Notable are the curvilinear side panels that arch toward the back panel, a design known to reduce internal standing waves.

The look and selection of materials remains traditional, even Old School some might say—MDF enclosures, do fabric mid/bass diaphragms rather than the latest exotic craze in cone materials. If anything, this is entirely consistent with the stated philosophy of ATC's founder and chief designer Billy Woodman, who said in a TAS interview (Issue 117): "It is our aim to produce loudspeakers of a neutral fidelity, with no particular signature, and

world, not by breaking new ground, but by the application of better engineering to established principles.”

Actually, it's more accurate to characterize ATC as, first and foremost, a transducer company. Other loudspeaker manufacturers typically source their drivers from third parties; ATC doesn't. Its transducers are still engineered, tested, and assembled as they have been for decades in the same, small facility in Stroud, England. And they remain exclusive to ATC. Don't bother looking for ATC drivers on other consumer brands; you won't find them.

There was, however, one exception to ATC's house-designed rule—tweeters. For years they were sourced from SEAS to ATC's specifications. No longer. Following some lengthy R&D ATC began producing its own soft-dome tweeters. The tweeter, designated model SH25-76, represents a jewel in the crown of ATC transducer design. The 25mm soft dome is a short-coil, long-gap, dual-suspension design, like ATC's famous 3" soft-dome midrange. According to ATC, the configuration “ensures pistonic motion and suppresses rocking modes even at high output levels.” ATC reports that its diaphragm “is based on a complex geometry which maximizes power transfer from the former, extending the high-frequency response and giving a smooth off-axis response.” The design also enables the use of a narrow magnetic gap and negates the requirement for ferrofluid—and the potential negative effect of the fluid drying out over time. The tweeter is set in a resonance-free, machined-alloy waveguide that's been calculated for optimum dispersion and the flattest possible on-axis frequency response. Later this year a high-efficiency “S” version of this tweeter will debut on pro and select consumer models.

Midrange and bass frequencies are handled by ATC's top-rung 6.5" Super Linear mid/bass unit—a driver with a sophisticated diaphragm structure that integrates the dual profiles of a traditional cone with a 75mm soft dome. In ATC tradition, it features a short coil in a long gap, a massive ceramic magnet, and long-throw suspension for linearity at extreme dynamic levels. The ultra-rigid basket construction is so sturdy it appears ready to launch in space. Given the output levels that are expected of these pro transducers, space-launch is not far from the truth. With 85dB sensitivity, however, power is what the 19s require. They gobble it up like candy, and won't be in full song at less than moderate volume levels.

I've owned ATCs for years, a relationship that began with the classic SCM20SL, later the SCM20-2—both direct descendants of ATC's active studio monitor. The SCM20s invariably shared one thing with their pro-monitor progenitors: They never communicated in a passive voice. The ATC sound is fully committed, never retiring. And so it goes with the new SCM19. Its resolution is unstoppable, as if it is on a mission to exploit every single aspect of an amplifier's output. Tonally faithful to the source, the 19 is brimming with midrange power and a single-driver coherence, challenging if not surpassing its compact predecessors.

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The SCM19 is neutral through the broader midband, presence range, and treble, with no energy drop-off as it approaches its 2.4kHz crossover point. Neither is there evidence of suck-outs or flagging dynamics that tend to soften and lay back the mids for an unearned depth effect. The 19 is not dry or clinical sounding, either. It has a comforting warmth in the lower mids and upper bass that adds to the impression of musical scale and substance. Also a good part of the 19's opulent character is attributable to the superb on-and off-axis dispersion of the mid/bass unit, i.e., its power response. I never felt head-locked in a tiny sweet spot. Even when I was seated well off-axis, the 19's essential tonality, weight, and body remain consistent. Vocal reproduction—always a point of pride for this brand—has never before been as direct, live, and in-the-room as it is through the SCM19. As I cued up a cavalcade of singers—from the grit and gravel of Tom Waits to the cut-crystal clarity of soprano Anna Netrebko—my notepad silently fell to the floor, along with my jaw.

The 19's lack of a true bottom octave obviously limits its ultimate bass extension, but the 19 descends into the midbass region with perceivable output into the upper forty-cycle range (piano aficionados take note). Where most compact speakers come up painfully short in attempting to reproduce the brooding weight and resonance of a cello, the SCM19 captures the most critical aspects of its timbre and dark harmonics. On something like the Ray Brown Trio's *Soular Energy* [Groove Note] this acoustic-suspension design also ensures a tight, tuneful bass that few

While its tonality is admirable, the true greatness of the SCM19—and its most striking feature—is the lifelike relationship between that tonal balance and the speaker’s midband and treble-range dynamic output. Very rare have I heard a two-way compact of this size that has balanced these twin imperatives— tonality and dynamics—with the ease and precision of the 19. Even as the frequencies dip into the lower mids and descend further into upper bass—a region where smaller speakers lose their guts—the SCM19 remains undaunted. And this is why the SCM19 can fool a listener into believing it’s something more than a two-way. Rather, in these respects it sounds more akin to a small three-way.

The SCM19 benefits greatly from an uncolored enclosure that permits more of the potential of the transducers to be heard. This is a quieter, less-colored box that steps out of the way of the signal and effectively disappears. It reveals a speaker that launches transients without hesitation and articulates lower frequencies with greater precision. Midrange timbral information has been clarified, and the hint of nasality that I’ve perceived in my own earlier-ed ATCs has been eliminated. (ATC engineer Ben Lilly confirmed that mods to the 19 crossover have likely contributed to this improvement.)

If there was one area where I felt that my original SCM20s could have upped its game it was in the upper treble. There was the slightest shroud over orchestral harmonics, an attenuation of air and brilliance that shaded a string section or chorus. However, as I listened to the vast chorale of singers during the Rutter *Requiem* [Reference Recordings], all exquisitely layered and brimming with height information, the new tweeter was a thing of beauty and experience. Revealing and fast and aided by the new waveguide it just seemed to launch an expanse of air and tone color into the room that was not just laser-guided toward the sweet spot. I noted that during *Les Brown Goes Direct to Disc* [Century] the SCM19 portrayed ride cymbals with a breath of additional top-end air. Trumpet solo sounded a shade quicker and friskier off the mark, a bit more discrete yet fully connected with their ambient environs. And as I listened to the Beatles “When I’m Sixty-Four” my appreciation for the new tweet only grew as keyed on Ringo’s elegantly understated playing, particularly his delicately accented cymbal work.

In low-level resolving power, the SCM19 conveys musical intimacy like few loudspeakers of this class. When I listened to the direct-to-disc recording of classical guitarist Michael Newman [Sheffield Lab] there was a near holographic sense of the artist playing, breathing, inhabiting the listening room. It’s a sensation that’s eerie in its communication of speed, tonal color, timbre, and ambience. And during Grieg’s *Four Lyric Pieces* [Sheffield Lab] the diamond-like transparency and color from the eight musicians of the Chicago Symphony Winds was breathtaking. This disc’s imaging has always been pristine, but here there was substance and dimension behind each image.

As I hear it, there’s a very short list of rivals that play in the league of the SCM19. And even fewer at this attainable price point. Although this review should speak for itself, let me reiterate: The ATC SCM19 is, without reservation, a superb monitor that should excite and please the most discriminating of listeners. My highest recommendation.

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Two-way acoustic-suspension monitor

Drivers: 1" soft-dome tweeter, 6.5" mid/bass

Frequency response: 54Hz–22kHz

Sensitivity: 85dB

Nominal impedance: 8 ohms

Dimensions: 17.2" x 10.4" x 11.8"

Weight: 35 lbs.

Price: \$3695

Gypsy Lane
Aston Down
Stroud, Gloucestershire
GL6 8HR, England
www.atcloudspeakers.co.uk