

Power couple

Chord and ATC may have slightly different design priorities, but combined **Ed Selley** thinks this combo is the perfect dynamic duo

Aesthetics is a funny old business. One person's clean is another's dull and something that's viewed as spectacular in one circle is going to be seen as vulgar in another. This means that across almost every category of mechanical design, you'll find a number of different approaches to the physical presentation of the equipment. Audio is no exception and you'll find pretty much every design practise within its boundaries.

Even so, it's tricky to imagine a pairing of components that takes as disparate an approach to the business of styling as the one you see here. On the one hand there's Chord Electronics, a company that makes as great a visual statement as an audible one, which has produced some of the most visually distinctive devices of the last 20 years. On the other, is ATC, a company whose pro audio heritage runs deep in everything it does, generally avoiding much in the way of visual frippery. You might assume we have put them together to riff on the mismatched buddy movie theme. You'd be wrong.

You see, what ties these components together more tightly than their appearance might suggest is a shared use of exceptional engineering. Take the Chord CPM 2800 MkII integrated amplifier. Behind that fabulous metalwork – the sort of thing the *Doctor Who* props department was shooting for, but condemned to work in papier-mâché could never achieve – is one of the most complete amplifiers you can buy at or anywhere near the price. The 120W of power is delivered by a circuit that ▶





COMPONENTS

**CHORD ELECTRONICS
CPM 2800 MKII £7,300**

The CPM 2800 MkII combines a 120W integrated amp boasting five analogue inputs with a DAC section based on the highly regarded 2Qute DAC for a one-stop shop to power any suitable pair of speakers.

**ATC SCM40
£3,750**

The SCM40 is the largest member of the company's Entry series. Available in passive and active versions, it mounts a 25mm tweeter, 75mm midrange driver and 164mm bass driver.

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM CHORD/ATC



uses a switch mode power supply as Chord favours its instantaneous power delivery. This gives it the ability to respond to dynamic peaks with all the current you need and ensures that the output climbs effectively as impedance lowers.

What really makes it stand out from the pack is the presence of a digital circuit derived from the 2Qute DAC (HFC 402). As well as five line inputs, you get an optical, coaxial and USB digital input. In the evolving 'post source' world of modern audio equipment, this means that the CPM 2800 MkII is ready for whatever you happen to want to connect to it.

Grand designs

Chord equipment does divide opinion, but I'd be surprised if on encountering it in the metal you don't find at least some aspects of its design raise a smile. Crucial to its ability to 'get away' with looking like it does is the fact that all the bits that need to be logical – the controls, the connections – are self-explanatory.

Of course, if self-explanatory is the aim of the game, the ATC SCM40 is an Olympic champion. The name is a glorious example of 'does what it says on the tin'-style thinking meaning as it does 'Studio Control Monitor' and

denoting an internal volume of 40 litres. This is the largest member of the entry-level range and as well as a 25mm soft dome tweeter and 164mm bass unit, it mounts an example of a driver that for many people makes an ATC an ATC. This is a 75mm dome midrange unit that is made inhouse at considerable time and expense.

The SCM40 is sealed and relatively sensibly sized. Aesthetically, it is as

One of the most accurate systems to ever pass through this part of the magazine

free of adornment as the Chord is packed with detail. There's an indisputable appeal to its no-nonsense design, though. It conveys an air of purpose and confidence that seems to speak to people even when they aren't experts on speaker design. The veneering and cabinet work has been done to an impressive standard, but the effect is still of a rugby player in a Savile Row suit – you tend to notice the contents rather than the wrapper.

They may look rather different and come from slightly different design approaches, but as with any match of

Above left: The dome midrange on the SCM40 is key to its abilities

Above centre: Extensive connectivity makes the CPM 2800 a highly flexible amp

Above right: Different design philosophies combine to spectacular effect

electronics and speakers, what matters is how they work together and here the omens are pretty good. The ATC is entirely benign in impedance terms and all it needs is enough power to work happily. This is something the Chord has in spades, while that bespoke decoding built into the CPM 2800 MkII should ensure that what the SCM40 receives is a perfectly rendered and sufficiently beefy version of what you want to hear so that the ATC will be able to work its magic.

Perfect pair

This is exactly what comes to pass. Tied together with a complete set of cables from the 'other' Chord (Company rather than Electronics) the result of this partnership is one of the most unambiguously accurate systems to ever pass through this particular corner of the magazine – it is more than up to the task of discerning the strengths and weaknesses of the *Group Test*. What is important about this is that for all the transparency, this system is still hugely entertaining to listen to. There's an almost uncanny balance of prodigious power that's combined with superb delicacy to make it sound very special indeed.



This is best demonstrated by playing a singularly unlikely piece of music. *Peace Is The Mission* by Major Lazer is a huge angry piece of electronica with the sort of bass that vibrates your vision if played loud enough. The first track, *Be Together*, combines this heavyweight low end with a delicate vocal piece from Natalie Bergman of Wild Belle. By rights, it shouldn't work – it's akin to spreading *foie gras* on a Big Mac – but this system absolutely nails it. The bass notes are deep and effortless, but impressively fast and well defined. Bergman's vocals soar above this low-level fury with absolute clarity and precision.

Ode to joy

What this system does is show beyond any doubt that accuracy is no impediment to joy. Playing the Cinematic Orchestra's *Ode To The Big Sea* is simply outstanding. The curious time signature is something that the speaker handles with ease, utterly unphased it proceeds with the precision of an atomic clock. Above this, instruments sizzle with the energy and vitality that separates the recording from the real. Here, the Chord is in its element. The decoding used in the CPM 2800 MkII is fearsomely sophisticated, but it

manifests itself in a way that is utterly free from any sense of 'digital.'

Should you want to, it can go effortlessly loud too. Plenty of equipment can be pushed to firmly antisocial levels, but a rather smaller percentage of it revels in this treatment. This system all but wills you on to prod the numbers ever

Chord's CPM 2800 is ready for whatever you happen to want to connect to it

upwards on the Chord's display. The harder you drive it the more it seems to transport you to the point of recording. Imogen Heap's scorching, intimate *The Moment I Said It* becomes all consuming, free from any sense of electronics or mechanical drivers. It's you, her and a perfect sense of the space and mood she was in at the time.

This ability to push past your hearing simply a collection of circuits and drivers to you listening unambiguously to the music is something that doesn't always happen with systems, even at price points rather in excess of this one. It depends on a medley of

phenomena, but boils down to the system needing to be genuine in such a way that the brain is left content it isn't listening to a facsimile, but sufficiently self-effacing that the brain doesn't start to focus on what the electronics are up to at the same time.

Dynamic duo

The reason ATC exists is to be a window on musicians trying to create these moments in the first place. As such, perhaps it isn't so surprising that the SCM40 can do this, but I've heard this speaker in a few situations and what it does in partnership with the CPM 2800 MkII is beyond what it can manage on its own. This duo ticks all the boxes of what we need from a system in 2017. It's built like a piece of laboratory equipment, has all the connectivity that you could reasonably ask for and doesn't really take up all that much space. It then goes one step further by having the ability to take you to the heart of any recording you care to throw at it without any sense of strain or struggle. Don't kid yourself that there's only one way to achieve musical greatness – sometimes behind two seemingly very different design approaches is the same desire to deliver the perfect musical message ●



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