

SONICFLARE REVIEW: ATC SCM-19 Speakers

by Josh Ray, Dec 11 '07



Sonic Circle: PRECISE

With a hyper-accurate and detailed sound, the Precise group's foundation is in pro studio recording. Speakers are fast and full range and amplifiers are solid state with high wattage.

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CONCLUSION FIRST

The [ATC SCM-19](#) (\$3500/pair via [Flat Earth Audio](#)) is the prototypical Precise-type speaker and, arguably, the most important. Combining hyper-accurate Precise sound with output suitable for the vast majority of listening spaces, the "19" is the ATC that'll find its way into most people's homes and convert Refined listeners to Precise lovers.

SONIC CIRCLE SOUND

Precise-loving listeners are quite possibly the most confrontational group in hi-fi. Bring up absolute accuracy, and they'll argue to the death that Precise gear is the most accurate in the world, slaying the easy-listening Refined-type gear and the bizarre Emotional-style equipment with their tiny tubes and banana peel drivers.

And the Precise junkies will always defer to real performances. After all, they'll say, a snare or electric guitar riff in a small club environment is going to scorch your eyebrows while a kick drum or three string bass is going to bruise your sternum like a bouncer's elbow. Real music, especially the bulk of live, non-chamber performances will sound raw, real, and in-your-face.

ATC, as such, is always in-your-face scorching and bruising like a real performance. And that's where the derision starts. For classic American audiophiles who love Refined-type gear, ATC is considered too aggressive for everyday home listening. The ATC cult – and they are a cult, have no doubt – recognize that ATC is a rough speaker but, with a little love, can form the cornerstone a really fantastic, everyday system.

The SCM-19s are the first ATCs with a slightly more mellow sound. While the 19s provide the classic ATC raw, real experience, the speaker has been toned down a slight bit for the home listeners who weren't able to tame past ATC speakers and left exasperated. This change is most noticeable in the upper midrange and treble areas.

The 19's bass is some of the best around for a bookshelf of this size. If you've looked at the 19's specs, forget them and remember SonicFlare's motto: Measurements Mean Jack. ATC uses a measuring method different from most everyone in home hi-fi. Just know the bass, with real room placement and loading, is going to pound you like little else in this category can. ATCs are known for extremely smooth bass without bloat, and the 19s are some of the tightest out there.

SYSTEM SYNERGY

ATCs are incredibly dependent on equipment, more-so than almost any other speaker. A good match is butter while a bad match makes children cry. Most lovers of Precise-type gear are going to pick from

the Vivid category of equipment for matching – it smoothes out the sound while keeping all the ATC precision and power. Linn is a fantastic match, as are YBA, Chord, Electrocompaniet and Exposure. EAR and Atma-Sphere are popular matches in the tube category. Bryston is probably the most common match for ATC in pro recording environments, but this pair is only for those daring folk who can handle brutal accuracy and hyper-etched sound.

ATCs are also known as sinkholes for power, so you'll want an amp with at least 100 watts. And that's to be taken seriously. While ATC says the 19s can run with as little as 50 watts, you'll want more. The powered SCM-20s (the model the 19s are based on) have 250 watts, and that's "active" power, so take a hint: the more power, the more smiles.

LIFESTYLE

While the new SCM-19 style is an improvement over the typical ATC box-and-grill look, it won't turn any heads in the hi-fi world. The 19s come in either oak or piano black. The light oak color shown in the picture above will quickly change to a warmer cherry-like color which looks quite nice.

The front baffle with rounded corners is also a pleasant improvement, but nothing new or exciting.

Comments from non-audiophiles found the speakers attractive, but not representative of their price.

BUYING RECOMMENDATION

I'm going to go out on a limb and recommend owning the 19s and a sub before moving up the range to the 40s or 50s. The bigger 3-way speakers feature the 3" dome and ATC woofers, but are also much trickier to set up in home. The 19s do just so much right, the vast majority of listeners will attain more enjoyment from the 19s and a sub than the bigger speakers.

That said, if you have a larger listening room with adequate space (and time and patience) to place the speakers correctly, the precision of the ATC midrange is unparalleled. But even with the 40 or 50 speakers, you'll need a sub to get the deep lows; ATC values smooth, precise (and measurably accurate) bass over big bass. While super accurate deep bass may sound nice on paper, having huge lows is, to me, just too much fun to pass up.

If you have a smaller room or need to place your speakers against the wall, the 7s or 11s are the way to go if, for no other reason, than they won't break your bookshelf or credenza. They have all the same ATC magic and sound just wonderfully good against the wall and, even more importantly, utilize the room gain for excellent bass.

Additionally, if you have the coin, think about investing in ATC's active series of speakers. ATC's active amplification takes their speakers to the proverbial 11. And because of the system simplicity, the sound is that much more pure. A DAC with integral volume or even a CD player with volume offers the purest approach and the results are simply stunning.

TECH TALK

ATC manufacturers midrange and bass drivers for both their own speakers and 3rd party manufacturers like Naim and PMC. ATC, however, keeps the best drivers for their own speakers and the 19's 6" driver won't be showing up anywhere else.

The famous 3" ATC SM150S dome, covering from 350hz-3kHz, forms the backbone of ATC's speaker lineup. While the 19s don't feature the actual 3" midrange, they feature a 6" SL (Super Linear) woofer with, as ATC says, "a 3" integral softdome." But think of the 19's driver more like the 3" dome with an additional three inches of woofer around it – same motor, same construction, same measurements, deeper bass.

Additionally, the motor assembly on the 6" driver weighs in at 19.4lbs. Yes, 19.4 pounds (the entire speaker weighs 35lbs). If you're curious, that is the biggest motor on any 6" driver in the world. ATC, unlike almost every other driver manufacturer, uses a short coil, long gap driver construction (instead of long coil, short gap) that they believe reduces distortion and driver hysteresis to the lowest possible levels. And because ATCs are built for recording engineers and tech junkies, they have the graphs and measurements to back it up.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

The ATC SCM-19s feature a sealed box and a 6" driver that puts out serious bass in small to medium rooms. Because it is a sealed box, room placement and optimization is fairly easy. While the best spot is going to be a few feet out into the room and toed in slightly, ATC accommodates recording studios who stuff their speakers into walls.

To grill or not to grill, that is the question. With older ATCs, grill-on was the preferable style. The grill is used to soak up high frequency reflections off the speaker baffle and ATC owners who didn't know this little gem of wisdom were tearing their hair out trying to tame the high frequencies.

With the 19s, you can go either grill on or off, though I prefer grill on. The new style doesn't use the same wrap-around grill as past ATCs, so the effect is not as noticeable. If you want a little more sizzle up top, take the grill off.

In regards to break-in, ATCs are known as roller-coasters, sounding like hell right out of the box, improving after a few dozen hours, then sounding like hell again until, finally, a couple hundred hours breaks in their titanic drivers and the heavens open up.

The 19s, however, are the first ATCs that sound pretty good right out of the box. Someone must have realized they were losing customers due to the ungodly long break-in period and started either breaking

in the speakers at the factory or tweaking the drivers in subtle ways. That said, you'll still want to put on your ultra dub bass tracks to break these babies in.

Comments

Outstanding review, Josh. Tells me everything I need to know about the speakers and more importantly places them in context within their range and as part of a system.

Most reviews in Stereophile, TAS, HiFi Plus and 6moons are great fun to read and offer insight into the company or technology but are not necessarily useful for the potential buyer. Your review cuts straight to the heart of the matter.

Thanks and best wishes

Jeremy

Posted by: Jeremy at December 12, 2007 3:22 PM

I could not agree more with all of your comments here. We are the distributor for ATC in Australia and the SCM19 is the one that totally blows me away. You are dead on when you say to forget the specs, the bass output from this little speaker is truly amazing and in anything other than a very large room, you can easily live with this speaker without a sub woofer. Great review, keep it up!

Posted by: Steve Lees at December 12, 2007 4:31 PM

Been part of the cult for years. Have had good results with NAD 372 and M3 driving these babies

Posted by: Bongofury at December 14, 2007 2:59 PM

Hey guys, glad you like the review. I think these speakers will attain legendary status with the Precise-lovers.

Posted by: Josh Ray at December 15, 2007 5:15 PM

This review is accurate. ATC are not for everyone and you correctly convey what they do so that buyers can make an informed decision.

Your suggestion to go 19's first and then a sub is an excellent one. I suspect this may be ATC's strategy in offering such good value with the biggest motor on any 6 inch driver in the world. This was my path: SCM20 passive for 4 years then added SCM 0.1/15 sub for 5 more years and most recently SCM100A's with the 20's now as rear surrounds. These speakers are addictive and hitting the play button has remained a real adrenaline rush since I started on this path. They renewed my interest in music. I continue to audition other speakers but have no desire to change - so the fit was good for me.

Posted by: Shadorne at December 16, 2007 7:58 AM

I have SCM19 for six months now, driven by a Musical Fidelity A3.2 integrated (115 W/channel).

The first surprise was they sound almost the same with and without the grill. The second, they sound good very close-one foot- to the rear wall, although the sound is more precise and the bass tighter at two feet or more.

They not only say all about the recording, which can be very good for many, but can ruin the pleasure to listen to others; they are the most "explicit" of the speakers I had during the years(JBL, Rogers, Sonus Faber), so in the big orchestral works, you hear every group and soloist the conductor allows you to hear. My room is not too big, and the amplifier volume knob rarely go over the 11th hour.

If I ever replace them, it will be with ATC active speakers only.

Posted by: Jacques at December 21, 2007 7:16 PM

still searching for the right pre- any updated suggestions to mate with the active 50's- would love to go tube-

Posted by: bill gordon at February 19, 2008 4:06 PM
