

ATC SCM 35 Loudspeaker

Neil Gader

Known for its professional monitors, a British company branches out.



British specialist manufacturer ATC (Acoustic Transducer Company) outfits some of the world's elite recording studios, mastering facilities, and concert halls with its powered, or "active," monitoring speakers. But the company's pro reputation has unfairly overshadowed its lineup of active and passive consumer models, which brim with audiophile credentials. In filling the need for a more

traditional, entry-level design that delivers the brand's high-performance "house sound" to a broader base of home enthusiasts, the new SCM 35 stands as one of ATC's most significant offerings.

A three-way acoustic suspension floorstander, the \$4075 SCM 35 is rooted in the classic design for which ATC has been known since the active SCM 50 became a studio standard over two decades ago. (SCM stands for studio control monitor.) It extols a brawny, mid-

band-dominant sound that echoes the output and precision of its pro-line brothers. Yet unlike some audiophile gear, it doesn't need to be coddled like a piece of Lalique crystal.

The SCM 35 is a control speaker—more so than my reference SCM 20 SL and newer SCM 20-2 (see sidebar). In the fashion of a true studio monitor, it has a direct, analytical personality and reacts with a velocity more associated

Build and Power Requirements

For a slender floorstander, the SCM 35 is ruggedly overbuilt. An integrated three-point plinth stabilizes its narrow footprint and includes adjustable spikes. The SCM 35 arrays its three drivers in close proximity to one another, with the 1" soft dome tweeter's casing nearly kissing the top edge of the baffle and the 8" woofer's basket brushing against the sides. The in-house-designed and -manufactured 3" dome midrange is the centerpiece that defines the SCM 35's personality. I recall hearing an earlier example of this Cyclops-eye transducer in the early 1980s and was struck by its midrange transparency, presence, and speed. My respect for the driver remains undiminished. Its personality emphasizes midrange focus in a way that steers vocal images toward you with laser-lit precision. Since my last encounter, the waveguide has been radiussed, a crucial difference that seems to have banished any quasi horn-loading/cupped-hand artifacts. To my ears it has wider and more linear dispersion, and a broader sweet spot. As befits a speaker with 85dB sensitivity, tri-wire terminals are provided for individually amplifying each driver. And like all ATC passives, power is an issue. Drive it with less than a couple hundred pristine watts-per-channel, and this speaker will pick your amp clean.

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The Evolution of a Classic: The ATC SCM 20-2

I don't make frivolous changes to my reference system, and the SCM 20 SL has been my reference compact for about four years. Its sound is neutral in the mids, with a slightly forward nature. The harmonic structure of the upper treble is lightly shaded. And while the 20 SL has the natural dynamic limitations dictated by its modest size (but less than you might imagine), its powerful mids and solid mid-to-upper bass give the impression that a lot more speaker is in the room.

A new version addresses two areas that I felt needed improvement—the veiled upper treble and that burst of warmth in the lower midrange. Make it *three* areas if you thought the boxy enclosure looked staid and stodgy.

Taking the latter two issues first, ATC implemented the composite cabinet architecture of its aggressively styled Concept series. The SCM 20-2 features an 18mm MDF enclosure with a metalized exterior finish. Four aluminum columns secure the highly polished top and bottom caps. Vertical aluminum fins act as heat sinks for the active version's amp pack, but were merely cosmetic on the passive model I listened to. Significantly, the sidewalls of the cabinet are non-parallel. Finally, the 20-2 has adapted the 1" soft dome, dual-magnet tweeter from the SCM 70 flagship. Its openness and extension place the speaker in a different league in terms of transparency and low-level resolving power. The 6" mid/bass driver remains unchanged. Like the 3" dome of the SCM 35, it's a short-coil/long-gap in-house design with a massive magnet structure and three-inch voice coil.

What this translates to is a speaker that is less obviously a *speaker* than before. There's an increased harmonic complexity and openness in the treble octaves that the original can't touch, and the new version has an effortless extension and luminance that embraces both transients and micro-dynamics. Notes sustain longer and maintain their harmonic integrity further into the velvety blackness of the soundstage. The 20-2 is a speaker with greater contrast and wider range of expression—particularly at softer levels. Piano notes are not merely louder or softer, but also harder and sharper, more rounded and delicate.

Gone is the sensation of the lower-mid and bass regions being at times too warm and underdamped. Absent, too, is the occasional nasality or hollowness that crept into the mids in the baritone vocal range. The new cabinet's non-parallel side walls might also partly explain the superior pitch definition in the lower regions. Cabinet resonance may have been addressed as well. Mind you—the ATC maintains a certain Britishness in its overall warmth, but I no longer perceive cabinet coloration or resonance.

At only 83dB sensitivity, the speaker still requires a hellacious amount of power to sound its very best. However, more than ever, the SCM 20-2 closely approximates the ideal point-source—making it stiff competition for even those extra-costly two-ways with brand names beginning at the other end of the alphabet. Meet my new compact reference.

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with electrostats than dynamic speakers. In revealing every dusty corner, it doesn't sweeten or lay a Krispy Kreme glaze over troubled recordings. Coherence and integration between the bass and midrange drivers is superior. If the

woofer wasn't this fast and pitch perfect, the midrange's ribbon-like speed would leave it at the starting line. Similarly sized bass-reflex floorstanders can surpass the SCM 35 in extension, but few will turn the trick without port or enclosure artifacts.

The SCM 35 makes the most of solo instruments and vocalists. During the *Kol Nidrei* [Channel Classics], I could almost see a puff of rosin powder float off cellist Peter Wispelwey's bow. The speaker's focus is unshakable, with a deep soundstage that picked up every distant percussion cue on Holly Cole's "Train" [*Temptation*, Alert]. Listening to Norah Jones' cover of "The Nearness Of You" [*Come Away With Me*, Blue Note], I noted how clean the leading edges of piano transients were—pristinely delineated yet almost buttery in the way they tickled and massaged the ear. And Clark Terry's horn blasts during "Liza All The Clouds Away" [*One On One*, Chesky] were striking in dynamism and clarity.

Contrasting the SCM 35 with the compact SCM 20-2 proved interesting. Although I wouldn't have predicted it, the 20-2s have a slightly deeper tonality and a more laterally expansive soundstage but lack the 35's front-to-back

depth. Not surprisingly, the 20-2 couldn't match the SCM 35's punch on the drum fills and guitars from Green Day's mini punk opera "Jesus of Suburbia" [*American Idiot*, Reprise]. In a perfect world, I'd wish for a little more weight and extension from the SCM 35's bass, and a tweeter with the range of expression to match the splendid midrange. The soft dome lacks a high level of fluidity and openness, which unfortunately undermines integration with the whole.

For those who insist on being carried away on a romantic, cushiony carpet of sound, ATC's latest will probably not be your ride. The SCM 35 embodies the exactness of a diagnostician—it's a precise performer that will not retouch reality with impressionistic brushstrokes. 

SPECIFICATIONS

SCM 35

Driver complement: 1" soft dome tweeter, 3" polyester weave dome midrange, 8" woofer

Frequency response: 48Hz–20kHz ± 3dB

Sensitivity: 85dB

Impedance: Eight ohms

Recommended amplifier power: 50–300 Watts

Dimensions: 9" x 36" x 12"

Weight: 64 lbs.

SCM 20-2

Driver complement: 1" soft dome tweeter, 3"/6" mid dome/woofer

Frequency Response: 45Hz–22kHz ± 3dB

Sensitivity: 83dB

Impedance: Eight ohms

Recommended Amplifier power: 50–300 watts

Dimensions: 11" x 19.5" x 15.5"

Weight: 55 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

See list on page 58.

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

FLAT EARTH AUDIO

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Prices: SCM 35: \$4075; SCM 20-2: \$5500