

Active life

EXCLUSIVE ATC has transformed its SCM20 into the Active 20, a makeover worthy of Changing Rooms, but has it transformed the sound?

Something strange and powerful has invaded the styling department at ATC's Stroud-based HQ. Smartly veneered traditional cabinets are slowly being usurped by rugged, anthracite grey creations with metal grilles and silver fins. This industrial look first took form in the heavyweight SCM70A, a floorstanding brute of a design that takes no prisoners. Then it went to the bottom of the range and delivered the Active 10. Now we have the Active 20 – there may not be much of a future for veneers in that part of Gloucestershire.

One reason for this 'look' is the expanse of aluminium that's required to dissipate the heat produced by the power amps that form the active element in this speaker. A 250-watt monoblock powers the bass/mid driver while a 50-watt amp controls the high frequency unit. As these amps operate in Class A for up to two thirds output the speakers produce enough heat to keep the listening room cosy, even while idle, hence the ventilating ports atop each cabinet.

The drive units consist of a high-performance 25mm soft-dome tweeter which has a double magnet construction, and is said to produce a linear frequency response to well beyond 25kHz. Bass and midrange are catered for with a hand-built 150mm bass/mid drive unit. Unusually this features a 75mm midrange soft dome, mechanically coupled to a 150mm bass cone that's coated with a viscous damping material in order to minimise coloration. The midrange element looks much like a dust cap, but rather than providing a stiffening effect at the point where the coil drives the cone, as is often the case, this is a soft dome that reproduces higher frequencies than the cone as a whole can manage.

A large 177mm, high-flux magnet is used to control a short, edge-wound copper voice coil, operating in a close-tolerance long magnetic gap for high power handling. Meanwhile, a fourth order electronic crossover filters the signal prior to amplification, allowing maximum driver control.

VERDICT
ATC Active 20
loudspeaker
£2,538 (per pair)

Superb control and resolution at the price, bass that most amp/speaker combinations can only dream about and timing that's right on the money.

Distinctive styling may not be to all tastes, balanced connection will not suit all preamps.

CONCLUSION
 A very solid and reliable loudspeaker system that will provide hours of highly engaging musical entertainment, suited to air guitarists and air baton twirlers alike.

KEY FEATURES

- Bass/mid driver: 150mm cone/dome
- Tweeter: 25mm soft dome
- Electronic fourth order crossover
- Bass/mid amplification: 250W
- Treble amplification: 50W
- Size (WxHxD): 27x44.8x31cm
- Weight: 30kg
- Bandwidth: (-6dB) 60Hz – 20kHz

All this power might seem a bit like overkill but in the pro world, where ATC does a lot of its business, you need a healthy amount of over specification to ensure a product's longevity. It's a bit like a V8 engine – not many cars require the sort of power available from them but the fact that they are cruising 99 per cent of the time means they should go on forever.

ATC's professional heritage is not only clear in the Active 20's appearance, you can hear it too. These speakers have much of the studio monitor in their sound. It's apparent in many ways but total unflappability is the key. Whatever sort of music you play and whatever volume level you play it at there's a sense of ease to the reproduction. And while high-level playback is very much on the menu this is not the sort of speaker that only sounds good when it's loud. ATC seems to have gone to some lengths to ensure that the Active 20s work equally well at 'normal' domestic levels.

PERFORMANCE

The heavyweight cabinets pay off with a sound that seems to be devoid of boxiness – it probably still sounds like a box compared to an electrostatic loudspeaker, but that's more down to the nature of the shape rather than its resonant character. Resonance is in fact extremely well controlled, which

BOX BUILDING

ATC takes cabinet construction seriously. Underneath all the 20's curves is a trapezoid box made of 18mm MDF, the only visible surface of which being the front baffle to which the drivers are attached, and even that's covered by a steel mesh grille. The sides that show are solid curved MDF with a composite coating while the top and the bottom are also solid but finished in a high-gloss paint finish. The latter is applied, we're informed, by the same company that finishes Jaguar racing cars. The two front pillars are aluminium extrusions which match the heat sinking that takes up the entire back of each speaker. At 30kg it's not a speaker to toy with!

Detail



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allows full size imagery when the right signal comes along.

The signal is of course key – some speakers produce a big sound because their panels are joining in, but these produce a big sound if it's on the recording rather than if the recording contains a frequency that excites the box. The word is control. Not a hard-edged, aggressive control either, just a natural let-the-signal-reveal-itself sort of control.

The Active 20 is in fact remarkably smooth and relaxed when the material sounds that way. This is down to smooth but extended high frequencies and an open and revealing midrange that, while not the most transparent ever, lets an awful lot of detail through. You can hear right into the mix, whether it be Steely Dan's *Royal Scam* or Rage Against The Machine's *Know Your Enemy*. There's also plenty of low-level resolution available, which comes in handy to sort out the lyrics of fast-talking rappers and the string tone of antique violins.

The most surprising aspect of the Active 20's performance is the bass. The degree to which bass character changes with recordings is uncanny – you get a sense with plenty of discs that the speaker is very dry, then you put something else on and the sofa starts to resonate. The specs suggest they roll off at a fairly high 60Hz but that must be an anechoic measurement because in-room it feels more like 40Hz (easily). They go remarkably low for such relatively compact boxes.

This is the active factor in all its glory. There's no bass like active bass – control and power are awesome despite the speaker's diminutive dimensions. It's a quality that craves indulgence, encouraging you to seek out the music in your collection that really digs down. In my experience that tends to be the newer material, things like Missy Elliott, Eminem and live recordings like Mari Boine's *Eallin*. Old school tunes do bass too but rarely with the same energy.

There are of course exceptions, such as Jeff Beck's live album with Jan Hammer and the *Koyaanisqatsi* soundtrack.

And inevitably some recordings sound sweeter than others. Frank Zappa's *The Best Band You Never Heard in Your Life*, for instance, sounds harder than one might like. But there's no suggestion that the speaker encourages an aggressive balance, just that it plays it like it is.

There are same-price alternatives with greater transparency but they aren't active, so power amplification has to be factored in. At a guess you'd have to set aside at least £1,500 for that side of the equation, which doesn't leave enough for a more transparent speaker – a more coloured one for sure, but what do you want to hear, the music or the speaker? ☑

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ALSO CONSIDER

- B&W SIGNATURE 805** £2,250
 Superb transparency, if not the bass control and power on offer with actives.
- MERIDIAN M33** £1,560
 An active design in a compact enclosure that offers impressive dynamic vigour.
- LINN KATAN AKTV/LK140** £2,325
 Very compact active design with free-standing amplifiers – sweet, clean and detailed.