

4-box phenomenon

Maximise your musical enjoyment while putting the bite on clutter

By the standards of a stressful existence, it's shaping up to be a good day. I don't know how you unwind from it all – I'd be surprised if saying "Horlicks" to yourself does the trick – but I listen to music. Probably for too much of the time and on a constantly-shifting roster of kit most people would consider laughably expensive. It works for me.

At least it works when I can truly forget about the kit. As a hi-fi reviewer, this isn't easy. Striving to pin down how an individual component 'sounds' and the nature of its contribution to any system it might be part of is the first line of the job description. The occasions when it's possible to connect completely with the music while blissfully disengaged from the mechanics of its reproduction are, sadly, quite rare. Which is ironic considering that getting you closer to the music is what hi-fi is for. Let's just call it an occupational hazard.

But today I suddenly feel better about the whole deal. Well, of course I do – I've constructed a system that's an antidote for hi-fi hack paranoia, a system that will get on with the job of playing my CD collection without drawing attention to anything that might be construed as a complex, highly-strung, cable-sensitive, tweak-hungry, not-now-honey-I've-got-a-headache attitude. You see, simple is sexy in my book. The fact that it cuts down on the box count has several significant consequences: fewer components and less aesthetic clutter ease the need to think about the conjectural tangle of interactions that lurk at the heart of more conventional hi-fi systems. And what we have here is beautifully simple – a world-class

CD/pre-monoblock/speaker combo reduced to four subtly glinting silver-grey components – minimal cabling, maximum music.

AFFORDABLE HIGH END

The inspirational reductionism resides with Stroud-based pro-sector hero ATC's idea of what a serious standmount domestic 'hi-fi' loudspeaker – and that's the pro-standard take on the term – should look and sound like. If a speaker that costs £2,695 suggests something pitched on the far side of 'affordable high-end', think again. This system is *deeply* AHE. The beauty of the Active 20 is that as well as having a stunning metal-grilled trapezoidal 20-litre aluminium/MDF composite enclosure with curved corners and an exquisitely-engineered 150mm bass/mid driver that could be used as a free weight in a gym, each speaker comes with its own 250-watt monoblock power amp – and that's just to take care of the bass/mid driver. An additional 50-watt amp controls the 25mm soft dome tweeter which has a double magnet construction and extends comfortably beyond 25kHz. The 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. A fourth order electronic crossover splits the incoming signal and the amps operate in Class A for two thirds of the maximum power output, a trait confirmed by the hand-warming potential of the full-length heat sink fins and top plate vents at the back of each enclosure.

So let's read that again: studio-standard speakers driven by their own immensely powerful internal power amps with a degree of accuracy and



Densen B-400 XS CD player £2,500
Densen's flagship disc spinner makes interesting claims about doubling the resolution of CDs but there's no denying the natural and unforced sound quality it displays in the right company.



ATC SCA2 preamp £3,929
Looks like a seventies throwback but this is a fully-featured preamp with near state-of-the-art performance from pro-sector stalwarts ATC. Balanced outputs drive ATC's Active 20s with ease.



ATC Active 20 speakers £2,695
Studio engineering comes to the home, the self-powered 20 combining amazing power and dynamics with remarkable subtlety and insight. The hi-tech styling is unusual but decor-friendly.

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control beyond the reach of any comparable passive design... all for £2.5k. Sounds like a steal. ATC's £3,929 SCA2 preamp is deceptive, too. It looks a little old-fashioned with its rounded-off casing, functional black front plate and distinctly seventies-style knobs. Under the lid, there isn't an integrated circuit in sight – it relies on discreet circuits for the entire signal path – also something of a bygone tradition. Actually, the SCA2 was introduced in the early nineties and does everything a modern high-end preamp should and shouldn't. Inputs number a generous eight, two of which are balanced XLR sockets; outputs offer a choice of RCA phono or XLR balanced connections, too, though of course the high output XLRs are mandatory to drive the Active 20s. Once you've plugged them into a convenient mains socket, that is.

SLAB AND TICKLE

Ten minutes after slicing open the cardboard cartons, it's all looking rather better than good. Densen's £2,500 B-400XS, now available in a dazzling silver-white 'Albino' finish, would be comparatively flashy if it wasn't for the balancing sobriety of its design. Its elegantly slabby functionalism matches the self-effacing but slightly

idiosyncratic form language of the ATC hardware like a dream. I'm anticipating an equally snug sonic fit, because I know from experience that the Densen is one of those CD players that works well with anything downstream that's genuinely transparent and neutral. Certainly, its engineering is comparably thorough. There are separate converters for right and left channels and the converter board includes an HDCD chip, but also, all control circuitry is designed by Densen and located on one board beneath the Sony-sourced transport for the shortest signal paths and to remove potential jitter between laser and laser reader. Densen claims immeasurably low DAC jitter thanks to an extremely effective new clock circuit.

You'll probably have read in *HFC's* previous review of Densen's somewhat controversial claim that its proprietary 'PlusBit' circuitry extracts a 17th bit from a 16-bit CD, effectively doubling its resolution. Yeah. I don't get it, either. Whatever it does, it makes the B-400XS an extremely smooth and natural-sounding machine with an almost analogue texture to its music making. In some systems it can seem strangely dull and lifeless but given the chance to exercise its subtler talents, it's capable of magical results.

And nothing less than sorcery will do

if this system is to succeed on the level I need it to. Not to put too finer point on it, it will have to disappear. I don't want to be sucked into an analysis of the hi-fi, I don't want it to dominate my living space. I want a break from all that. I want to kick back with a can of Stella and play my favourite CDs, nothing less, nothing more.

HONESTY FIRST

Joe Sample's almost ridiculously funky *Ashes To Ashes* is an album I've always enjoyed immensely on vinyl that seems to lose some of its sparkle, colour and, er, funk in the transition to CD. Better systems make more of it without quite hitting the spot. But no longer. The Densen/ATC combo's effortless weight and presentation of fine detail instantly ramped up the realism. Better still, the rather pale production was potently restored to full-blooded health with tonal colours and timbres convincingly resolved. Bass that had seemed thin and leading-edgy was now imbued with terrific energy, body and rhythmic drive.

The system's honesty-first approach works with languid classical music, too. A spot of Dvorak – not noted for his jaunty tempos – was handled with fabulous finesse and a real sense of 'performance'. Violin and cello string tone had a particularly natural and



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unforced quality – smooth without being smothered.

This system doesn't seek attention for itself, only the music. It balances difficult elements that can sometimes trash the ambitions of lesser hi-fi so well that you forget there was ever a problem. For instance, on the Crusaders' first outing in 20 years, *Rural Renewal*, the massed voices of the female gospel choir on *A Healing Coming On* weren't just clear and cleanly separated but were also beautifully rounded, and there was no artificial harshness or edge to Wilton Felder's tenor sax. It all meshes together so naturally, it just pulls you in.

On a selection of cuts, I don't think I've ever heard Larry Carlton's laid-back acoustic guitar playing sound better. In particular, the old Michael McDonald number *Minute By Minute* moved along in a groove so deep even a Range Rover wouldn't have been able to climb out. Kirk Whalum's sax sounded and sounded appropriately loud and generous of spirit and the incisive sting of Carlton's

guitar was spot-on. The system once again excelled low down with smooth, deep, tangible bass lines.

HIGH CLASS

But there was still another gear to go. Not to mention a whole canister of nitrous oxide. Well produced as Carlton's material usually is, Steely Dan's new CD, *Everything Must Go*, is completely off the scale and team Densen/ATC lapped it up. On the wonderful *Things I Miss The Most*, Michael Leonhart's tenor sax sounded sensually warm and reedy and locked solidly in the soundstage. The imaging on this track was virtually holographic with Gordon Gottlieb's drums and percussion placed precisely where they should be, behind Leonhart and Donald Fagen's vocals. Absolutely exhilarating. The system evoked the darkly-tinged fun and atmosphere of *Blues Beach* superbly, too, especially Becker's effortlessly funky bass work.

Switching to some two-work playing with jazz pianist Julian Joseph it was

indubitably clear he was playing a grand piano – full size, correctly tuned, a joy to listen to. ATC's boss Billy Woodman says he started the company so he could listen to jazz properly. Sounds like he got his wish.

Although disarmingly simple and compact, this is a serious system that does what a serious system should do – let the music breath in an effortless, uncompressed manner. It represents an artful coalition of power, finesse and neutrality. The key to the system's sound is that it doesn't – it's not merely transparent but a completely open window, revealing acoustic and timing clues on golden oldies like Rickie Lee Jones' *Flying Cowboys* album I'd never even suspected before while bringing a still more tangible and harmonically rich feeling to John Lee Hooker's collaboration with Carlos Santana on *The Healer*. Like all open windows, a certain amount of rubbish is liable to fly in, but get the recording right and the results are breathtaking. *HFC*

David Vivian

