

# Going Ampleless!

## ATC SCM40A Powered Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

**W**ho better to select an amplifier to match speakers than the manufacturer? That's been the argument by fans of self-powered boxes for years now. Until the development of tri-path chips, this concept was highly limited. Of course, the true genesis began with console systems. My folks' version was an RCA in solid maple with an awful shoe-polish brown stain. The cool part, though, was the gooey tube sound and the side speakers that could not only swing out, but detach as well.

In the tradition of fellow British manufacturers Meridian, Linn and PMC, ATC's SCM40A floorstanders provide three amplifiers in each speaker: 150 watts for bass, 60 watts for the stunning dome midrange, and 25 watts to handle the soft dome tweeter. Mounted near the bottom on the backside, the amplifier offers no dials — just a detachable power cord receptacle, XLR female cable socket, power button, and access to the fuse. The powered pair will set you back \$13,995, while those married to their own amplification can purchase the standard SCM40 without amplification for \$8,995 per pair. ATC's Ben Lilly points out that their first powered model was the SCM50A, produced in 1987; so you can rest assured that ATC has massive experience building powered speakers.

Power up the SCM40A and the ears are greeted with a speaker that has a solid grip on whatever music is played. When the Romans' "Uh Huh" via Tidal is playing, the bass frequencies penetrate while the finger snapping is rich and textured. It's immediately apparent that these speakers rock the house.

All ATC drivers are built in-house, not by a third party. This may cost a bit more but the result is a perfect match from design to implementation. From the one-inch soft dome tweeter, 3-inch dome midrange, and the 6.5-inch short coil bass driver, accuracy is key and the SCM40-As have it in spades. "Shine" by Years and Years is downright addicting with its electronic bass and keyboards. The sound is so spot on you almost start listening for an artifact from Pro Tools.

The 38.5"H x 10.5"W x 13.5"D teardrop cabinet in an oiled cherry veneer is both stunning and understated. Unless you have little ones or a crazy feline around, keep the metal grills in the box as they only take away from the beauty of the woodwork. If you live in a dry climate, a little lemon oil will deepen the beautiful patina over time. The metal base is low profile with the front footers barely noticeable, except in how much additional stability they add. The included spikes can be attached to tighten up the bass, if needed, depending your room. *(continued)*





The SCM40As don't take long to burn in past the edginess, though small improvements continue for many hours. Placement took a good three days in my main 9'x12' room with the speakers 38 inches out from the rear wall and 28 inches from the side walls, toed in slightly to my listening chair 6 feet away. Later during the review I moved the speakers to my 18'x14' living room and repeated the musical selections. While tonality is similar, the larger space allows the SCM40As to produce higher decibel levels without room compression. Without the need for an amplifier section I used both my SimAudio i7 integrated amp with pre-out RCA to XLR, as well as the XLR output of *TONEAudio's* 2014 Product of the Year, Oppo HA-1 headphone/DAC, both with excellent results.

The SCM40As are not speakers for those who listen to music at low volume with the Sunday morning paper. Even in my small 9'x12' listening room, levels below 75dB are uninspiring at best. These speakers are designed to be impactful. Warren Zevon's "Desperados Under the Eaves" needs to be played near 80dB to get his conversational vocals brought forth in front of the bass frequencies.

The mid range is the money zone in speakers, and never is this truer than with the SCM40As. The soft dome is a revelation, especially with acoustic guitars. The romantic Mexican string style in "Puesta Del Sol" by Sean Harkness combines mellow richness with clarity. This accuracy is a hallmark of ATC.

Another instrument with excellent recreation on these floor-standers is the saxophone. John Coltrane sounds stunningly pure in "Naima." It's a lean-forward-in-your-chair moment with the SCM40As. Once again, credit the mid-dome for this sonic treat as well as Keith Jarrett's strong keyboarding in "Fort Yawuh" where the ivory notes carry with force, though the soft notes do fall prey to getting lost in the background – again, at lower levels. *(continued)*

Great recordings with 16/44 or hi-res 24/96 from Linn, etc., prove enveloping. The flip side to accurate speakers is the lack of mercy with poor recordings. The SCM40As are brutally honest and will not gloss over the less than stellar recordings in your collection. The Burt Bacharach classic "What the World Needs Now" holds an abundance of distortion, and the SCM40As reveal every bit of the flawed copy. Be aware that you may never want to listen to certain poor recordings ever again on the SCM40As, as they give no camouflage.

Hearing the distinction between multiple vocalists of similar styles is a real defining point between mid and hifi in my book. REM's "Shiny Happy People" is a go-to song in hearing such differences between the three vocalists, especially with the near distortion-free lead guitar riffs accompanying the vocals. The sensual voice of Sade's "No Ordinary Love" is impressive even off axis from a couch in the living room.

If the SCM40As have one weakness it's in how breathy and sweet-style vocalists are recreated. Diana Krall lacks the liquid romance in such tracks as "If I Take You Home Tonight." Her vocals come out dry and lacking emotion. The same holds true for many Dan Fogelberg tracks as well. The sweet Carolina accented vocals of James Taylor miss the last ounce of molasses in his ode to baseball, "Angels of Fenway," yet the cymbals shimmer perfectly. A tube preamp may just be the answer for this shortcoming.

Of all the genres, symphonic is where the SCM40A reigns supreme.

ATC's long held reputation for accuracy is put on full display. Pick any number of popular classic recordings and the results are the same, spot-on pitch and tonal clarity. The tremendous refinement in violinist Giuliani Camignola's performance of Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" is a revelation, as is the reed instruments from a vinyl pressing of "Grand Canyon Suite."

Modern orchestral soundtracks are equally rich. The dominating French horn that rolls throughout the "Dances With Wolves" soundtrack never crumbles into shrillness, while the background tympanis provide the echo which reveals that the Sioux tribe is not far away on the vast prairie. The SCM40As faithfully recreate the audio setting in a variety of films, all the while allowing each instrument to be picked up while listening.

If your speakers must act as part of the home theater, the SCM40As make for fun audio during movies. Dialogue is very clear for main speakers, and the bass response while watching "The Hunger Games" is damn good and fast. Some may still want a subwoofer, but many will find the bass response just fine without.

Tally up the total package and the ATC SCM40A is fun departure from the typical floorstanding speaker. Its bass, while not rock bottom, is richly detailed. Exorcising an amplifier from the budgetary equation allows for more investment in a fine preamp if needed. Or, just more money to invest in music. For those who crave accuracy above all, the ATC SCM40A is an absolute finalist for your system. As for the balance of buyers in this price range, do yourself a favor and give them an audition; hearing the dome midrange itself is worth the time.

## Additional Listening

ATC is best known for their work with recording studios, and their speakers also reside in the home of many musicians. No wonder, because they offer outstanding dispersion, tonal accuracy and tremendous dynamic range along with low distortion. Their ability to play without fatigue in the recording studio translates into home speakers that can rock at concert level all day long, should you have the need.

While powered speakers have never really caught on in the US, I submit this is an excellent concept, especially for someone a bit more space challenged, or the music enthusiast who just doesn't want a rack full of gear, or to bother with all of those cables. The SCM40As spent a bit of time in my new apartment, with three top preamplifiers in rotation: the Audio Research GSPre (reviewed this issue), the Pass Xs preamplifier and the Robert Koda K10. Each of these preamplifiers carry a larger price tag than the SCM40As and they proved up to task with each. I also had great luck in my studio, powering them directly by the dCS Paganini stack, via a long length of Cardas Clear interconnects. And Mark was completely correct insinuating that you can voice the SCM40As to your taste with interconnects and choice of preamplifier.

Thanks to their studio heritage, they possess the resolution to easily discern between cables or source components with ease. They did benefit from being plugged into the IsoTek Super Titan, offering a smoother, more grain-free presentation.

While I love the concept of the SCM40As, the speakers are good enough and accurate enough that in the context of my system, with a pair of \$90,000 Pass Xs300s on the rack, I'd probably opt for the passive models, as they are certainly good enough. But for the apartment or small-space dweller, I'd match them up with the recently reviewed MOON by Simaudio 430HA DAC/pre-amplifier, a good pair of interconnects and call it a day.

If you're tired of the cable and equipment hassle, I can't suggest a better pair of active speakers than the ATC SCM40As. They produce sound well beyond what their price tag suggests, especially considering that you will eliminate at least a few thousand dollars in speaker cables and power amplifiers. —*Jeff Dorgay*

The ATC SCM40A Speakers  
\$13,995/pair

### MANUFACTURER

ATC Loudspeaker Technoloty Ltd

### CONTACT

[www.atcloudspeakers.co.uk](http://www.atcloudspeakers.co.uk)

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AVID Volvere SP/SMEV/  
Grado Statement 1

**Digital Source** Gryphon Kalliope

**Preamplifiers** Simaudio MOON 430HA,  
Pass Labs XsPre, ARC GSPre

**Cable** Cardas Clear

**Power** IsoTek SuperTitan

