



PRO SURROUND

ATC turns its successful SCM12 loudspeaker into a full 5.1 system with a new centre and subwoofer

PRODUCT ATC Concept 3

TYPE Multichannel loudspeaker system

PRICE (5.1 SYSTEM) £4,877

INDIVIDUAL PRICES SCM12 standmount speaker

(front/rear): £999 per pair ● C3 centre speaker: £920

● C4 active subwoofer: £1,959

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When Billy Woodman emigrated from Australia to build his drive units for PA systems in 1974 it's doubtful that he envisaged his hardcore studio-oriented approach finding a place in the home. Yet thirty years later his company is making as many speakers for the domestic market as it does for the professionals.

The brand's latest offensive is in the surround or multichannel market, an area where sales are strong yet the amount of companies making high-quality, dedicated systems are relatively few. ATC's success in the studio undoubtedly encouraged this – its speakers were used to master the

multichannel mix of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon* for SACD and regularly find favour with soundtrack mixers. John Kurlander mixed the sound for *Lord Of The Rings: Return Of The King* at Abbey Road on an ATC 5.1 rig. That was inevitably a somewhat larger set-up than the four SCM12s (reviewed separately in *HFC* 253) plus C3 centre speaker and C4 subwoofer of the Concept 3 system assembled here, but still with very similar characteristics.

With the exception of the subwoofer this looks like a sensible enough system, not too big and conservatively finished in real-wood veneer with inset grilles to hide the business end of things. The illusion of a domestically friendly system is shattered somewhat when you try to pick up the C3 centre speaker and realise that it is a 30-kilo brute. It's only a 60cm-long passive speaker for crying out loud! Clearly ATC has not cut any corners with this or any of the other elements in this system. The 150mm doped, woven polyester drive unit that produces mid and bass in the SCM12 and C3 has a 75mm voice coil and

177mm magnet – professional style build that means you can drive it long and hard without distortion creeping in. A 25mm soft-dome tweeter covers the higher frequencies.

Given the AV orientation of this system it's a little surprising to discover that neither the centre channel nor any other speaker is fully shielded. ATC's response is that few home cinema enthusiasts who spend this much on their speaker system will have a conventional CRT TV set – other forms of projection and display systems are not similarly sensitive.

The subwoofer in this otherwise sensible system is also quite brutal. This piano-black monolith is so dense that light cannot escape its confines and at 52 kilos its take-no-prisoners attitude is not to be trifled with. The 50cm cube includes a 650-watt amp which, combined with a specially modified bass driver, can produce a continuous 112dB SPL (sound pressure level), though we wouldn't recommend such in your average living room!

With a frequency range that drops below 20Hz, the C4's drive unit is a 305mm (12-in)



device with the short voice coil/long gap design that the company prefers for its reduced distortion and high power handling. The controls that roll-off the driver don't offer the range you get with a REL for instance – here you can pick between set points at 50, 70, 90, 120 and 180Hz, which seems slightly odd given that the roll-off point of the SCM 12s is specified at 62Hz (-6dB). Ideally a 60Hz notch would seem to be appropriate, but practically speaking you have to set these things up by ear and the best setting in our room turned out to be 50Hz – though the 70Hz position was quite fun too!

A contour control lets you select between in and out-of-phase settings, with or without some additional home cinematic lift in the 40-60Hz region. Connection is as with ATC active speakers by XLR-balanced sockets only, one for each channel, though given the largely mono nature of low bass it's hard to see why.

SOUND QUALITY

HFC reviewer Paul Messenger checked out the SCM12 in May and liked it enough to give it an HFC Best Buy. Listening to a pair in stereo it's not hard to hear why. It's a speaker that's highly revealing of all aspects of recordings, both good and bad, so compression is not disguised but neither is great playing – come one, come all seems to be the ATC way. It's a hard approach to dislike if you prefer your music on the loud side – the harder you drive them, the better they sound.



KEY FEATURES

SCM12 STANDMOUNT SPEAKER

- Size (WxHxD): 22x39x26cm
- Weight: 15kg
- 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 150mm bass/mid driver
- Sensitivity/impedance: 85dB/8 ohms nom

C3 CENTRE SPEAKER

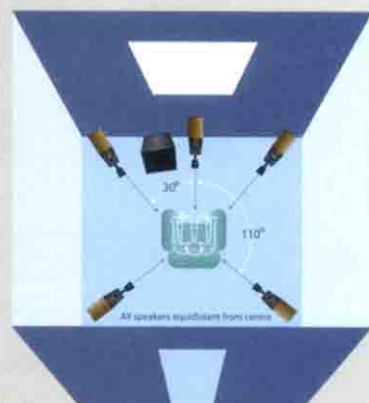
- Size (WxHxD): 60x21x30cm
- Weight: 30kg
- 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 2x150mm bass/mid drivers
- Sensitivity/impedance: 86dB/8 ohms nom

C4 ACTIVE SUBWOOFER

- Size (WxHxD): 50x58x50cm
- Weight: 52kg
- 305mm (12-in) bass driver
- 650W power amp

Moving over to Linn Kisto/2x5125 multichannel amplification, we kicked off by adding only the sub to create a 2.1 stereo system. Once the beast had been tuned in this proved an extremely gratifying set-up, and we found that the SCM 12s could be pulled out into the room to create a more spacious sound with glorious underpinning from the sub. This is a very juicy sub/sat system; it genuinely kicks the proverbial with its lack of distortion at high levels and its overall resolution. It's a vivacious, high-energy-but-with-restrained-midrange balance that's desperate to be turned up, yet if you get the SPL meter out, isn't playing that loud when ▶

SET-UP



POSITIONING

ATC recommends the classic ITU (International Telecommunications Union) speaker set-up for the Concept 3 system, illustrated above, which is designed to recreate the same monitor arrangement as that used in studios. Obviously, the success of this approach depends on the layout of your room, but if your speakers are arranged to the same standard as defined it should be possible to recreate precisely the same effects.

However, this is not necessarily the best set-up for movie soundtracks where a wider positioning of the front channels combined with surround channels either side of the listener is generally regarded as the more conventional route. System set-up will of course also be affected by practical considerations, especially with regard to the positioning of the rear channels. If you cannot set the speakers up in this fashion then you can try to keep the SCM12s away from walls at the front if not the back as well, and ditto for the C3 centre speaker.

The subwoofer meanwhile will work most efficiently if placed near the corner of the room. Setting the level and roll-off for the sub will be largely room-dependent but we found that both 50Hz and 70Hz positions gave a good result. The phase and level settings are best arrived at by listening – you might be surprised at how easy it can be to hear changes to either of these parameters and find that you can arrive at a well integrated sound without the inconvenience of a great deal of fiddling.

If you're intending to combine some serious music listening with some serious home cinema, we would recommend that you try keeping the front left and right channels at the same distance from the listening position as the centre channel. The rear channels are best placed behind the listening position but if you can't get them far enough away, try angling them toward each other. In our experiments we found that rear-channel output levels had to be reduced relative to the front channels in order to obtain a seamless surround experience. In general, when balancing front to rear levels, more natural results are obtained when the front channels are the musical focus. Inevitably, recordings vary significantly in this respect and some degree of trimming is occasionally necessary.



“The synth bass positively revelled in the low stuff while guitars both acoustic and electric sounded startlingly real over the top.”

you get there. Heavyweight tracks like Aphex Twin's *Windowlicker* were surprisingly relaxed – the speakers had no trouble controlling the manic electronic bass sounds that other systems can struggle with. Bringing in the other three channels and hooking up an SACD player for surround is no less of an entertaining experience, the speakers integrating as seamlessly as you'd expect given the similarity of driver arrays. McCoy Tyner's *Land Of Giants* disc was revealed to be a far better recording than previously demonstrated – other systems had given the impression of a lack of clarity and dynamics, but the Concept 3 showed that it is unusually natural with plenty of detail and great instrument tone. The sound overall is less ethereal than the (much more costly) Linn Akurate system tested in HFC 253, partly because there are no super-tweeters here, but when it comes to integrity it's highly convincing. Timing is spot-on, which makes any disc you care to spin sound engaging without being thrust in your face, the subwoofer balancing out the 'satellites' perfectly, treading the line between energy and control with ease. Arvo Pärt's *De Profundis* revealed a degree of solidity that provided a foundation to the

voices and gave them more body – they didn't soar up to the rafters as well as they could but seemed no less real as a result. In musical contrast, Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *Welcome To The Pleasure Dome* employed the subwoofer to marvellous theatrical effect, the synth bass positively reveling in the low stuff while guitars both acoustic and electric sounded startlingly real over the top. Detail was well served, the clatter of new acoustic strings revealed in rich harmonic patterns. Despite having heard Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon* numerous times it provided a more engaging, musically satisfying experience on SACD through these speakers than it has for a long time. The headroom available meant that it could be replayed at the proper level without any sense of effort, the only worry being that the subwoofer might be damaging the structure of the house! If you like your music at the 'proper' level (approaching live reproduction in other words) and you appreciate a fine bottom end, then this is a relatively unobtrusive yet hugely entertaining system – real hi-fi for music and movies. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT	
<p>SOUND >> 91%</p> <p>» SUB RATINGS STEREO 88% MULTICHANNEL 93%</p>	<p>PRO</p> <p>Top grade drive units plus rock-solid cabinets equal exceptional dynamic grip and subtlety. The new C3 centre and C4 subwoofer complement the SCM12 perfectly.</p>
<p>EASE OF DRIVE >> 71%</p>	<p>CON</p> <p>Though well built and relatively discrete, few would describe these speakers as beauties. Lack of shielding may be a problem for CRT TVs.</p>
<p>BUILD >> 93%</p>	
<p>VALUE >> 84%</p>	
<p>CONCLUSION</p> <p>ATC is extremely good at making highly engaging, high power-handling, very revealing loudspeakers for a reasonable price. This surround rig emphasises as much and provides 360 degrees of top-quality, heavy-duty entertainment.</p>	
<p>HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 88%</p>	