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REVIEWS
hardware

atc

CA2 preamplifier

as reviewed by Larry Cox and Francisco Duran



one

LARRY COX'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS
ATC SCM 35.

ELECTRONICS
E.A.R. 509 amplifiers and E.A.
R. 864 preamplifier.

SOURCE
Audio Note CD3.1x CD player.

CABLES
Ensemble Dynaflux and
Calrad balanced
interconnects. Speaker cables
are either Ixos 6003 or Belden
1219A.

ACCESSORIES
API Power Pack. BDR cones.

ATC has recently decided that it wants to expand beyond the recording studio market, in which it has had great success, and to enter the home audio market. (Go to <http://www.atc.gb.net/> to see the pro studios and performers who use ATC products.) I'm a fan of ATC. I'm not a hook, line, and sinker acolyte that thinks that only they are on the right path and everyone else is lost in the woods, but I feel that the company produces very satisfying products. Among the putative audio cognoscenti, many products are like trophy wives, and are most appreciated when they are trotted out in front of others. Owning them is a way of saying, "Look what I've got," but when the trophies return home, how satisfying are they?

Many audio components produce sparkling sound, a huge soundstage, prodigious bass, sky-high treble, and gobs of information, yet relief arises when you press the pause button on your CD player or lift the tonearm from an LP. The owner says, after playing parts of three songs, "Pretty amazing sound, eh? It's so exciting that I can only listen for a while!" That is not what I experience with ATC products, which invite listening for the long haul. They can seem boring at first because of their lack of exaggeration, but they give a full sense of timbre and melody while rendering all of the details that can be heard live. Imaging is fair to good, and again, very satisfying.

ATC's strategy includes lowering the prices of their equipment. When I discovered the company, their entry-level speaker, the unpowered SCM 10, retailed for \$2500, a fairly high price for a speaker that couldn't fill a large room. I owned a pair of SCM 7s that retailed for \$1200, which ATC has now reintroduced at \$850. They are an excellent bargain. Hooked up with a Hsu subwoofer, they now deliver musical joy to my brother-in-law, easily filling a relatively large (15 x 20 x 8) room with excellent dynamics. Four years ago, ATC's only preamp, the SCA2, retailed for about \$7000. The price has now dropped to \$6500 (\$7100 with a phono section). ATC has also created the CA2, a non-balanced line stage, that retails for \$1250, plus \$500 for a phono section.

The CA2 features remote control of source and volume. It has four inputs, plus a tape loop, a mute switch, and a detachable power cord. Its build quality is excellent. It is small but attractive. Little money was spent on making it look like a trophy wife, but that allows your savings account to look more trophy-like. The innards are simply laid out. One problem that the CA2 may present to some people is that its output connections are via XLR. It took a little work to get the CA2 to function with my E.A.R. 509 Mk II monoblocks. I ended up using using an inexpensive set of cables with XLRs on one end and RCAs on the other. Why does this preamp have XLR outputs, but not balanced operation? I don't know, but my guess is that ATC designed the CA2 for their powered speakers, which use XLR connections.

Connection between the CA2 and the Coda 30.5 was easy because I already possessed balanced cables for this 300-watt balanced amplifier. The CA2 produced a more incisive, precise, and detailed sound than Coda's very nice 05r preamp (\$3150). The 05r was more relaxed, vague, and tubey in character. With the 05r in my system, I could putter around the house and just enjoy music. With the CA2, the 30.5 grew teeth and got angry. It was harder not to sit and listen to the system with the CA2 because its character was more insistent. I believe that superior dynamics explain why the \$1250 CA2 bettered the 05r.

Both the CA2 and the 05r did a nice job of conveying the richness of music, from female and male vocals to stand up bass and piano, although both fell short of my E.A.R. 864 preamp (\$3495). All three preamps did a more than credible job of presenting the sustained tone of piano on Grieg's *Piano Concerto No. 1 in A Minor*, and with the piano tracks on Ensemble's *Sounds in a Natural Perspective*. The 864 had more liquidity than either solid state preamp, but the E.A.R. is more liquid than most other preamps.

The 05r and the CA2 both delivered Mary Black's bell-like vocal clarity, coupled with the warmth and—for lack of a better term—humanity present in her voice. The 05r delivered her emotion quietly, while the CA2 portrayed her as slightly distraught on the more emotional tracks. There was a slightly more impatient quality to her voice through the CA2.

The most musically appealing preamp was the 864. It was the champ in the treble range, and in overall purity. The CA2 brought a bit more speed to triangles, but lost a bit of detail, truncating the sound more than the much more expensive E.A.R. The 05r's treble was more ethereal than either the CA2's or the 864's, which meant it was more relaxing than the CA2, but not as realistic as the 864. On track 14 of the Ensemble disc, a John Cage-like piece that combines dissonance with repetition to create music out of noise, the tinkling sounds were lighter on the ears with the 05r. The CA2 made things a bit more dissonant, and a little harder to listen to. The 864 was again the winner here.

Bass was clearly the domain of the CA2, more so than with the 05r or the 864. The 864's bass is fuller, but it slightly overwhelms the lower midrange. It may be the 864 or it may be the room, but with the CA2, bass notes had more space around them, and were a bit more distinct than they were through the 864. The 05r, a buffered preamp, didn't go as deep as the 864 or the CA2, which was not much of a surprise, as it has been my experience that passive designs just don't plumb the depths. Imaging was not the strong point of either solid state preamp, and the 864 won again here. On the other hand, I'm not an imaging fetishist, and your mileage may vary.

I'd rate my 864 the best of this trio. The contest between the CA2 and the 05r was a closer match than it should have been. Given that the Coda costs nearly \$2000 more than the CA2, it should have won. I presume that matching the CA2 to a more relaxed sounding amplifier or speakers would make it sound more like the 05r, although you will never confuse the ATC with a tube preamp. I didn't have a turntable in the house while the CA2 was here, but given the performance of the SCA2 with the Oracle Delphi MkII I owned when I reviewed the older preamp, I expect that the performance of the CA2's phono section will be good, if not the last word in silky sweetness or detail.

Do I have any caveats with the CA2? Yes. I think it is quite good, especially for the money, but the XLR outputs are a problem. I tried an XLR adapter with my Jena Labs, Ensemble, Silver Audio, Supra, and DALI interconnects, and without exception the adapter introduced a "sandpaper" quality to male and female voices. These cables run the gamut of wiring technology, and I got sandpaper with all of them. My comments are based on a \$20 balanced to unbalanced wire, so I ran into limits there, too. If you are thinking of trying out the CA2, consider that you will not be hearing all it can do if you don't have properly terminated wire.

The CA2 sounds clear and clean, but it does not quite make it into "liquid" territory. Its transient attack and decay were surprisingly good, and this is usually where solid

state electronics fall short. The sound of this preamp is fast, with tonality and frequency extension that is quite good for a solid state preamplifier, and excellent for one priced at \$1250. A best buy. **Larry Cox**

two

I took one look at ATC's new CA2 preamplifier, and knew that I wanted to have a listen. The allure of a fully remote-controlled preamplifier, and one that doesn't involve the responsibility of tube maintenance, was appealing. My tube preamp is on at least six hours a day! The CA2 is a compact unit, but it is chock full of features. There are four RCA inputs along with tape inputs and outputs. There is a headphone socket that suppresses the main output but is not affected by the mute switch. One pair of balanced outputs is supplied, but no RCA outputs, perhaps reflecting ATC's professional background. The balanced outputs allow the CA2 to use runs of up to fifty meters of cable. If you've always wanted to put your front end out in the garage, you can do it, without sonic degradation! The preamp has two auxiliary inputs, but aux2 is not to be used if the optional RIAA phono board is installed. The phono board can be configured for a very broad array of cartridges by arranging jumpers.

The CA2 saw service with my usual stable of tube amps, as well as my solid state Monarchy SM-70. You need two SM-70s set up as monoblocks in order to run them in balanced mode. I sold one a while back, so balanced connection from amp to preamp was not to be. My tube amps all have single-ended connections, so the problem was solved by a trip to my local Guitar Center. A pair of balanced-to-RCA interconnects was purchased for the princely sum of \$20—for four meters, no less! To say that was the weak link in the chain would not be an exaggeration, but they worked. The little CA2 mated flawlessly with every amp I tried. The preamp was silent as a stone, with not even a grounding buzz to be heard.

I couldn't resist the opportunity to take the cover off and have a peek inside. This proved a little harder than with most other gear, as the cover of this thing is on tighter than a frog's bottom! The quality of this preamp's innards is very good to excellent. It should give years of trouble-free service. Of course, build quality alone does not make for a musical preamp. If it did, we would all have solid state receivers. Luckily, the CA2 showed its mettle quickly, with a fast, clean, and accurate sound. One noticeable strength of this preamp is its speed, yet the speed doesn't come at the expense of artificiality. There is another British audio company whose products are known for speed, but their electronics always sound artificial to me. Listening to my usual blues and jazz recordings revealed that the CA2 did not slow down the music that passed through it one iota. Spinning LPs on the Opera 1.0 turntable was a sheer delight with this preamp. Although I listened to the Cary Audio PH-302 phono preamp with the CA2, the convenience and flexibility of the ATC phono card proved enticing, with the musical qualities of the phono section mirroring that of the line stage.

On albums by two of my favorite guitarists, Pat Metheny and Larry Carlton, their finger picking and strumming styles were easily distinguished. The preamp's pace and timing were second to none. It was fast, fluid, and fantastic. Metheny's note bending and decay were reproduced cleanly and naturally. The speed also carried over to the bass and midbass. The many bass players on *The Deep End* CD by Govt Mule sounded full, solid and articulate. The quick low end of the CA2 didn't come at the

FRANCISCO DURAN'S SYSTEM:

LOUDSPEAKERS
Dali Euphonia MS4.

ELECTRONICS
Antique Sound Labs MG-SPM25DT monoblocks, Canary CA-301Mk-II amplifier, and Reference Line Preeminence IA passive and Canary CA-601Mk-II preamplifiers.

SOURCE
NAD T531 and Antique Electronic Supply CD-1 (temporary) CD players, and a Taddeo Digital Antidote Two.

CABLES
Either JPS Superconductor+ and FX interconnects and a double run of JPS Ultraconductor speaker cables, or Analysis Plus interconnects and Oval 12 speaker cables, and Monarchy and various DIY AC cords.

ACCESSORIES
Balanced Power Technologies BPT 4SE, Brick Wall Series Mode Surge Suppressor, Audio Prism Quiet Lines and Noise Sniffer, Vibrapods, Black Diamond Racing Boards and cones, Final Labs Daruma-3II Isolation Bearings, various ferrite rings, Target rack, Yamaha KX-380 cassette deck, custom made wooden cable lifters by Mr. Clark senior, and all the NOS tubes I can afford!

expense of fullness and texture. David Payton's electric bass playing on tracks from several Alan Parson LPs sounded rhythmic and solid. The dynamic snap and tone of Bill Stuve's acoustic bass on Doug MacLeod's *You Can't Take My Blues* drew me in. This disc is chock full of great blues from a man whose musical storytelling is fast becoming a national treasure.



Listening to tube equipment day after day conditions one to the performance traits inherent to tubes. A dimensional, airy, and somewhat sweet, full top end always seems to be there in some degree. The CA2 is unmistakably a solid state preamplifier. While the top end exhibited no obvious shortcomings like graininess or brightness, the lush presentation of a tube preamp was missing. The CA2 was pretty even-handed. The high notes of Lee Ritenour's guitar on *Captain Fingers* sounded clean and fast, but never etched. There was a very slight trace of sibilance on vocals, from Sade to Warren Haynes (Govt Mule). Horns, strings, and voices were not as full bodied or dimensional as the ones I hear through my Canary preamp or the excellent little Ultra Verve that was here for awhile. These two tubed units were tough competition, but the CA2 held its own, always serving music in its quick, clean style.

Both tube preamps sounded more spacious than the CA2. When I reached back to the early eighties for the fusion LP *Race To The Oasis*, from the group Kittyhawk, the Canary preamp and Cary phono stage combination drew me into the music easily. The chorus on the title track sounded especially nice and open. Even when this combination was cold, it sounded more full in the midrange than the CA2. Nevertheless, the ATC pulled ahead of the tube units in the bass department, sounding more solid, taut, authoritative, and fast. The ATC unit also benefited from its cleaner background—again, no surprise.

The ATC preamp sounded faster and cleaner, but definitely thinner in the midrange and top end than the tubed competition. The CA2 is no slouch in the soundstage department. It threw a wide and deep soundscape and very solid images. I did notice that it had a tendency to slightly compress on dynamic peaks. Admittedly, some of the blame could be put on the low-power amps that I use with my full-range Dali speakers, but this has been a non-issue with other preamps. In the back of my audiophile mind, I kept thinking that those \$20 interconnects had something to do with the faults I perceived with the CA2, but that was the only cable I had with that configuration, so that is what I used.

Even though I was pretty tough on this little preamplifier, it kept a stiff upper lip and carried on like the well-mannered Englishmen it is. It makes no excuses for itself. It is built to a very high standard, and is compact, lightweight, and runs cool. It is also affordable. If you prefer Elizabeth Hurley and Jude Law to Kate Winslett and Robbie Coltrane, the ATC CA2 could very well occupy a place in your equipment rack.

Francisco Duran

CA2 preamplifier

Retail: \$1250

ATC USA

web address: <http://www.flatearthaudio.com/>

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[BACK TO TOP](#)