

atc

SPA2 200P amplifier

as reviewed by Larry Cox



ATC has made professional gear since about 1974. Pro gear has a reputation for not sounding as "real" as audiophile stuff. While that was my expectation, it has not been my experience. ATC's SPA2 200P pro amplifier (\$4990) is intended primarily for the professional world, but Steve Kregling of Flat Earth Audio, ATC's US importer, tells me that the SPA2 200 amplifier (no "professional" designation) retails for \$6990 and is the same basic design except that it is dual mono from the IEC plug forward.

Attractive in a scientific instrument sort of way, the SPA2 200P is said to be preferred by studio guys and to be a "just the facts, ma'am" kind of amplifier, while the SPA2 200 is "tubey." Both amps are balanced designs, with the pro version having only balanced inputs.

Inside, it is cleanly and compactly laid out and built like a tank. No fairy dust inside, just solid, well-thought-out engineering. A little ATC logo and red light are all that adorn an otherwise plain black faceplate. The light tells you whether the amp is ready to rip or in standby mode. No two-minute warmups here—within about three seconds the amp is making music.

I was concerned that the SPA2 200P amplifier might be a sonic buzz saw, ready to remove my head with the first bright CD. Happily that was not so. For several years now I've been noting in my reviews that my ATC SCM 20 speakers would be happier if I only had enough power. Well, I have enough power now. This big dog's 200 watts per channel effortlessly grabbed hold of the mid/woofers and tweeters of my speakers

LARRY COX'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS
ATC SCM 20.

ELECTRONICS
Majeel Labs Pristine S-10
amplifier and E.A.R 864
preamplifier.

SOURCE
Audio Note CD3 CD player.

CABLES
Ensemble Dynaflex and
Calrad balanced
interconnects. Speaker cables
made from Belden 1219A wire

& IXOS 6003a.

ACCESSORIES
API Power Pack. BDR cones.

and shook them like toys. The 20s and the SPA2 200P are a great match, though not one that is going to ignite excitement in listeners who want to hear distortion that melts you into your seat, or which makes bad recordings sound good. (Occasionally, I want both). A fundamentally different experience was rendered for me. I'm not sure how to describe the sound, save to say that even with a bad recording I was held in place by the experience of a live event. It seemed that whatever marks the sound of a live instrument, rather than just a recording of one, was still present, even if the coloration of a bad recording was in the mix. I could hear through the distortion rather than have the distortion color all aspects of the sound.

Oh, I should tell you that my reference system is different. While my E.A.R. 802 preamp is going back to England for repairs, I'm listening to Frank Duran's now long gone Reference Line Preeminence 1A passive preamp. The passive presents images and instruments with less body and liquidity than the tubed preamp, also lightening the timbre of strings and, say, the left hand of piano. It is delicate, fast, and a little thin-sounding compared to my desired presentation. Also different now is my CD player, as I have replaced my Pioneer DVD player with Audio Note CD 3, which is much more full-bodied, dimensional, and sweet. It was in fact not a good match for the E.A. R. 802—too dark and colored, especially when hooked up to the Pristine A S10 amplifier. With the current setup, though, the sound was a little leaner than I normally want, at least until the ATC amp arrived.

Normally I try to provide a sense of the signature of a product, but the ATC comes as close to having no signature as anything I've had before, rubbing shoulders with the Chord SPM1200B, which retails for over \$6000. Both lean slightly in the clinical direction compared to some gear, but the ATC is certainly not as analytical as, say, a Krell. What really, really worked about the ATC amplifier, more so than the Chord as I recall it, was that the system sounded just great whether I was planted in the "magic seat," off to the side, or in another room. There was a clarity and detail to the sound that let me hear everything I wanted to hear in a recording. The single shortcoming of the ATC-powered ATC speakers is that they were not as emotional as I'd like. They are a "just the facts" speaker, but in the way that a cup of coffee is just the thing after cotton candy. How many concerts melt you in your seat? Not many. I don't think that the experience of live music is an inherently emotional one. It just happens to be emotional some of the time.

I think the absence of emotion occurs in the midrange, although I am not sure. I've never heard better extension at either frequency extreme. There was little to criticize and much to enjoy in the presentation of both. However, there was an immediacy in the midrange, starting around the soprano range and terminating at about the male tenor range, that was a little strident. Vocals didn't get chalky or edgy, but were a little glazed over. On *Only The Lonely*, Frank Sinatra's voice was a little less resonant than I've heard in most other systems. On *Facing Future*, Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's voice missed a little of the slight vibrato that makes his voice sound angelic without becoming "female" in texture. My experience of this recording conjured up an image of hearing Israel in front of a microphone in a studio, rather than Israel in my living room. This, however, is a relatively minor shortcoming. Over and over, my wife Simone and I remarked how great the system sounded, whether we were in our listening room or in the kitchen. The immediacy made up, in some respects, for the emotional shortcoming. This, she remarked, was the best our system had ever sounded, and I'm inclined to agree.

Ride cymbals shimmered like metal objects rather than with some sort of hashy sound. The top end of the ATC speakers came forward and announced itself,

something that had not previously occurred in my system. I like a warm, rich sound, not only because it sounds good, but I won't suffer through bright and scratchy sound. With the ATC amp driving my speakers, I got incredible treble extension without the slightest wincing! This is probably a harbinger of changes to my system. I think that the ATC amplifier is more accurate than my current reference. Vocals revealed that the Pristine's warmth is an overlay of gauze and fuzziness and not "true" warmth. I've gone on about how "electrostatic-like" the ATCs are with the Pristine and other amplifiers. With the ATC amp, that quality not only remained in place but stepped up a notch. Image specificity really stepped up as well. Sitting in the magic seat rendered far better dimensionality than my reference amp. This created more space for the instruments to call their own. Images were very clear, but not as threshed out as with a good tube amp. However, the ATC provided the very best image height that any amplifier has provided in my system.

I really liked the SPA2 200P. I'd really love to hear powered ATC 20s with the same amplifier hooked up through active equalization. It could be marvelous. This amplifier will likely grab your woofers and tweeters with a vise-like grip, providing plenty of watts with a clarity of sound that is rare indeed. The SPA2 200P may be a little hard to find, but it is a wonderful product. Highly recommended. **Larry Cox**

ATC

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