



Get down

Who says subwoofers are only for movies? **Mark Craven** gets deeply dipped about REL's latest entry-level offering

REL is somewhat unusual in being a subwoofer manufacturer with no interest in also producing loudspeakers. As such, there's no talk of its models being an ideal match for a specific speaker or series, just the suggestion that adding a REL sub to your hi-fi setup will improve the performance. Feeding into this 'come one, come all' attitude is its dedication to offering speaker-level as well as line-level inputs for optimal integration with two-channel amps.

The S/550 auditioned here has – on Neutrik Speakon connections – speaker level inputs and outputs, the latter for daisy-chaining more than one unit from a single amp feed. Such a multi-sub setup, says REL, can reach 'line-array' stacks of three S/550s per channel, courtesy of the sub's large rail-style feet.

Available in a smart Black or White gloss finish, this combines a 250mm front-firing active driver with a 305mm down-facing passive radiator. The active unit is a new 'CarbonAlloy'

design with carbon fibre centre cap in place of the previous generation's aluminium. Also new is the carbon/fibreglass/foam passive radiator, claimed to be stiffer and lighter than the outgoing S/510 (HFC 457).

Powering the active driver is a 550W-rated Class D amplifier stage. Being a REL model, this is married to an entirely analogue filter section, with no hint of any DSP. For an extra £350 you can replace the sub's standard black cloth grille with a robust slatted wooden one that looks rather fetching. The S/550 is also compatible with REL's Airship Direct wireless transmission kit (also £350), which supports both LFE and speaker-level signals simultaneously.

Sound quality

Given the lack of app control and EQ settings, setup is very 'old school'. Once connected to a Primare A35.2 power amp over its speaker-level inputs via the bundled 10m cable, and positioned at the front of my listening room between the speakers,

level and crossover are set by ear. There's nothing here to scare the horses. Nor, it must be said, to get dedicated audio tweekers salivating.

This new REL sub delivers deep, tuneful bass – and goes thrillingly loud, too – without calling attention to itself. You get no sense of driver, amp and cabinet being under any strain. Delicate is the word, as opposed to churning your stomach with those deep lows.

Stevie Ray Vaughan's well-recorded cover of *The Sky Is Crying* gains a whole other level of scale with the S/550 added to a set of B&W 705 S2 Signature (HFC 430) standmounts. The languid, bluesy bassline feels richer and more solid, while the kick drums thud with greater impact and intensity. But that's not all – the entire performance is better defined, thanks to the low-end foundation set by the sub. SRV's virtuosic guitar leads and twangy vocals have more presence and character.

The S/550 powers along with the thrash metal of Testament's *For The Love Of Pain*, its tightly controlled driver keeping pace with the flurry of drums. The low bass never sounds muddled. Remove the subwoofer from the equation and the track suddenly becomes flatter and smaller.

REL claims a 19Hz (-6dB) low-end extension from the S/550 and the subjective performance gives me no reason to doubt it. The basslines in *Blue Eyes* by Skeptical range lower than many speakers are comfortable with, but now they fill the room, massive and liquidly in tone.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
REL S/550
ORIGIN
UK/USA
TYPE
Active subwoofer
WEIGHT
31kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
445 x 372 x 500mm
FEATURES
● 250mm CarbonAlloy driver
● 305mm passive radiator
● 550W-rated Class D amplification
DISTRIBUTOR
REL Ltd.
WEBSITE
rel.net

Conclusion

There's an inherent deftness and subtlety about the S/550 that makes it a fine addition to a two-channel system. Anyone still under the impression that active subwoofers are hard to integrate or only good for movies will be shocked by how much more the S/550 brings to music ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Mixes low-end extension with poise, subtlety and speed; build; styling

DISLIKE: Cabinet is far from compact; no EQ or wood finish

WE SAY: A sure-fire way to bring greater depth, scale and presence to your setup