

REL 212/SX Subwoofer Review

Tall, dark and handsome
by Martin Dew Sep 9, 2023

Review Specs Discussion (123)



REL 212/SX SUBWOOFER (2020) MSRP: £4,499.00

10 OUT OF 10

The REL 212/SX is a tight yet expansive sounding subwoofer. Not only can it send shudders through your floor, it can also cast a massive soundstage seemingly both upwards and outwards from the enclosure. The fact that it can disappear most of the time is the real trick. The 212/SX is sensitive and lends just enough of that crucial counterbalance of lower harmonics to musical instruments when required. Combine all this with a simply beautiful design – this thing will look at home in the swankiest of penthouse apartments – and there really is not much to dislike here. Even the price is compelling for what you get in return. REL is rather well known in subwoofer circles. But if this is the current state-of-play for the Bridgend-based company, then we look on agog.

- Pros**
- Expansive yet controlled output
 - Powerful with bags of headroom
 - Subtle and musical
 - Exquisite industrial design
 - Excellent connectivity
 - Good value

- Cons**
- Heavy

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What is the REL 212/SX?

REL Acoustics started to gain attention in the early 1990s. With a self-proclaimed intent to pursue 'perfect sound', its engineers have not swayed from the goal ever since. This is despite several ownership changes. Subwoofers were much cruder entities 30 years ago than they are now. Indeed, it was REL's early adoption of high level inputs and other technologies that have kept the company firmly on the bass cabinet-making map.

The REL 212/SX, which we review here, forms part of the 'Serie S'. This line of subs sits just below the No.31 and No. 32 Reference Series models, which can be stacked in line arrays for a massive in-room bass output. We'd hoped to get our hands on one of these models initially but given the small-family-car-like profile and weight of one the beasts, it wouldn't have been practical to get it downstairs to the cinema room. That might be a job for one of the other reviewers down the road.



Just in case there was any confusion, it's clear where the 212/SX is from

REL has this year released the limited-edition Carbon Special in the Serie S, a sub which pulls down many of the design protocols of the Reference Series. This unfortunately wasn't available at the time of review, but will almost certainly get a good grilling by AVF personnel at some point in the future as well. REL also considered the 212/SX to be the more obviously home cinema-friendly model and this 2020 version replaced the 212/SE with several performance and design enhancements added.

The 212-SX still needs two pairs of hands to carry it and the good people from REL Acoustics kindly took time out of their day and showed up at the doorstep with the gleaming black tower and bag of accessories.

Design

Did we already mention that the 212/SX was tall? The tower profile design stands at 83.8 cm and weighs a hernia-inducing 58 kg. The 51.5 cm depth and 36.2 cm width are clearly needed to house the two 12-inch front-firing active drivers and two down-firing and rear-firing 12-inch passive drivers in the sealed box. The active pair and rear-facing drivers are formed from an aluminium cast alloy cone structure with rubber surrounds, while the down-firing is a carbon flat cone design. The alloy cones, with their distinctive silver colouring, use REL's sophisticated logo adorned with signature crown. Presumably deliberate, the crown gives the aura of the Royal Warrant of Appointment, so adding further to the sense of refinement.



The 212/SX has two passive radiators: A carbon flat cone designed down-firer...

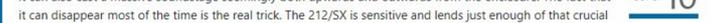


... and a rear facing aluminium cast alloy cone

The 212 SX must be one of the prettiest subwoofers out there. The entire cabinet, aside from a classy matte steel control/connection panel on the back, is covered in a shiny piano gloss lacquer. On the top of the unit is a square silver plaque with REL embossed letters. Down the sides, you get four anodised steel bars with the Serie S branding etched into each. Halfway down on each side are two inset carrying handles which themselves look like part of the intentional aesthetic.

Connections and Control

The rear plate of the REL comes packed with connections to suit every whim. Inputs comprise a high level Neutrik Speakon fitting, two low level L/R stereo RCAs, one LFE RCA and a balanced XLR. Outputs support a high level Neutrik Speakon fitting, one LFE RCA and one balanced XLR, both the latter for daisy-chaining. Near the top of the plate are three rotary dials for high/low level input adjustment, LFE (.1) level for bass derived from a surround sound processor and a 20 Hz to 120 Hz crossover. Phase comes in the form of a 0/180-degrees flip switch just below.



The rear mounted connections and controls

Close to the base of the plate are an on/off switch, a standby/always on selection switch, a power pilot light and power cord port. Included in the box are a mains lead and 10-metre length Neutrik Speakon cable with bare wire ends for amplifier connection. This is a nice bonus, but care must be taken when connected to amplifiers with different topologies. Luckily, the operation manual is well laid out with excellent explanations for multiple setups.

Features and Specifications

Powering the two active drivers is a NextGen 5 Class D amplifier section. Power output is rated at 1,000 watts RMS and low frequency extends to 18 Hz at -6 dB.

Among the new upgrades to the 212 platform over and above the former SE model are circuitry enhancements for crossovers and limiters, and the cabinet profile has been revamped for better control of airflow. Also key here, according to the manufacturer, are the ultra-lightweight carbon fibre reinforcement blades behind the cone assemblies for reduced noise transmission. The downward facing passive carbon driver is another addition to the later model. This enables greater output and therefore louder performance with improved detail resolution. The twin active drivers now have a further 12 mm of stroke distance with greater power handling.



The REL 212 SX Subwoofer: Front and rear views

Set Up and Operation

We tried out the 212/SX in two locations. The recommended placement is a room's front corner, which represents the first of two listening scenarios in a dedicated cinema room. The second was at the back of the room behind the sofa. The subwoofer was almost as room-filling in its output of energy in the latter location as the former. The 212 also remained virtually audibly undetectable, so cohesively it behaves within the soundstage and sympathetically to the music and film sources chosen.

For two-channel music sources, we used the included Speakon cable, a high-level connection (with the black ground cable floating for a Class D-type Primare power amplifier). For 5.1 movies, the T-Rex movie, the balanced XLR cable sufficed for LFE and all sub-80 Hz frequencies from a Lyngdorf MP-50 surround sound processor. Satellite speakers in all setups were three M&K S150 fronts and two S150T tripole surrounds.

Performance

We kick things off with 'Got to Keep On' by The Chemical Brothers (CD, *Copland: The Music of America*, Telarc), by contrast, is a stunning recording of some of the US composer's best works. The pounding timpani in the opening and closing sections carry from the studio and to our room. Not only does the REL perfectly isolate and fixate on the devastating attack of those drums, it also allows the fallout of the resonances to engulf the listening area. At every moment - and in a way I've not experienced with a subwoofer before - the feeling is that the bass notes are above, below and to the sides of me. The sense of genuine scale is impressive. All the while, there's an overarching musical sensitivity to the proceedings.

The sub is also channelling comfortable but realistic shockwaves through the carpet-covered wood floor. Even the sofa is vibrating in harmony, while not being overrun. The feeling is that the 212 is just applying enough of what it has in store, no more and no less.

Conclusion

REL 212/SX Subwoofer Review

Should I buy one?

Harnessing bass in a small room can be laced with problems. A large commercial space, by contrast, can allow bass waves of all lengths to dance merrily across its dimensions. But to find a subwoofer which sounds good pretty much wherever you put it in a small cinema is a revelation. The REL 212/SX can cast its net of bass frequencies seemingly in a massive orb radiating out in all directions.

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