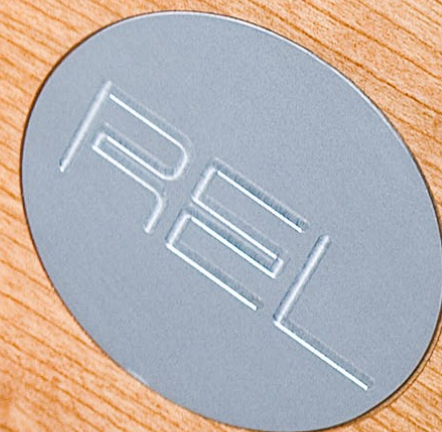


The REL Britannia B2

The great thing about a subwoofer review, is that you can focus on pretty much one thing; bass. No worries about midrange palpability or image height, etc. Seems easy, right?

— JEFF DORGAY





Not always. Think for a minute, how many of your friends in the audio world have gone down the subwoofer path, whether it be with a pair of smaller speakers as satellites, or just to augment the low frequency response of an already good system.

Now, how many of them are happy with the choice they made? Let me guess, you always walk away from their system thinking: “not enough bass”, “too much bass”, “doesn’t integrate with the room and/or speakers” “boy, that big thing is ugly”.

At least that’s what often goes through my head, even when dealing with my own system.

Personally, I have been on and off the subwoofer bus more times than I like to remember and I have only managed to get it somewhat close a couple of times. Adding all that low frequency energy to your room adds more complexity to your system beyond just more cables. Achieving solid response down to the 20-25hz region will reveal new inadequacies in your room and system setup that may need to be accommodated, especially if you are a turntable person.

Don’t forget that you now will also have one more big box in the room to deal with and the related issues there... However, in the end if you can make it all work properly, the reward is tremendous.

I have heard nothing but great things about REL subwoofers for some time now, so I was anxious to put their B2 subwoofer to the acid test. *(continued)*

Here at the TONE studio, we always have quite a few sets of speakers here for review at any given time and I have a few things of my own that I wanted to give the B2 a go with!

The REL Britannia B2 comes in Cherry or Maple wood veneer for \$2695 and in Black for \$2495.

It weighs about 85 pounds, so eat your Wheaties the day you decide to experiment with subwoofer placement!

It is a forward-firing design that features a 10" woofer and a 300 watt amplifier.

Setup and Initial Listening

I've told you before, I am a mind reader. I know you are out there in the audience thinking that you have panel speakers, or minimonitors or whatever, and there is no way this sub is going to work with YOUR SPEAKERS. Rest assured, I put this subwoofer through its paces. While my main setup consisted of the Tetra 506 Customs and the Imperium Acoustics Nicoles (both good full range speakers that go down solidly to around 30hz), I also did a lot of listening with the ACI Sapphire XLs, the 2nd Rethm single driver speakers and my pair of Apogee Calipers. So much for just listening to bass!

Because these speakers were used in such varied conditions, almost all of the gear that I had here at my disposal was put to use, from SET amplification all the way up to the Premier 350. Same thing with all other system aspects. In many ways, this has been the most comprehensive review we have done to date, because we used the B2 in about seven different systems and four different room configurations. *(continued)*



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Keep in mind that the manual is ESSENTIAL to read before setting up your B2. Not only is it very well written and will give you some great tips, there are a number of ways to hook it up depending on the configuration of your system and it is important that you figure out what the correct way is before you begin.

REL suggests a number of different placement options for the B2, but because I had my speakers set up in a corner arrangement, it was a perfect solution to have the front of the B2 about three feet out from the corner, which REL suggests as the preferred spot.

Read the manual, listen to the manual!

One interesting aspect of the B2 is that REL suggests that you DO NOT spike it. I can confirm that though this might go against your audiophile conventional wisdom, I tried it and the spikes really don't work, dulling the bass response and slam considerably. Read the manual, listen to the manual!

Especially when used for low frequency reinforcement, the REL B2 will transform your system. In the past, a number of subwoofers I have used gave you some of the notes, but it was often more of a whumpy type of bass; not so with the B2. With this sub in place, if your room can handle it, you can expect very solid output in the 20-25hz range.

In my final reference setup, where I was just using the Tetra 506s or the Nicoles, with the crossover on the B2 set to 28hz. I was fortunate to get a visit from my local Sumiko rep, Kathleen Thomas who can set speakers up better than anyone I've ever met. It was a big shot in the arm, when she only moved the crossover settings a click or two and we could spend the rest of the afternoon listening to records! Again, hats off to the concise manual.



Subwoofing defined

First, if we are going to be scientific, we have to set the parameters for the experiment. Most manufacturers use the subwoofer as an integral part of a speaker system in the sense that it is usually crossed over in the neighborhood of 50-80hz to free up the two main speakers from reproducing any low bass, and often by means of an active or passive crossover, taking the burden off the shoulders of the main amplifier.

Not a bad idea in theory, but it usually ends up crossing that big woofer over at a range that is just a bit too high, resulting in mediocre integration and a somewhat wooly upper bass response.

The folks at REL have a different take on what a subwoofer should be and also offer a few additional ways to make the B2 part of your system, giving it a tremendous amount of flexibility. You can hook the B2 up via line level RCA, XLR inputs, or you can use the high-level (speaker outputs) Neutrik Speakon connector. The Speakon connector is preferred, because it's high level, 100k input

simply takes the signal that is going right to your speakers. REL says that is the most accurate picture of the low level information in your system and I agree wholeheartedly.

The REL philosophy also differs from most others in the sense that they see a sub woofer as truly a "sub bass" device, just reproducing the lowest frequencies and leaving the rest to your system. In order to really accomplish this, you need a system to have decent low frequency response to begin with. To keep the minimonitor folks at bay, I did use the B2 in this configuration. While it did a better job than anything else I have used yet in this capacity, using it to just handle the deepest bass notes is really the way to go.

Now I Get It

For the first time in my own system, I was hearing amazing bass detail instead of just low frequencies. You might think that it can't make that much of a contribution to the overall sound, crossing over at 28hz, but the effect is fantastic. *(continued)*

I keep harping about weight, but once you experience it, you will never want to go back. REL has always talked about pressurizing the room and now I get it. Very much like the way a system with clean, extended high frequency response, gives you an airier, more lifelike musical experience, it's the same thing with the lower registers, properly reproduced.

As soon as I got used to this newfound power, I shut it off. The music really collapsed after the B2 was not in the system anymore. Whether you are a classical music listener or you just want to rock out, the B2 will take your system to another level of realism.

Still a classical newbie, I went back to Bax and Shostakovich, because that music has a ton of dynamic range and impact. Where this music was pleasant before, thanks to the reinforcement on the bottom of the spectrum, it now had a presence. Granted, it still didn't feel like I had the BBC Philharmonic in my room, but it felt a lot closer!

Those of you that are lovers of rock in roll are also in for a huge treat. Music that you have listened to for years (that you thought you knew pretty well) will be a fresh experience. Whether you listen to Dark Side of The Moon for the millionth time or just pulled Bob Dylan's new LP out of the jacket for the first time, you will dig the B2.

But how well does it work with the other speaker groups?

As I hinted before, the least preferable way to use the B2 is with a pair of small speakers with limited bass response. Though it did a fantastic job with the Sapphire XLs (6" woofer) and much better than I expected, it was straining a bit with the upper bass, lower mids going up to about 70hz to crossover.

Panels were next on the list and my Apogees go down pretty solidly to 35-40hz, so this was no problem at all. Because they are so inefficient, I was barely using the amplifier power of the B2 and it was more than fast enough to keep up with these speakers. Integration was excellent with this combination and that's the trick with a panel speaker system. It was also a great match for the Manger

Zerobox speakers reviewed in this issue and that is one of the fastest speakers I've ever heard.

The biggest surprise was with my 2nd Rethms. These are single-driver speakers with a modified Lowther driver. Spread way out in my room, they can get down to about 45 hz by themselves, but it's a pretty harsh dropoff after that. Again the B2 was a great match, keeping up with this speaker very well at a crossover point of 50hz.

TONE Says

I recommend the B2 very highly. If you are shopping for a sub, put the B series subwoofers at the top of your list. The B3 is a bit smaller and less powerful and the B1 is a bit larger and more powerful. (it also uses a 12" driver, where the other two use 10") Either way, I think you will be very pleased.

The only thing left to explore is getting another B2, to take room pressurization to another level. Perhaps we will revisit this sometime in 2007, but for now I am thrilled with the B2. ●



MANUFACTURER:

IMPORTER:

Sumiko

2431 Fifth St.

Berkeley, CA 94710

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www.sumikoaudio.net

PERIPHERALS:

Preamp: Conrad-Johnson ACT2, Aesthetix Callisto

Power Amplifiers: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Conrad-Johnson CA200, Pass Aleph 3, Pass First Watt F3, Pacific Creek SEI 300, Red Rock Renaissance monoblocks.

Speakers: Tetra 506 custom, Imperium Acoustics Nicole, Rethm 2nd Rethm, Penaudio Serenade, Apogee Caliper, ACI Sapphire XL, Manger Zerobox 109

Analog Sources: SME 10 w/Sumiko Celebration, AVID Volvere w/ SME 309 arm and Shelter 90x, Ray Samuels XR-10B phono preamp.

Digital Sources: Metronome CD-3 Signature, Wadia 581

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Cardas Golden Presence, Tetra Artet

Speaker Cable: Cardas Golden Presence, Tetra Artet

Power Cords: Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco, Running Springs Duke

Vibration Control: Symposium Ultra Platforms, Rollerblock Jr.s.

FAVORITE TEST TUNES:

Bax – The Symphonies (CD)

Genesis – Lamb Lies Down on Broadway (LP, Classic Records)

Kruder&Dorfmeister – The K&D Sessions (CD)

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