

REL R-528SE subwoofer

By Alan Sircom

It's getting hard to keep up with REL's subwoofer output of late. Now split between three ranges (or 'Serie') – T, R and Gibraltar – there's some overlap across the 10 strong range. The REL R-528SE is a perfect example of this. The new top of the Serie R line, the R-528SE could easily be dismissed as a R-528 with added bling, but in fact is closer to a Gibraltar G-1 sub, both in design and sound.

On paper, though, the similarities between the R-528 and the SE are not immediately apparent. It's a high-gloss black cube sitting on four triangular spiked feet with a 300mm powered driver facing forward behind a grille and a similarly sized passive radiator firing down into the floor. Both are identically sized and weigh almost the same. There's even a notionally similar Class D 500W power output from the on-board amplifier. The cynical might think the only difference between them from first looks is the nickel-plated chrome REL logo, side name badges and feet.

The cynical would be wrong. The cabinet bracing has been extensively modified, the front-firing 300mm drive unit is now identical to the carbon fibre unit used passively (in the existing R-528, it's one of the company's Heavy 12 drivers) and the amplifier's circuit topology has been mildly revised, although I suspect the driver change and the cabinet reshuffle have been the principle changes.

REL subs are always fast – it's one of the reason they consistently score well in hi-fi magazines, they are some of the only bass-bringers that can keep up with snappy little sealed box speakers with ultralight 100mm mid-woofers. But more importantly in the R-528SE, it's clean with that too. It's the control of the bass – rather than the depth of it – that separates the whopping G1 from the Serie R in many respects. That it goes down to 15Hz really won't make a whole heap of difference in most rooms and with most pieces of music. And it's that clean control over the bass is where the R-528SE scores above its already good Serie R stablemates.

The way we set up a sub in hi-fi is all about subtlety; if you can hear it making bass sounds, it's set too high. Bring down the sound until you can only hear the sub by its absence (when you turn it off) and the level is about right. Consequently, it's a relatively hard



► concept to justify in theory; spending £1,799 on a subwoofer that you aren't hearing, except when you begin to hear what kind of liberating effect it has on the mids and upper registers of your loudspeakers. Curiously, the tighter the sub, the more free sounding the loudspeakers and the R-528SE brings that freedom easily.

It's not hard to spot, once you get past the almost instinctual desire to check out the bass from a bass loudspeaker. For example, take listening to the king of all whiners, Neil Young singing 'Heart of Gold' on *Harvest* from the recently released four CD set. Although excellent, there's not a great deal of deep, low bass going on there, but Kermit's – sorry Neil's – voice just begins to soar better than it does without the sub. And this through a pair of ProAc original Studio 140s, which do deliver good bass in their own right. Ditto Martha Argerich playing preludes by Chopin; in most of those cases, the left hand rarely reaches down to the bottom octave, but it's not the bottom octave that makes the difference. It's the way the speaker better copes with her forceful middle-registers playing instead.

There are two schools of thought with regard to installing a sub in a hi-fi system. The first is to install one that is the right size for the system; the next is to go for the biggest possible sub money and room size will allow. Both arguments have their merits; a smaller subwoofer is usually faster and more controllable than a bigger one and that helps make it blend with the speakers better, the bigger ones have better deep bass and larger amplifiers for greater depth. The reality is probably somewhere between these two poles, and the R-528SE makes that argument perfectly. The control it has over the bottom end is prodigious, and it's closer to the Gibraltar than the Serie R. That control makes it integrate with the main loudspeakers perfectly.

Don't mistake this for lightness, though. If you go home cinema and play this with the likes of *Avengers Assemble* in full throw, Hulk! Smash! gets a whole new meaning. That's



the thing about the REL R-528SE, it's a wolf in wolf's clothing, if you want it to be. It can go deep and loud, but it's capable of the subtlety needed to make piano preludes dance off the keyboard. In short, it's highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Front-firing active woofer, down-firing passive radiator
Inputs: Hi Level Neutrik Speakon, Lo Level single phono, LFE phono
Active drive unit: 300mm carbon-fibre driver with aluminium chassis
Passive radiator unit: 300mm carbon-fibre
Power output: 500w (RMS)
Lower frequency response: 21Hz at -6dB
Gain control range: 80dB
Dimensions (WxHxD): 39x45x44cm
Weight: 26.3kg
Price: £1,799

Manufactured by: REL Acoustics
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