



Super high octane

Although not typically part of a hi-fi setup, **Lee Dunkley** thinks this sub-bass system takes music listening to new heights

Many audiophiles have a natural aversion to the idea of adding a sub-bass loudspeaker into a two-channel music system, and for justifiably good reasons. Integrating a separate sub-bass speaker into a stereo configuration to seamlessly extend the low-frequency response of the system by around an octave was a tricky business a decade or so ago when models were better suited to less sensitive home cinema applications. In terms of hi-fi listening, speed and timing are everything, and REL

Acoustics has been tirelessly working to convince two-channel music lovers its range of active sub-bass systems can play a tuneful role in hi-fi setups too. We've seen a couple of models from its entry-level T series (*HFC* 421 and 428), but the S/3 hails from its mid-level Serie S range, aimed at elevating higher-end systems in medium-to-large-sized rooms.

The range has undergone a bit of an overhaul since I saw the £1,000 S/2 (*HFC* 387) – now discontinued – with the S/5 flagship and S/3 model both becoming Super High Output (SHO)

designs that beef up the original rated 350W power output to 400W, thanks to the NextGen2 Class D amplifier along with updated driver and revised electronics. The update has also seen a price hike, but looking over the neat styling and flexible design its easy to appreciate where the money has gone, and all REL subs come with a three-year warranty on parts and labour. Cosmetically, it looks similar to the S/2. The cabinet is constructed from the same marine ply that's specially sourced for superior rigidity, and handcrafted to exacting standards with up to eight coats of lacquer to achieve one of the highest gloss black finishes I have seen on a speaker – it's also available in white lacquer. There's the same solid billeted piece of aluminium embedded into the top face of the unit, that's said to aid energy dispersion away from the rigid 406 x 424 x 464mm cabinet.

Removing the substantial grille from the front lugs reveals a new driver

Superior definition and depth give the impression of a fuller soundstage

design – a forward-firing 250mm long-throw aluminium cone structure with a thick rubber surround that's said to be lighter than previous compositions and has been engineered to achieve a faster response time. Underneath the cabinet is a 300mm special carbon weave passive radiator, claimed to be stiff, lightweight and incredibly well behaved. As with the feet on all RELs sub-bass systems, even the shape and amount they raise the cabinet from the floor has been meticulously calculated for the best airflow in order to optimise performance.

The controls and connections will be familiar to anyone that's integrated a subwoofer into a home cinema setup, with line and high-level volume controls, reversible phase, variable crossover and the option of line-level stereo or high-level input via a special cable (up to 10m) with locking Neutrik connector. There's auto standby mode for when the system isn't in use, as well as a line-level LFE input for home cinema installations. If you're not keen on trailing a cable from your amplifier to the S/3 SHO, you can add REL's LongBow wireless system for an extra £300, which sends uncompressed audio signals to the S/3 over a distance of up to 14m. It's a simple case of pairing the transmitter with

the built-in receiver and proves wholly reliable and stable throughout the reviewing process.

Sound quality

It can often take a bit of time to get a sub-bass system seamlessly integrated with the main speakers. Not so with the S/3 SHO, which is accurately dialed into my setup in a matter of minutes. Whether this has anything to do with the revised specification with increased power output, or if it just happens to be the right cabinet proportions for my mid-sized listening room and better matches the Dynaudio X38 floorstanding loudspeakers that it's partnered with is hard to identify. Nevertheless, it's one of the smoothest installs I've been through. For the record, the S/3 is positioned just behind the plane and to the side of the left loudspeaker, and fires diagonally down the length of the room towards the main listening area.

I've tried active sub-bass systems in my hi-fi setup before – in fact, the S/3 SHO replaces the T/5i duo that I saw in *HFC* 428. Swapping to a single larger cabinet with more than three times the power reserves brings an unexpected degree of subtlety and speed that was missing from the smaller twin arrangement. It feels better controlled and the sustained bass notes in Newton Faulkner's *Teardrop* have better definition and depth, and give the impression of a significantly fuller and more tangible



The carbon weave bass radiator and optimised feet

soundstage. It's compelling listening, and as the final bass note is struck it resonates in a more emotional way, bringing a greater sense of connection to this seismic version of the track.

As I've discovered with other active sub-bass system installs, the S/3's inclusion here isn't detrimental in any way to the performance of the loudspeakers. In fact, it only appears to enhance the system's capabilities further by opening up the soundstage with a richer performance, delivering more perceived clarity to vocals and

midband frequencies. With Rag'n'bone Man's *Human*, Rory Charles Graham's vocal is even more ragged, and the soundstage is vast and three dimensional. The sense of scale with modern film scores is tremendous too, and for a real treat I play a 24/96 Qobuz stream of Hans Zimmer's *Like A Dog Chasing Cars* from *The Dark Knight* soundtrack, which demonstrates the RELs superb transient attack.

Conclusion

There's no doubt, the S/3 SHO is a lot of speaker with enough power and musicality to convince hi-fi doubters. The way its inclusion appears to magically add more focus and immediacy to an already impressive stereo soundstage is mind blowing. The cost may be high, especially when you factor in the extra for the wireless connectivity, but the bass depth allied to the faultless timing the S/3 brings to recordings old and new, is nothing short of spectacular ●

CONNECTIONS



- 1 LongBow wireless receiver antenna
- 2 High and low-level gain controls
- 3 Crossover control
- 4 Phase switch
- 5 Neutrik Speakon high-level input

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Speed and musicality; ease of integration; build |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: High unit price, plus extra cost for wireless add-on |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: An attractive and super fast sub-bass system with a high level of musicality |
| FEATURES
★★★★★ | |

OVERALL

