

REL 212/SX

Sublime and Substantial

\$4,999
rel.net

Listening to Charlie Hayden's bass radiate up from the ground, organically, in Earle's listening room, feels incredibly natural. His 24 x 30 room allows the Focal Sopra 3s to really come alive and integrate perfectly with the 212/SX's that replace the 212 SE's that were here. I don't usually write reviews based on other systems, but because I lived with this exact combination for about three years and have heard this system extensively, it's more like a home away from home.

Running through a number of tracks, this already spectacular system has taken on a new dimension with what might seem to an outsider as a modest upgrade – and in terms of dollars spent, it is. Yet the increase in performance is massive. Even with tracks having no apparent substantial low frequency information, combining the original 212/SEs with my Focal Sopra 3s made for a staggering improvement.

A favorite subwoofer track to illustrate this is Ella Fitzgerald's "Miss Otis Regrets." An excellent subwoofer properly integrated brings substantially more depth to the recording in all three dimensions. You won't believe it until you hear it, yet you won't be able to unhear it once you've experienced it. And the RELs do this better than anything else we've used over the years. Earle is equally impressed with this track in his system. He claims over and over that "he wasn't prepared for this level of improvement, and noticed it "immediately, before the fine tuning began." And it only gets better.



The Basics

REL manages to include a lot into the 14.25(W) x 33 (H) x 20.25(D) cabinet that makes up the 212/SX. There are two front-firing 12-inch drivers, a down-firing 12-inch passive, and a rear-firing passive, mated to REL's latest 1000-watt NextGen 5 Class D amplifier.

They are only available in Piano Black Lacquer, and weigh in at 128 pounds each, out of their well-padded shipping container. You know the drill, save em' just in case. Once unloaded, we started with the same position and settings (the 212/SX has adjustments for level and crossover frequency) as the SE's they replaced. Ultimately, we did not deviate terribly far from these settings and position, though some final tuning by Hunter to the main speakers made the whole system snap together even better. Get a friend to help you set these up and it will go a lot faster, unless you are incredibly buff.

You can click [here](#) to see the full list of 212/SX specifications.

REL includes black grilles that snap on the front, but they stayed grill-less in this installation. Who doesn't want to see those woofers moving? Am I right? The only complaint I have (it's minor, personal, and irrelevant in the scheme of things) is that I would love to see these subs finished in the gloss white that REL offers on some of their other models. While I understand the logistics of warehousing more than one SKU, I'd happily pay extra for this, as I love the way my six pack of white S/510s blend into the room. To be fair, in Earle's room white would have been out of place, so everyone ended up happy.

A path of improvement.

One of the biggest questions I always ask audio designers when they've made a fantastic product is, "what will you do next?" REL's John Hunter is one of those people that no matter how good their products perform is always pondering "what if..." REL is never a company to merely change models to generate new SKU's or issue press releases. Great audio designers are like great editors and great art directors – the late Dave Wilson was like this – he could always step back from his creations, listen in further, and find a way to extract more performance. Hunter tells me how one day while stuck in traffic, the idea to improve the 212/SE came to him.

Initially you notice that the new SX is slightly smaller than the outgoing model, so its 14.25-inch front panel requires a smaller footprint than the 17.2 inch width of the SE. Hunter explains, "The differences between the original 212/SE and the new 212/SX are many, but it started with experiencing the older SE in a variety of different rooms as I travelled around the world. It always had a bold swaggering character, but once in a while there were rooms and systems where the unit would get going so hard it almost seemed as though it might run away from itself. Too much of a good thing. I realized that there was just too much air mass, especially in the upper chamber of the sub."



Hunter says that a pair of the new 212/SX subs deliver “about 75% the performance of a six pack of S/812s for about half the price.” This is great news for someone who doesn’t have the space or budget for a six pack. Having lived with a number of RELs now for some time (as well as a six pack of S/510s and no.25s) they have more than achieved that goal. He goes on to say that the 212/SX “manages to retain all the big character cues but is so much better resolved and has better inter-transient silence. This quality is due to the use of the Carbon fibre latticework on the rear of the alloy cone. It simply shuts up beautifully after a huge sequence, quiets back down to silence instantly. There are a bunch of tricks unique to this model. Most important is that we limit its primary response to 60 Hz. Doing so snapped the whole design together.”

The proof is in the listening

Everything was elevated, even from initial install. More extension, more dynamic power, and more clarity everywhere. As mentioned earlier, when REL subs are correctly set up, they integrate perfectly with the main speakers and the room. Fortunately, Hunter made the quick trip to Portland to double check our work and fine tune things to magnificence.

Because Earle is a jazz lover, critical listening began with a number of familiar jazz tracks, before subjecting him to a few hours of rock, hip-hop, and electronica tracks. Regardless of program material, it’s easy to see where the improvements have been made. Listening to Stanley Clarke or Jaco Pastorius play bass, frames the increased low frequency tonality that the SX brings, yet favorite electronica tracks from Tosca, Kruder & Dorfmeister, and Jean-Paul Jarre showcase the increased slam. This type of music played on subwoofers with less capability exposes any overhang present. Sheer force replaces the boom, making this music much more exciting.

Past experience with the 212/SE proved it to work well with full range speakers capable of going down to about 40-45 Hz. If you aren’t familiar with how REL’s operate, they do it a little differently than most. A .1/LFE input is offered as well as L and R RCA line-level inputs from preamplifier out. However, you will get the best results, making the connection at your speaker outputs, via the Speakon connectors.

This high impedance connection puts no load on your power amplifier, but does two things. First, it allows the sub to see the same sonic signature going to the main speakers, and if you should take the time to connect your REL via line outs and then speaker outs, you will notice a slightly different presentation. (arguably a smidge less performance when connected this way)



As a variation on this theme, you can also take advantage of REL’s Airship II, zero compression wireless transmitter and receiver. This can come in handy if your equipment rack is truly out of reach of where your subs need to go, or you just can’t be bothered with long subwoofer cables. REL utilizes a proprietary, military grade 5.8 GHz chipset to provide top quality bass performance. Their transmitter and receiver pass full frequency signals, not just bass for optimum results. We did not have a chance to use the Airship II in the context of this review, but we have had impressive results with their last generation of wireless product.

Being old-school, I prefer connecting RELs up via speaker outs, as I do in my own reference systems. This, combined with REL’s new Bassline Blue cables is the optimum choice. It also makes it incredibly easy to plug and unplug the subs to see just how much they add.

Finally, as has been the case with all the other REL’s I’ve used, the increased dimensionality that their subs provide, always makes listening at lower levels even more enjoyable. That extra bass reinforcement really rounds out the picture at lower levels.

Still champ

A few years ago, the 212/SE was our product of the year. These have gone up to just under \$10,000 a pair, from just under \$8,000 a pair, but the bump in performance is much more than a 20% increase. Everything from top to bottom has been improved, and the difference is not subtle.

If it makes sense for your wallet and environment, I highly suggest getting a pair to start out with. You’ll be glad you did. Enthusiastically recommended. Cliché as it sounds, the REL 212/SX is not something you will be able to unhear once you’ve experienced it.

Peripherals

Analog Source	AVID Volvere turntable/Ortofon Cadenza Bronze
Digital Source	Esoteric N-01XD
Preamplifier	Conrad Johnson GAT series 2
Power Amplifier	Nagra Classic
Speakers	Focal Sopra no.3
Cable	Cardas Clear