

REL No 31 subwoofer

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REL's Reference Series of subwoofers comprises just two models; the No 31 tested here and the bigger No 32. These can also be stacked in line arrays. Given the sheer excavating power of the bass from a single No 31, I'm wondering what a sextet of No 32s can do; jostle a few buildings around, perhaps. Or maybe enough sonic push to shove-start a Boeing.

What these Reference Series subwoofers really do is the same as what REL's other subwoofers can do, but with more! More grace, more power, more speed, more refinement, and – for that moment when you want to show what a sub really can do – more air movement. It doesn't feel like it's moving more air in use, but then you feel the waves of bass energy washing over you and realise why the No 31 is something very special.

The specification sheet of the No 31 is a heady and potent brew of superlatives. The 52kg subwoofer

includes a 300mm long-throw driver, 900W of Class D oomph and has low-frequency extension to 17Hz (at -6dB). And yes, you can stack up to three of them atop one another with the appropriate mounting kit. The No 31 and 32 share a similar comprehensive rear panel for line and speaker level connection and to allow said stacking and stereo connections. There's a useful hockey-puck remote control, a stringy-grille front panel in the style of classic Italianate loudspeakers, a front panel display and grab handles on the side. Fortunately, the handles are sufficiently wide apart that only an idiot would try lifting the No 31, but at least it makes moving the loudspeaker across carpeted floors less hernia-inducing.

What the extra £3,000 buys you in the No 32 is a kilowatt of Class D power, a 380mm driver that reaches down to 15Hz and an 85kg weight. Oh, and where the No 31 is finished in high-gloss black, the No 32 goes with full piano lacquer. You can stack No 32s as well, but you can't mix and match.

So, the No 31 is a No 32 for slightly smaller settings and bank balances, but if you think that spells 'compromise', guess again. If anything, the No 31 is in something of a sweet spot, balancing size, performance, and price. This makes it the ideal choice for all bar the vastest of rooms, the most esoteric of systems and the deepest of pockets.

Bass Dogs

Sure, the temptation to cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of bass is irresistible. You are going to want to experience the almost malevolent power of bass. I did this with 'Insomnia' by Faithless, first with the back beat and then that almighty reverb-heavy drop... wow! Anything not tied down is on the move, bits of your body that should stay in position are being shifted round, and there's a sheer force that reminds you of the first time you heard that track in a club somewhere. The volume level might not be club-level, but the intensity and energy are still there.

Then, of course, your audiophile sensitivities begin to kick in once more. You should know the drill by now; you turn it down to be a barely audible low-frequency support for your loudspeakers... and then readjust a few weeks later, just to make sure. Fortunately, the remote makes this easy and can be locked to prevent someone fiddling about unnecessarily. And in turning the subwoofer into audiophile base reinforcement, the No 31 shows its true colours well. That foundation of bass is solid granite, an architectural stentorian solidity that makes music seem that more realistic and a more visceral experience. But with that is an





extension of performance further up into the midrange and treble. A good sub makes loudspeakers sound like they are on cruise control, in all the right ways. The midrange is more open and yet also more focused and articulate. Held in the No 31's thrall, however, those loudspeakers take that articulation, detail and focus to new heights, and extend that well into the treble. The jump between low, mid, and high frequency drivers is more seamless and even the smallest peaks seem less noticeable.

Bear in mind that this isn't simply used with smaller stand-mounts; I used the No 31 with the excellent Raidho TD2.2, which is no stranger to bottom-end definition and mid-range and high-frequency clarity. And yet, even here the No 31 showed these speakers have more to give when freed from having to produce their own foundation. I'm used to the transformative effect a good subwoofer can bring to the party – I've been recommending them for

almost 30 years, after all – but even I was surprised at just how much improvement the No 31 delivered. This is good sound, transformed. And all it takes is a subwoofer the size of a car engine!

The REL No 31 is an iron fist in a velvet glove. Like all good subwoofers designed for audio use, it's subtle enough to subtly reinforce the bottom end of almost all loudspeakers ever made, in every room that isn't a concert hall. That last isn't simply a throwaway line; adding the No 31 to your system is like adding concert hall space and realism to your loudspeakers. Naturally, no one – make that 'no one sane' – thinking of using a £7,000 subwoofer is going to connect it to a pair of £200 bookshelf loudspeakers, but a pair of loudspeakers commensurate with the No 31's gravitas will already deliver the goods... and the addition of the No 31 is going to transform even high-end designs in ways you might not expect.

To say I was impressed by the REL No 31 is an understatement, but curiously the No 31 is all about understatement. Sure, it can move a lot of air when called upon, but it's at its best when making great loudspeakers sound so much better than you might expect. For all its size and weight and power, the No 31 is a truly graceful performer able to bring out the best in your system. +

Technical specifications

Type Active subwoofer
Output connectors High Level Neutrik Speakon, LFE XLR, Line XLR
Amplifier type 900W, Class D
Driver 300mm long throw carbon fibre cone with inverted centre cap
Low frequency extension 17Hz at -6dB
Dimensions (W×H×D) 63.8 × 43.5 × 72cm
Weight 52kg
Price £7,000

Manufacturer REL

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