

REL Quake subwoofer

The cubist revival By Brent Burmester

REL Quake subwoofer. \$1299 in black, \$1499 in cherry

Big. Ugly. Flabby. Arrange these words in a sentence describing the average subwoofer. While you're at it, I'll get back to enjoying the REL Quake, a subwoofer that fails on each count. The Quake is tiny, pretty, and tight as a drum.

Strictly speaking, I shouldn't be referring to this little wooden cube as a subwoofer. REL prefers the term 'sub-bass system', because too many so-called subwoofers make no attempt to reproduce the really low notes that generate the sense of physical presence audiophiles crave.

Sure, they wobble away oppressively and never let you forget they're there, but that isn't the point. The point, in hi-fi at least, is seamless low-frequency extension of the sound from the main pair of speakers.

At less than a cubic foot, the Quake really is a midget. With an 200mm (8 inch) driver and only 100 watts on hand, such a titch might be expected to muster little below middle C, let alone anything south of 30Hz. Yet the Quake is rated down to 23Hz at -6dB and will play loudly enough to partner the modest home cinema set-up, or burly stereo floorstanders like the Linn Ninka or Image 414.

For sheer entrail-crushing impact, you'll need something capable of pushing big air: REL does plenty of those, as do fellow sub-specialists, Velodyne and M&K. The Quake is about filling in below the roll-off point of smallish speakers, such as my Castle Kendals, or Pro-Ac's nifty Tablette 8.

Settling in

REL provide line-level and speaker-level inputs for hi-fi/home theatre, and rather optimistically include a stereo jack for computer-audio applications. Believe me, your computer multimedia speakers are not worthy.

Speaker-level connection is recommended for hi-fi use, because it enables the Quake to adapt to your amp-speaker interface. In New Zealand a long length of cable terminating in a

Neutrik Speakon plug comes packaged with the Quake for this purpose.

Placement of a sub-bass loudspeaker can be a mission. Low notes go mad at different points in your room, and it takes time to find a position that keeps everything level below 70Hz. Unlike the original and now-discontinued Quake – a larger rear-firing sealed box – the new downward-firing unit proved to be fussier about where it would play nicely.

Corners, often a safe bet, proved to be completely wrong in my room. After much trial and error, I found a neutral-zone behind the listening position against a sidewall. I had to give up on that when I discovered I could feel the origin of the lowest frequencies through the floor. Maybe our ears can't pinpoint the source of sound under 80Hz, but apparently our bums can.

Finally, playing 180 degrees out of phase the Quake found a home beside the left-channel speaker, probably the very spot you'd pick for it on purely aesthetic grounds. Damn. After that, the problem of finding the right upper roll-off point and volume level for the sub became the task in hand. This meant days of adjustment and re-adjustment until I settled for a volume level below 9 o'clock on the dial, and a roll-off in the vicinity of 40Hz.

Intuitively, these levels seem way too low, but you typically find that less is more when it comes to subwoofers worth their salt.

Depth Charge

REL gives good advice in their manual about tuning the Quake, most importantly, work with a familiar performance that is not bass-heavy. That way you concentrate on the genuinely low bass, as opposed to the in-yr-face mid-bass thumping higher up in the frequency spectrum. Once you're nearly there, a good upright-bass solo helps you really nail the self-effacing point at which the sub supports your main system without drawing attention to itself. To this end I used *Scrapple from the Apple*, in fact a bass duet on vinyl from The Charlie Watts Orchestra, *Live at Fulham Town Hall*.

Once a good sub like this is doing



its thing properly, the whole audio spectrum seems improved. With the Quake tuned to the nth-degree and fed a speaker-level signal from my amp, the greatest gain was in the solidity lent to the sonic image. The sense of space derived from live recordings was heightened, and, of course, the lowest notes suddenly surfaced and joined in the music. Massive Attack attacked more massively, but even a solo flute became more tangible thanks to concert hall-resonance captured on disc.

Remember though, we're not looking for the distorted and disproportionate bass that alerts bystanders to the approach of a low-riding Mazda 323 with tinted windows and 19 inch rims. The sub must 'disappear', and if it can't be made to, do without it. To RELs credit, the Quake offers enough fine-tuning flexibility to allow that disappearing act for nearly everyone.

Despite the few days I spent swearing as I searched for a place for the Quake to work with my system, I was sorry at the thought of giving the little cube back. Unless you need a big enclosure to work with a PA system in a town hall, or to serve as a spare tool shed, give this little champ a go. Paying for it will free up just enough pocket space for you to stuff the Quake in there with your change.

