

Cover Story:

**You really need
six.**

REL's S/510 subwoofers, configured as a six-pack array are rattling something in my living room, playing some vintage Genesis – "Squonk" to be exact. I turn the volume down just as the FedEx person rings the bell, and he teases me about being a "crappy boomer rock guy." Lousy as my musical taste is, we have a socially distanced 10-minute conversation about subwoofers, as he's somewhat of an audio enthusiast. He does confess that it sounded like the windows were going to fall out of my house as he walked up to the door. "Six of them? Why would anyone have six subwoofers?" As my favorite cartoon secret agent Sterling Archer is fond of saying, "Why would I not?"

Our review of REL's no.25 subwoofer as a six-pack array was somewhat controversial last year, especially in light of us calling it one of two products of the decade. Having lived with the no.25s for over a year now, I am no less thrilled with these massive subwoofers in my listening room than I was the day REL's John Hunter left, work complete. There is nothing that handles the lower registers, delivering bass that is powerful and nuanced like the no.25s. As fast and articulate as any speaker you might place in front of them. Completely seamless when properly installed and setup. I could go on and on. But they are that good, providing a musical experience like nothing else.

That's great stuff, but not everyone has the space, budget, or front end to need a six pack of no.25s. REL has just introduced a few new models, the Carbon Special, the S/812, and their smaller model, the S/510 we have here. At \$2,499 each, a six pack will set you back about \$15k, but this is considerably less than a six pack of no.25s. Perspective is relative.

Additional photography courtesy of REL.

REL S/510 Subwoofer

\$2,499 (each)
rel.net

The REL S/510

My living room system has been upgraded to a pair of Dynaudio Contour 20s, and these \$13k/pair monitors will be the subject of an enthusiastic review soon. A few years back, I had the privilege to use the Dynaudio Evidence Platinum towers that tip the scales at over \$100k/pair. I'm playing the price card, only because the Contour 20s with a six pack of S/510s behind them play louder, deeper and with more resolution than Dynaudio's old flagship did. So, at just a touch over \$30k, the Dynaudio/REL combination is fantastic and in their own way, fantastic values.

Configuration

The S/510 takes advantage of the latest in REL's technology. This nearly 16 x 16 inch cube (18.25 inches deep, a full 20 inches deep, taking into account for the high level connectors) weighs in at 70 pounds and feels even more solid when lifting out of the carton.

Like the entire REL lineup, the (gloss black or gloss white) finish uses a ten-layer process, with a much smoother and deeper finish than you'll ever see on a Bentley, Aston Martin, or Rolls Royce. In short, it's perfect. The only downside is that you need to handle them with extreme care, and make it a point to only dust them with a damp microfiber towel, or they will get the same surface scratches that your car gets if you've ever taken it through a car wash. While black subs have always been the rage, I'm a huge fan of the white, it disappears in the room even easier.

The S/510s use a 10-inch aluminum cone, long throw driver that has a thin coating of carbon fiber on the rear face for additional stiffness. The 12-inch passive driver is downward firing. These are mated to a 500-watt amplifier, and RELs proprietary filters, which allow the S/510s to be set up for music, home theater, or a combination with equally good results.

For those not familiar, REL relies on a high level connection to their subwoofers, via your speakers outputs. This allows the tonal characteristic of your amplification to be expressed with their subs, rather than just coming out via the preamplifier's line level outputs. Those feeling the need to still do things in that manner, will be pleased to find line level RCA and balanced inputs, along with a single LFE/.1 input.

The key to success

Because REL subwoofers are a true low bass system, they are not meant to be crossed over from a set of satellite speakers at 80-120hz – though they will work this way if required. REL prefers that you pick a main speaker with enough low frequency extension, and run it full range, to let the REL sub(s) fill in only the lowest frequencies. A REL sub with this in mind, when properly set up, will disappear completely in your listening room. In addition to filling in the deepest part of the frequency range, they also add presence and dimension to the rest of the frequency range in a way that nothing else we've used can achieve to this level of realism. Six of them disappear in the same manner.

In the case of the Dynaudio Contour 20s, they have a claimed low frequency response of 42hz (+/- 3db), so the RELs aren't having to go too far up into mid-range territory. For additional comparison, I also used a pair of Focal Kanta 1s, Focal Kanta 3s, and the Eggleston Nico's we reviewed earlier this year. A vintage pair of Acoustat 1+1 ESLs were also dragged in for a listening session or two, but this is probably overkill for 1+1 owner. Nevertheless, the combination worked brilliantly. However, the majority of the review listening was done with the Dynaudio speakers, and the six S/510s and Dynaudio Contour 20s are now a permanent reference.

A seamless transition from your main speakers to the RELs requires starting with meticulous setup of the mains. Regardless of how well you think your main speakers are set up, it might be worth spending a few hours (or more) making sure the main speakers are optimized in your listening room. Because you will get all the LF output you need from the RELs, you no longer need to have the room gain from your mains to compensate. Chances are you might be able to position your main speakers for a bit smoother top to bottom response and let the RELs do the heaviest lifting.

Fine tuning

Just as getting your main speakers optimized, the same rules apply for a REL six pack, and the same procedure is followed. The first sub is set up as the anchor, then the right channel. The two on the bottom of the array provide the deepest bass, coupling with the floor to provide the necessary low frequency extension. They also serve up a majority of the LF dynamics.

dCS | LEGENDS

Only A Few Engineers Become Legends

In the world of music production, there's a select group of recording engineers who have strived throughout their career to deliver the highest quality listening experience possible.

Over the course of his nearly forty year career, Mark Wilder has mastered or remastered over two thousand recordings for such diverse artists as Aretha Franklin, Herbie Hancock, Pat Metheny, Phish and Sting. And as senior mastering engineer at Sony Music's Battery Studios, Mark's golden ear and pursuit of sonic perfection can be heard in many major titles found in the incredible Legacy Recordings catalog.

To date, Mark has won six GRAMMY® Awards for his work on such iconic albums as Bob Dylan's *The Cutting Edge 1965-1966: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 12*; and *The Basement Tapes Complete: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 11*; Bill Wither's *The Complete Sussex and Columbia Albums*; Billie Holiday's *Lady Day – The Complete Billie Holiday on Columbia 1933-1944*; Louis Armstrong's *The Complete Hot Five & Hot Seven Recordings*; and Miles Davis and Gil Evans' *The Complete Columbia Studio Recordings*.

Mark Wilder's dedication to his craft and his passionate commitment to music are why dCS is proud to honor him as the latest recipient of our dCS Legends Award.



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The middle two subs, cross over at a slightly higher frequency (Again, this is done meticulously, a click at a time, the RELs offer very fine adjustments) When you have these properly adjusted, they will prove seamlessly integrated with the bottom two, and you'll notice a lot more mid-bass attack and presence in the lower midrange region of your main speakers. We're talking about a click or three higher on crossover making all the difference, so proceed with care and in small increments. At this point, the overall soundstage in the Dynaudios increases in width, depth, and height dramatically.

But it's the last two on top that produce the last, and perhaps the most significant helping of realism. These are crossed over even higher than the middle and bottom subs, yet they provide the dramatic increase in overall presence that only the six pack can deliver.

This is what adds the true feel of room and hall space. Listening to Jeff Beck's *Live at Ronnie Scott's*, the difference in hall ambience is staggering. Now you can easily hear people clapping at the front of the room and the back, with the right spatial relationships in place.

Unplug the six pack, and it's still pleasant, but the clapping is now diffuse. Moving on to the live recording of Al DiMeola, John McLaughlin, and Paco DeLucia's *Friday Night in San Francisco*, reveals the air and space between these three virtuoso guitarists playing acoustic to be stunningly real.

**This is when it's easy
to start being fooled
that you're listening
to the real thing, not
just a recording. This
is what it's all about.**

In the end, I admit to a little bit of cheating, because it was so much easier to set the S/510 array up, being able to use the no.25s as a reference. I just kept going back and forth, listening to the same tracks over and over, until I felt I'd tweaked the S/510 array as close as I could to the sound of the no.25s.



So, what's missing?

The biggest difference between the S/510 six pack and the no.25s comes in terms of ultimate scale, and gradation. If you imagine music strictly in terms of a 0-100% scale, the top REL stack has the ability to reproduce low frequencies with an incredibly fine gradation between loud and softest sounds. Which gives the no. 25 stack a higher level of intricacy to the music it reproduces. (provided the rest of the system is up to the task)

But bass is a lot about moving air in a specific sized room. In a smaller room, at modest to fairly high levels, with the right main speakers the stack of S/510s deliver an experience that is very powerful, convincing, and incredibly close to what the big array delivers in a big room. A six pack of no. 25s in my 13 x 18 foot living room would severely overdrive the room and not be as effective as the 510s in this room.

Going back and forth between my big room and the living room, I was never disappointed in the S/510 array. Just before COVID kicked in, I had the pleasure of visiting REL's home office where John Hunter had a six pack of S/510s set up with a speaker I know very well – the MartinLogan CLS.

The CLS has always been notoriously tough to mate with subwoofers because of their incredibly speed and transparency, but the S/510s are perfect. They make the CLSs sound like massive speakers that rock, in a way that the CLS and even the flagship ESL from MartinLogan, the CLX can not. (and I've owned both) This combination in the context of a \$30k system, was one of the most musically enjoyable systems I've heard at any price in a long time.

The detail and texture in the lower frequencies, along with the sheer weight that the six pack of S/510s provide is always what keeps me coming back for more music, for a longer listening session. With both the CLS and my Dynaudios, revisiting familiar tracks that are either bass heavy, bass challenging or both reveal unheard of nuance, with a new sense of recording depth previously unavailable.

If you start with a pair of S/510s, you will not be disappointed. At, \$2,499 each, these are a fantastic value, offering tremendous performance. When you are ready to step up to an array, you need only get an additional cable from your REL dealer to piggy back the subs. For those with larger rooms, but still shy of the true “public room” sized salons that No.25's often find themselves working in, the S/812 Line Arrays are just as amazing with additional weight and deep bass extension and are better suited to larger speakers.

If your needs are more mixed, requiring your system to do double duty for theater as well as hifi listening, the S/510s can also be configured via your processor's LFE channels. While I do not have a theater setup in my main listening room, I did use a single S/510 connected this way in our bedroom system. Pairing the S/510 with the Totem Kin Play's LFE channel integrates perfectly, and made catching up on last season's *Star Trek – Discovery* episodes very enjoyable.

If you can make it happen, the six pack array is the way to go. Once you experience low frequencies rendered the way a REL six pack does, it will be tough to go back.

www.rel.net



The REL S/510

