

# REL Classic 98 Subwoofer

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In the 1990s, a Welshman called Richard Lord had an idea about bass. That idea became the REL (after 'Richard E. Lord') range of subwoofers. Those first subs – Strata, Stadium, Stentor – put REL on the UK map. But the product that 'broke' REL internationally was the Strata III in 1998. And REL's latest model is the Classic 98, essentially the Strata III brought up to date.

This could have gone one of three ways. REL could have simply remade the Strata III once again. It could have made a poor pastiche of the Strata III. Or it could take that classic product and see what modern-era REL could do with the design. REL took the high-ground option and viewed 1998 through 2023's design lens.

## Original Concept

The original REL concept was a sealed enclosure with a relatively low-power Class A/B amplifier and a long-throw bass driver. Where most subwoofers tend to use a port to stretch a loudspeaker's deep bass properties, Richard Lord's clever idea was to use a bigger – but sealed – cabinet. This meant the Strata III and 98 use a 250mm bass unit. Back in 1998, that driver was a VIFA unit. The company could have 'raided' the driver from its T9X design but has instead made its own unit specifically for the Classic 98.

In fairness to late 20th Century REL, the low-power Class A/B design was more of a necessary evil than a design decision. Commercial Class D designs were still a year or two away. Building several hundred watts of Class A/B amp into the Strata III would have been stupidly heavy, prohibitively expensive, and would run alarmingly warm.

REL of 2023 knows its way around Class D amps, and a new 300W model is used in the Classic 98.

Unlike modern RELs, the Classic 98 has a deep matt walnut veneer finish and rolled edges, especially on the top and bottom plates. The shiny REL badge on the middle of the top plate and the square feet are the only visible differences. Even the rear panel is close to looking like a Strata III, although the logo looks less like a child of the 70s today. However, it's now a braced cabinet with extra MDF under the top plate and along the side walls. This is because the new Classic

98 is some three times more powerful than the Strata III and the old cabinet wouldn't cope well with the strain.

## Same as it ever was

Setting up a REL is the same as it always was. For audio, use the high-level settings (the supplied cable helps, and there is an upgrade that is worth treating yourself to). Connect this cable to the loudspeaker terminals. Now turn the subwoofer down until it is at the limits of audibility (then turn in down one more notch for good measure).

A good way of checking this is to use a well-recorded piece of music with



EQUIPMENT REVIEW  
REL Classic 98



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» a solid walking bass. Adjust until the REL sub makes that bass come alive but doesn't thicken or slow the sound. Check back in a few weeks; you'll probably turn the sound down more.

What REL has done here is successfully blend old and new. REL subs were a revelation for music lovers wanting to add some reinforcement to the sound, but they probably weren't the deepest or most neutral subs around. However, some still crave that early REL warmth... or at least the idea of it. Most find them a little too warm for today's systems and want something with some of that characteristic old-REL performance, but with the speed and depth of modern designs. The Classic 98 balances those demands well.

There's some of that lovely warmth still in effect. The Classic 98 doesn't have that warming-up effect to anything like the same degree, but then again it sounds a great deal more direct and deeper than its 1990s counterpart.

More importantly, though, the Classic 98 has the speed of modern REL designs. That paper cone driver moves a lot of air at very great speed;

faster than I remember its 1990s predecessors doing. It wouldn't be a fair comparison using a 25 year old subwoofer as its 'provenance' is always unclear (a polite way of saying, "it could well be completely screwed"), but this sounds less warm and even more in time with the sound than I remember hearing with any 1990s REL model at the time, and I do recall them well.

The warmth of older REL designs was, in hindsight, possibly a lack of control over the bass. The Strata III was an unbraced cabinet with OK wadding and as much power as could be used to grip that driver at the time. While the cabinet remains unbraced, the thicker wadding, the more controlled, more dynamic cone and a lot more power on tap all make for a faster, tighter, and deeper sound, with just a trace of that warmth.

I find this the perfect foil to the Revival Audio Atalante 3 two-way stand-mounts tested in issue 216. The easy roll-off of these loudspeakers – reminiscent of classic British BBC-style loudspeakers of the last century – is a perfect blend with the REL Classic 98. Bass reinforcement from this subwoofer is more in line with REL's

long-standing guidelines of just enough to underpin the sound, thereby letting the midrange and treble of the main loudspeaker shine through.

While the Classic 98 can do good bass 'oomph', like the Strata III of a quarter of a century ago, that's not the point. This is sound reinforcement, not simply confined to bass, and that's what makes this great for audio.

### Not just rose tinted

Richard passed away in 2017, aged 78. He would be extremely pleased about the Classic 98. It's a distillation of his ideas, combining what made the Strata III such a hit 25 years ago, with what REL does so well today. It's so much more than just a rose-tinted view of the past; it honours what made REL the company it is today. And finally, for classic speaker lovers, you can do no wrong with the Classic 98. +

### Price and contact details

Price £1,299, \$1,399

Manufacturer REL Acoustics

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