

AS SEEN IN...

THE ELECTRONICS GUIDE FOR DIGITAL LIFESTYLES

E-GEAR

OCTOBER 2008

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Noble Fidelity L-55 LCRS In-Wall Loudspeaker

BIG SOUND IN DISCREET PACKAGE

A friend in my volleyball league is helping his daughter construct a basement theater and he recently asked for my assistance with loudspeaker selection. As Joe said at a recent match, "There's just so many of them out there, it's completely overwhelming!" He's entirely correct – in the consumer electronics market, no product has more varied competition than a loudspeaker. When looking at A/V receivers, they all do essentially the same thing and they all look very similar to one another. The same can be said of DVD players, portable music players and, to some extent, flat panel televisions. Loudspeakers on the other hand can be freestanding, on a bookshelf, in the ceiling, in the wall, on the wall, or somewhere in between. They come in all shapes and sizes, some require a subwoofer while others don't, and finish and color options are practically limitless. Consequently, when I was asked to review the L-55 LCRS in-walls from Nevada-based upstart loudspeaker manufacturer Noble Fidelity, it got me thinking. In this age of intense loudspeaker competition, a manu-



facturer trying to enter such a crowded market must either be crazy or have something truly special on their hands – something strong enough to stand on its own apart from the pack. After living with a set of L-55's for a few days and having spoken with the folks at Noble I can tell you this much – they're not crazy.

Before getting to the specifics of the L-55, Noble Fidelity deserves a bit of recognition for their trendsetting ecological efforts. Early last year, it was announced that Noble became the first North American loudspeaker company to be fully RoHS-compliant. RoHS, or Restriction of Hazardous Substances, is a European directive limiting the amount of hazardous materials that can be used in the construction of electrical and electronic equipment. Although the U.S. hasn't yet adopted the same strict guidelines, that day is undoubtedly coming. As Kermit says, "It's not easy being green" so kudos to Noble for being ahead of the curve.

Whether you're building a new theater space or retrofitting an existing room, in-wall loudspeakers have become a popular

**Noble Fidelity L-55 LCRS \$379 each Dual 5.25-inch Kevlar woofers
1-inch Tetonon pivoting soft dome tweeter**

Frequency Response: 45Hz – 21kHz ± 3 dB on reference axis

Sensitivity: 91dB spl (2.83V, 1m) • Nominal impedance: 8 Ohms

15.75" x 9" x 3.5" Deep

www.noble-fidelity.com

CONNECT AT WWW.E-GEAR.COM

option for today's homeowner. Freestanding loudspeakers are still tops when it comes to outright performance, but they can be both physically and visually intrusive. In-ceiling loudspeakers are the exact opposite; they're practically invisible but their stealthy nature comes with a price of comparatively inferior performance and an ill-defined sense of spatial imaging – a critically important factor in home theater installations. In-ceiling loudspeakers are great for whole-house audio applications, but they're not my first choice in a theater. The in-wall loudspeaker represents a superior compromise, allowing for substantially improved sonic performance while keeping the loudspeakers out of sight and off the floor. Noble's L-55 is an open-back, all-channel loudspeaker specifically designed for home theater and music listening duties. And thanks to its just-small-enough cutout dimensions, it can be installed vertically or horizontally in a standard 16-inch-on-center stud wall.

The first thing you notice about the L-55 when removing it from its handsome packaging is its significant heft. With its dual 5.25-inch Kevlar woofers, the L-55 tips the scales at close to ten pounds and exudes a reassuring sturdiness – this is not a chintzy loudspeaker. The next thing you'll notice – or won't notice I should say – is that the L-55 frame does not use plastic, swing-out cams or "dogs" for attaching to your drywall. Instead, Noble gives you a far superior steel clamp ring which bolts to the room-side frame. Once I maneuvered the clamp ring inside the cut-out hole, my 5/8" Suppress Board acoustical drywall was sandwiched between the layers, delivering 28 inches of clamping surface for a tight and stress-free grip. Contrast that with the more common practice of using six swing-out cams where you end up with six small, high-stress contact points and larger inside-the-wall width and height requirements to accommodate the swinging cams. This is one of those times where I find myself asking, "Why doesn't everybody do it this way?"

Due to the fact that Noble's clamp ring gives you such a vast amount of surface contact, the machine screws that bring the front and rear of the clamp together do not – and should not – be over-tightened. The owner's manual is careful to point out, and I confirmed this on my first loudspeaker install, that over-tightening of these screws can cause the plastic frame to become slightly bowed or "hourglassed." This will make grille insertion rather difficult after the baffle is installed so be sure to follow Noble's advice and leave those screws just barely snug. On the subject of grilles, it should be noted that the L-55 is white and paintable, but a black frame and grille is also available if you so desire. My screen wall is black so I opted for three blacks up front and four whites for the surround channels.

As mentioned above, the L-55 is an open-back loudspeaker. That means it lacks the sealed enclosure you'll find on some in-wall loudspeakers. However, Noble's engineers have tuned the drivers to sound their best in a typical interior wall bay – 3 to 4.5 cubic feet of air volume. My screen wall is accessible from the rear so I played around with attaching a sheet of drywall to the rear of the studs versus leaving it wide open and found superior results with the drywall in place.

I installed the center channel loudspeaker horizontally beneath my Carada Masquerade and I positioned the front left and right units such that the L-55's central tweeter is 36 inches up from the carpet

– ear level when seated in the primary listening position. The four surrounds I installed vertically around the room so that the tweeters are approximately 30 inches above ear level when seated. For each loudspeaker connection I used 12ga UltraLink in-wall speaker cable, cutting each wire to length before finally connecting all of them to my Onkyo TX-SR805 A/V receiver.

Although my initial impressions were good, I try not to do any critical speaker listening during the first 30 hours. Although I had them running, I wasn't listening with a careful ear and I certainly didn't push the drivers beyond moderate listening levels. After letting the loudspeakers stretch their legs for a few days, I went into "Pure Audio" mode on my receiver and turned off everything but the front left and right channels. WOW. Eric Clapton "Unplugged" is still one of my favorite acoustic albums and his vocals were wonderfully centered and incredibly clean. Low-end extension was equally solid with convincingly-deep guitar strums; the L-55 definitely doesn't need a subwoofer to impress. The openness and spacious sound stage created by the L-55's is probably what surprised me most about these loudspeakers, particularly when you consider their attractive \$379 price tag; they sound a lot more expensive.

Thanks to its D'Appolito driver array, off-axis performance was excellent in both the vertical and horizontal directions. Standing up and moving side to side in my room yielded consistently impressive performance across the board. This makes them ideally suited for a home theater installation where you're apt to have folks sitting in various locations around the room. On the front of the baffle, Noble gives you a pair of three-position EQ switches, one for Middle Frequencies ("MF") and one for High Frequencies ("HF"). In my room, I obtained the most pleasing results with the MF switch in its default position and the HF switch in the "-" position. I'll undoubtedly tinker with these switches again as my room evolves, but the reassuring thing is that no permutation of these switches yielded a sound quality anything less than fantastic.

Noble Fidelity's L-55 LCRS is an impressive all-channel loudspeaker and it brings to the table a refreshing combination of versatility, value and exceptional performance. If you're looking for an in-wall that handles music and movies with equal aptitude, the L-55 warrants your serious consideration.■

Greg Robinson



NOBLE FIDELITY.

Carson City, Nevada • 888 808-4434

www.noble-fidelity.com • info@noble-fidelity.com