

NOBLE FIDELITY L-82 IN-WALL SPEAKERS

*Reviewed By Jim Swantko
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The Noble Fidelity L-82 in-wall speaker system was designed to offer a stealth, high-performance audiophile alternative to traditional box speakers. It should be no surprise that in-wall speakers offer simple installation options and rate highly on the all-too-important wife approval factor. While my wife was ranting and raving, "Why can't you replace all of your speakers around the house with in-walls?", I had some doubts entering into this review, having heard many in-wall speakers and rarely being impressed with the sound as compared to more traditional bookshelf or floor-standing speaker systems.

After an informative conversation with Greg Ford at Noble Fidelity, I was encouraged and cautiously optimistic about his products. During our conversation, it became clear that he is a true music lover, and that his products were designed and constructed with performance as the top priority. This information is good to know, when you consider the commitment required to cut a large

rectangle into a perfectly good wall.

Greg and I decided that the L-82 would be the best fit for my room and listening preferences. Specifically, I wanted speakers that would come as close as possible to recreating my reference rig's personality. Attributes such as tonal accuracy, wide frequency range and zero listener fatigue are high on my list of must-haves.

RATING

Performance: ★★★★★
Value: ★★★★★
Overall: ★★★★★

The \$699 L-82 is a two-way speaker utilizing a one-inch tweeter and eight-inch woofer. The tweeter is a soft dome model made of Teton fabric and includes a useful pivoting mount to allow fine-tuning. The woofer is made of DuPont Kevlar and includes a phase plug to reduce coloration and a rugged butyl surround for

long life. The drivers are mounted on a rigid ribbed baffle, which is reported to reduce diffraction and near-field distortion. The L-82s also include two switches on the front, which allow further fine-tuning of the midrange and treble levels.

The rear of the L-82 is dominated by a large crossover network, complete with high-quality resistors and capacitors mounted to a robust circuit board. Thick oxygen-free wiring connects the crossover to the individual drivers, and large spring-loaded speaker terminals are included for simple connections.

ROHS COMPLIANT SPEAKERS

Noble Fidelity's European heritage is well-known, but not everyone knows about their attention to being RoHS (Restriction of Hazardous Substances) compliant. While "green" is a red-hot marketing term, RoHS tells consumers that an electronic product contains compliant amounts of lead, mercury, cadmium, hexavalent

chromium, polybrominated biphenyl and polybrominated diphenyl ether. Considering how in-tune consumers have become with using less power, less water and less toxic materials, being RoHS compliant is a nice perk when considering that you could be installing these speakers all over your house.

installation. Pre-construction brackets are also available for those of you with walls still in the construction phase. Noble includes a mesh grille and white fabric insert, if you prefer to completely hide the drivers.

The L-82s were then connected to my NuForce Ref 9 V3 SE amplifiers

I left the speakers playing for several days to allow for break-in prior to any critical listening. During this time, the speakers opened up significantly. After about three days, the L-82s seemed to stabilize their sound and I was ready to see if the L-82s delivered the goods that Mr. Ford promised they would.

“YOU CERTAINLY CAN SPEND MORE ON SIMILAR IN-WALL SPEAKERS, BUT I’M NOT CONVINCED YOU WILL GET SOUND SIGNIFICANTLY BETTER THAN THE NOBLES BY LAYING OUT THOSE EXTRA DOLLARS.”

SET-UP

After reading the well-written instruction manual, I realized that the most difficult aspect of the installation was going to be choosing a mounting location. I decided that the L-82s would work quite nicely flanking my Sony sixty-inch HDTV monitor. The location would be slightly higher than ear level in order to clear some clutter in the living room.

The included templates made marking my cut lines simple and, after checking several times with my stud finder, I made the initial cut. The cut area is just slightly wider than the mounting bracket, but quite a bit taller. This allows the bracket to drop down far enough into the wall for the upper portion of the bracket to clear the top section of sheetrock. After the bracket is in the wall, you simply tighten six screws, which draw the rear frame toward the front, and squeeze the sheetrock. The L-82 brackets grab with seventeen inches of clamping force, resulting in a very secure

with Audioquest Meteor speaker cables. The rest of the equipment includes a Cary Audio SLP-05 preamplifier, Esoteric DV-50 disc player and Cary Audio USB DAC, all connected with Audioquest Colorado cabling and power cords.

PERFORMANCE

The L-82s sounded quite good right out of the box, but after a little experimentation, I was able to improve the focus of the sweet spot by angling the tweeters in slightly. I also sampled the various EQ options, but always ended up preferring the flat setting. With the tweaking finished, I placed the grilles over the speakers to finish the install. This may seem like a simple step, but it was anything except simple. The tolerances between the frame and grille are extremely tight and significant effort was needed to get them into place. After a few minutes of struggling, they were finally on.

What first impressed me about the L-82s was that they could dig deep and hit hard, my biggest concern for any in-wall speaker. “Got Me Under Pressure” from the classic Eliminator (Warner Bros.) album by ZZ Top filled my living room with their trademark hard-edged Texas style of bluesy rock. Heavy on the guitar licks and pulse-pounding drum work, the Nobles did an excellent job of keeping it all together, even at very high levels. Frank Beard’s bass pedal not only was delivered with impact, but it had speed and snap. This was surprising, considering the poor enclosure they were forced to work in, namely my wall. Billy Gibbons’ voice and guitar were well placed front and center stage, and both had equal amounts of grit and texture. The Nobles provided a very honest voice and let the recordings do the talking.

Next I cued up another classic album, this time from the Canadian trio Rush. “Limelight” from the Moving Pictures (Mercury) album really gave the L-82s a low frequency workout

with the combination of Geddy Lee's bass guitar and Neil Peart's insane drum skills. Again, the Nobles impressed me. Peart's cymbal work is also on full display in "Limelight" and the Tetoron tweeter delivered with an open and clear presentation.

to the touchy-feely world of in-wall speakers and made me a convert.

Noble should put stickers on the front of the speakers for those who don't read the manual so they know not to over-tighten the grills as that is an easy mistake for a newbie to make.

who take the time to be a little bit more environmentally conscious.

If you are a music enthusiast who is looking for an open and detailed speaker that can also pump out substantial low-frequency information, then the L-82 is a

“COMPARE THESE NOBLE FIDELITY L-82S WITH SOME OF THE BEST IN-WALL OFFERINGS FROM THE LIKES OF SONANCE, SPEAKERCRAFT, PARADIGM, B&W, PSB AND RBH.”

Even during busy passages, the Nobles did a great job of keeping instruments isolated in space and time. Regarding space, I was also surprised at the soundstage, which the Nobles were able to create from a flat wall. It extended well beyond the speakers to either side. Even more surprising to me was that it seemed to begin well inside the wall.

Robert Plant's "In the Mood" from the Principle of Moments album (Es Paranza) played smooth and relaxed. Plant's vocals hovered several feet in front of the wall, while instruments were placed within. The soundstage was spread wide across my living room and sounded natural, whether outside the sweet spot or even in the adjacent kitchen. Over several weeks of listening, I am glad to report that I never experienced any listener fatigue. Since the Nobles were so conveniently located in my living room, I realized how much more time I spent listening to and enjoying music.

THE DOWNSIDE

Sonically, I can't find fault with these speakers for their price and configuration. They have wooed me

While more of a warning than a downside, Noble Fidelity speakers offer audiophile performance, but you need to consider positioning and upstream electronics to get the most from them. Sticking a pair of these speakers in the ceiling is certainly something you can do, but to get the most audiophile performance, you will want to get them more dialed in to an ear-level position if possible.

CONCLUSION

In-wall speakers have come a long way and are narrowing the gap with traditional box speakers. Considering the environmental challenges that the \$699 Noble Fidelity L-82s were confronted with, I was very pleasantly surprised by just how good they sounded in my walls. Can they compete at an absolute level with full floor-standing loudspeaker systems? No. But then again, I have yet to hear any in-wall speaker that could. Compare these Noble Fidelity L-82s with some of the best in-wall offerings from the likes of Sonance, Speakercraft, Paradigm, B&W, PSB and RBH. The RoHS compliance is nice icing on the cake for those looking to support companies

speaker you should absolutely consider. A system with five or seven of them would make an outstanding home theater system, which can blend seamlessly into even the most highly decorated living rooms. You certainly can spend more on similar in-wall speakers, but I'm not convinced you will get sound significantly better than the Nobles by laying out those extra dollars.

