

## NOBLE FIDELITY L-85 LCRS IN-CEILING LOUDSPEAKER

*Reviewed By Andrew Robinson  
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I'm a huge fan of in-wall loudspeakers because I believe they've reached a level of performance that rivals many of their freestanding counterparts, yet because they lack a traditional cabinet and furniture grade finish they often retail for a fraction of the price. For example, my former reference theater (5.1) was designed and built around Meridian's now discontinued 300 Series in-wall loudspeakers. When properly installed, configured and powered the Meridian in-walls were capable of sound quality that rivaled many high-end reference loudspeakers such as Wilson Audio's WATT Puppy 8 (Sasha W/Ps weren't around at the time), yet they didn't take up an inch of square footage in my home and the entire system cost roughly \$20,000 or nearly \$10,000 less than a pair of WATT Puppy 8s. So when my wife and I recently moved to our new home in the country there wasn't even a question about whether or not we'd use in-wall loudspeakers. The question was, which ones? Imagine my surprise when upon moving in we discovered that our walls wouldn't

allow for in-wall loudspeakers due to construction methods employed in the late 1930s when our house was originally built.

### RATING

Performance: ★★★★★

Value: ★★★★★

Overall: ★★★★★

While I have been a supporter of in-wall loudspeakers, my experience with in-ceiling loudspeakers was close to zero. I had heard a few in stores and in some high-end home automation systems around the country but never for an extended period of time. That's when I learned of Noble Fidelity. I had booked a Noble Fidelity review for fellow writer Jim Swantko, who received a home theater system based around their L-82 in-wall loudspeaker. Jim was so pleased with the L-82's performance that he nominated them for Home Theater Review's coveted Best of Award in 2010, which they later

won in the category of best in-wall loudspeaker. It was after the L-82 review that I got in contact with Noble Fidelity's Greg Ford and began discussing his in-ceiling loudspeakers, specifically the L-85 LCRS reviewed here. My biggest question, could the L-85 LCRS sound like in-walls or better yet floorstanding loudspeakers despite having to be mounted in a ceiling? Greg Ford refused to answer my question; instead he sent me seven L-85 LCRS loudspeakers so that I could judge for myself.

The L-85 LCRS is (according to Noble Fidelity) a high performance, single point, round in-ceiling loudspeaker. Retailing for \$349.00 each the L-85 LCRS utilizes an eight-inch Kevlar woofer like Bowers & Wilkins with a single, one-inch soft dome tweeter resting dead center. The whole speaker, drivers and all, has a 15-degree offset or rake allowing the L-85 LCRS to direct its sound at the listener seated below. To further help with placement and/or to address boundary concerns the L-85 LCRS comes standard with midrange and high frequency acoustic

compensation switches, which allow you to better “dial in” their sound to better suit your room and tastes. The L-85 LCRS is as well suited to serving as the main channels (L/C/R) in a home theater setup as it is rear channels in a non in-ceiling or in-wall theater, but more on that later.

The L-85 LCRS measures nearly 13 inches in diameter and five and three quarter inches deep but requires only an 11 and a half-inch diameter cutout

## THE HOOKUP

The L-85 LCRSs arrived individually packaged one to a box. The entire presentation, from the box itself to the experience of unpacking each L-85 LCRS, was decidedly Apple-esque, so those of you who have recently purchased an iPhone or iPad know exactly what I’m on about. At one point I had to pull up Noble Fidelity’s website to double check the L-85 LCRS’s price, for I’ve unboxed

a drawing of your room and where your speakers should be mounted free of charge so as to ensure maximum performance and customer satisfaction. Noble Fidelity already had both my living room and master bedroom dimensions so when the seven L-85 LCRS speakers arrived they were accompanied by two very precise schematics detailing exactly where each speaker should be installed.

**“WHILE THERE ARE SMALLER, MORE STYLISH IN-CEILING SOLUTIONS TO BE HAD, FEW CAN HOLD A CANDLE TO THE L-85LCRS’S VALUE FOR DOLLAR PROPOSITION”**

for mounting. The L-85 LCRS weighs a little over six pounds and is finished in a matte white, which you can paint to match your décor. The L-85 LCRS has a reported frequency response of 38Hz to 21kHz with a sensitivity of 91dB into a stable eight-Ohm load making it ideal for today’s modern receivers or mid-fi separates. The L-85 LCRS is not an enclosed design meaning it has no back box shrouding its internal electronics and wiring from debris such as insulation or dust that might be found in your ceiling. Instead the L-85 LCRS comes with what Noble Fidelity calls a “Top Hat” or a thin piece of nylon that covers the speaker’s ‘guts’ so to speak, keeping them free of unwanted particles or environmental hazards.

Speaking of the environment, Noble Fidelity is a charter member of the IPRO Manufacturers Group and the first manufacturer to be RoHS compliant, recognized by the U.S. Green Building Council. I like the extra effort to be a little more green especially when installing something into my walls.

speakers and electronics costing four times as much packed with less pride and attention to detail.



Now, I should point out that Noble Fidelity’s speakers are sold through select dealers nationwide so chances are you won’t have to undergo any of the steps I’m about to describe. However if you don’t have a Noble Fidelity dealer in your area you might want to take notes. Also, for those of you who opt to go it alone or DIY style please know that you’re not going to be installing your speakers blind; Noble Fidelity will send you

For the purposes of this review I installed two L-85 LCRSs in my reference home theater to act as rear channels to my Bowers & Wilkins 800 Series Diamond loudspeakers. I installed the remaining five L-85 LCRSs in my master bedroom creating a full surround sound system that I augmented with a single GoldenEar ForceField 4 Subwoofer.

I started by measuring the center point of each of the L-85 LCRS’s positions on my ceiling, which were previously determined by Noble Fidelity. Once I had the center point(s) marked I used the L-85 LCRS’s included circle tool. Once I had all of the mounting holes drawn I used a very small drill bit and a stud finder to check for studs one last time and since both Noble Fidelity and I planned ahead none were present. From there I used a simple drywall saw to cut out along my pencil lines until I had five large holes in my ceiling.

With the holes cut I ran my speaker wire next, which I picked up from my local Best Buy - just be sure it’s in-

wall rated before you go buttoning things up. With the speaker wire in place and dangling about a foot below each hole I began the process of installing the L-85 LCRSs. I should stress that while I did the entire installation myself I don't recommend it, especially when it comes to installing the speakers in the ceiling, for an extra set of hands would've saved me and my shoulders a lot of grief. It's not that the process of installing the L-85 LCRSs is difficult; it's just hard when you need to use one hand to hold the speaker in place while the other tightens the dog-ear mounts by hand via a simple screwdriver. You can use a powered screwdriver but exercise extreme caution so not to strip the screws or over-tighten them because you can quickly crack drywall that way or worse, make it so the speaker's dog-ear brackets snap, thus failing to hold the speaker in place.



With all five speakers aimed, installed and secured I attached the L-85 LCRSs' white metal grills and began to clean up. Per Noble Fidelity's instructions all five L-85 LCRS speakers were to be pointed straight back at my rear wall, including the rears. I connected the L-85 LCRSs to my Onkyo receiver and ran through its auto setup, which included Audyssey's EQ program, before

letting the whole system play for several days before sitting down for a listen. The rest of the components in my bedroom system are as follows: AppleTV, Sony BDP-S350 Blu-ray player, Dish Network HD DVR, Vizio LCD HDTV with cabling by Transparent and racks and mounts from OmniMount.

## PERFORMANCE

Not wanting to waste any time I began my evaluation of the L-85 LCRS with some two-channel music courtesy of The Matrix soundtrack (Maverick) and Rammstein's "Du Hast." Right off the bat the L-85 LCRS proved to be explosive, possessing lightning fast reflexes that made for a dynamic performance that came from nowhere and shook me off guard. Now, the GoldenEar ForceField 4 subwoofer did aid the L-85 LCRS's performance in this and other regards, but nevertheless, the L-85 LCRS's attack was visceral. At high volumes the L-85 LCRS's soft dome tweeter retained its composure, failing to compress or shout the way other budget dome tweeters can and often do. The L-85 LCRS's midrange was precise, articulate and a touch forward and just ever so slightly on the lean side (which may have been more the fault of the Audyssey program) that gave the music a more energetic vibe. Despite its slightly forward nature, the L-85 LCRS's overall sound was a lot closer to that of a large open baffle or, dare I say, panel speaker than a traditional cone and dome design; no boxy resonances, bloat or romanticism here.

The most impressive aspect of the L-85 LCRS's performance was the large, open soundstage that appeared in front of me. Despite being mounted in my ceiling, the L-85 LCRS still cast a soundstage that sounded, more or less, like it was coming from speakers mounted in line with my ears. The L-85 LCRS's soundstage was wide

and extremely deep and possessed surprising focus and though it wasn't quite as refined as what you'll achieve from floorstanding and/or monitor loudspeakers, it was still extremely impressive. Lead vocals hung effortlessly in space yet were rendered front and center with lifelike scale and weight. Speaking of scale and weight, I placed the GoldenEar ForceField 4 sub between the left and right mains or below the center channel in my bedroom, which no doubt aided in creating a more seamless "wall of sound" presentation versus had I placed the sub elsewhere in my room. Adding an additional subwoofer would've only enhanced and perhaps anchored the L-85 LCRS's sound and completed the illusion of a floorstanding speaker that much better. Just throwing that out there.

Confident that the L-85 LCRS could rock I wanted to see how it handled something a bit more nuanced so I cued up Diana Krall's "A Case of You" from her album Live in Paris (Umvd Labels). Krall's opening piano solo appeared as if from nowhere. Krall's piano was lifelike in its scale as well as placement within the soundstage. Each strike of the keys produced a rich, full, punctual sound that was accompanied by the appropriate resonance and decay giving the whole presentation a sense of space and air few budget loudspeakers, regardless of make, can match. Krall's vocals were fast and articulate without excess or artificial warmth though they did appear a touch more neutral or full compared to my earlier Rammstein demo. Then again, Krall's Live in Paris is a far more delicately recorded and nuanced album compared to Rammstein.

Switching over to movies I fired up the political thriller Fair Game (Summit) starring Naomi Watts and the venerable Sean Penn on Blu-ray. While largely an intellectual thriller,

Fair Game does possess a few scenes and sequences where we are taken through the busy streets of Iraq (pre and post war) as well as several other Middle Eastern countries. It was during these sequences that I got a taste for the L-85 LCRS's home theater capabilities, not to mention its ability to create a full 360-degree surround field that didn't just sonically show me the space but instead transported me. With the rear L-85 LCRS speakers pointed back at my rear wall versus towards my listening position the way most rear speakers are, the ambient cues contained within the DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack were just as detailed but more open and vast, creating the illusion that my bedroom was far larger than it was. It was also during these sequences that the L-85 LCRS proved its dynamic prowess once again, showcasing its ability to go from dead silent to pandemonium in the blink of an eye without strain or fatigue to itself or my ears. Dialog was presented faithfully and with great focus, again making it seem as if there was a center channel somewhere closer to my screen versus several feet above it. I should point out, however, that if I moved too far forward on my bed, for instance sitting on the end with the center speaker almost directly overhead, the illusion that the sound was coming from a wall mounted or floorstanding position disintegrated. The farther I moved back the more the sound crawled down my wall and re-took its spot front and center.

I ended my evaluation of the L-85 LCRS with a personal favorite, Moulin Rouge! (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox) on Blu-ray. The entire performance put forth by the L-85 LCRS system was sublime and for the money difficult to fault for I've demoed numerous speakers over the years at more than twice the L-85's asking price that weren't as good at re-creating the grandeur of Moulin Rouge! The

film's soundtrack and endless stream of pop classics simply soared and I became so enthralled by the film that I simply stopped evaluating the L-85s altogether and enjoyed the film - a film I've seen probably a hundred times.

### **PARTNERING WITH AN ICON**

As I stated earlier I received seven L-85 LCRS in-ceiling loudspeakers for review, with five going in my bedroom and two joining my reference home theater in my living room where they would accompany my Bowers & Wilkins 800 Series Diamond

didn't disappoint, blending pretty much seamlessly with my 800 Series Diamonds in terms of overall voicing, midrange clarity, treble extension and tone, coming up short only in the lower mid-bass and ultimate bass extension - but what more can you ask of an in-ceiling speaker?

At the behest of Noble Fidelity I aimed the L-85 LCRS rears away from my listening position and towards the side walls for a more diffused sound which worked beautifully, filling out every nook and cranny of my room for a far more atmospheric surround field not unlike what you'd experience at

**“AT \$349 EACH THE L-85 LCRS IN-CEILING LOUDSPEAKER FROM NOBLE FIDELITY IS A REMARKABLE ACHIEVEMENT BY ANY STANDARD, FOR THEY MANAGE TO SOUND LIKE LARGE IN-WALL LOUDSPEAKERS (AND EVEN FLOORSTANDING SPEAKERS) WHEN SEATED IN THE RIGHT PLACE. ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION THE L-85 LCRSs TRICKED GUESTS INTO THINKING THERE WERE SPEAKERS SOMEHOW “HIDDEN” IN MY WALLS, THEY WERE THAT CERTAIN THE SOUND WAS NOT COMING FROM ABOVE THEM.”**

loudspeakers. The L-85 LCRSs in my reference room would serve as rear channels to an entire 800 Series front three - not an easy task. But at the urging of Noble Fidelity's Greg Ford I was willing to give the L-85 LCRS a shot at playing with the big boys. Well, like my experience with the L-85 LCRSs in my bedroom system, they

your local multiplex. Though, thanks to the L-85 LCRS's quickness and accuracy if the surround sound mix called for an accurate sound effect, the L-85 LCRSs were capable of presenting it with precision despite their positioning.

## THE DOWNSIDE

The L-85 LCRS performs as advertised and while I may be tickled pink about its performance there are a few downsides that are worth pointing out. For starters, I'm not a fan of Noble Fidelity's choice to use a "top hat" instead of fully enclosing the back of the L-85 LCRS. I'm sure this is a cost saving measure but the nylon bag doesn't exactly stay on so much as it rests over the top. It's a little janky if I'm honest, though it does nothing to alter or hinder the L-85 LCRS's performance.

Next, the L-85 LCRS's grills are a pain in the ass to install. They do not go on easily and require a lot of finessing and in some cases careful bending to get them to 'snap' into place. All of the L-85 LCRS's grills eventually fit and have stayed firmly in place; it was just a curse laden process to get there.

I know this is going to sound a bit strange but there are less conspicuous in-ceiling models out there. There's no getting around the L-85 LCRS's large size, not to mention thick edge that does little to camouflage the L-85 LCRS and make it appear like anything but a speaker – that, and its yellow midrange driver doesn't help either. That being said, how often does one fixate on one's ceiling? While the L-85 LCRS may not be a baffle-less design and its yellow driver may call some attention, it's a small price to pay for the performance the L-85 LCRS affords you.

If you have recessed lighting sharing a ceiling with your L-85 LCRSs, you may want to consider placing some foam or rubber between their baffles and your ceiling drywall to combat rattle, for when the L-85 LCRSs get to crankin' - your ceiling will get to shakin'.

Lastly, as convincing as the L-85 LCRSs are at making one think their sound is emanating from a forward mounted speaker be it an in-wall, on-wall or floorstanding, the effect goes away the moment you sit too close or too far away. Now, I'm not suggesting the L-85 LCRS is a head-in-a-vice type of loudspeaker - not at all, for it'll cover a large enough area for the entire family to enjoy from the comfort of the same couch or sectional, but those sitting to the side and/or behind said sectional may experience a slightly different sound. Not bad, just different.

## COMPETITION AND COMPARISONS

The in-wall and in-ceiling segment of the home theater market is hotter than ever with nearly every speaker manufacturer offering some sort of solution, be it in your walls or ceiling. One of the more prolific companies in the space is Paradigm and their CS-60R-30 In-Ceiling Loudspeaker competes directly with the L-85 LCRS. At \$249 each the Paradigm is cheaper, though it doesn't possess quite the same performance specs as the L-85 LCRS.

The Bowers & Wilkins CCM66 at \$700 a pair is also a fine in-ceiling loudspeaker and an obvious competitor to the L-85 LCRS, though on paper the L-85 LCRS does still pack a little more punch for the money.

Lastly, there is Definitive Technology's UIW RCS III Reference In-Ceiling loudspeakers which are a bit up market at \$549 each, not to mention they're square instead of round. For more information on in-ceiling loudspeakers please check out Home Theater Review's in-wall speaker page.

## CONCLUSION

At \$349 each the L-85 LCRS In-Ceiling loudspeaker from Noble Fidelity is a remarkable achievement by any standard, for they manage to sound like large in-wall loudspeakers (and even floorstanding speakers) when seated in the right place. On more than one occasion the L-85 LCRSs tricked guests into thinking there were speakers somehow "hidden" in my walls; they were that certain the sound was not coming from above them.

High praise and proof the L-85 LCRS's 15-degree rake works, but that's not even the best part for the L-85 LCRSs sound fantastic. True, they require a subwoofer to achieve full-range sound and to further complete the illusion; still the L-85 LCRS's midrange is – well, let's just say there's no denying the homage to Bowers & Wilkins both in looks and sound. The L-85 LCRS's Teton dome tweeter is also equal to the task, possessing tremendous focus, detail and air – three things you don't usually get in an affordable anything, let alone an in-ceiling loudspeaker.

While there are smaller, more stylish in-ceiling solutions to be had, few can hold a candle to the L-85 LCRS's value for dollar proposition, which is off the charts considering an entire five-speaker home theater comprised of L-85 LCRSs (minus a subwoofer) will set you back \$1,745 and take up zero floor or wall space. It appears Noble Fidelity is on a roll and I wouldn't be surprised if the L-85 LCRS ends up being nominated for another one of Home Theater Review's Best of Awards. They're that good.