

# Review of the Nobilis Sonum 98

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Reviewer: Bert Oling      Suggested Retail Price: € 20,000 the pair  
Manufacturer: Noble & Noble  
Model: Nobilis Sonum 98      Type: Active speakers



## Nobilis Sonum 98 A noble appearance, a noble sound

**“ It is not every day that a pair of high-end active speakers of Dutch and of Groningen origin as well finds its way to our listening room. ”**

When MC System’s Chief Engineering Officer, Rob Meyst, asked me to review the company’s first active speakers my answer was a resounding and immediate yes. These speakers were designed and produced for MC System’s sister company: Noble & Noble.

It was a somewhat dreary Thursday in January 2021 when Rob himself carried the beautifully and carefully boxed Nobilis Sonum 98 speakers up two flights of stairs - yours truly is not carrying anything for a while due to a back injury. The unboxing, loosening the transport screw, inserting the dedicated spike beneath

the 7th side and the positioning of the speakers themselves only took moments. Same for connecting our Mark Levinson preamplifier, by way of (analog) XLR balanced cables. Same for connecting our Metrum Acoustics Ambre network adaptor, by way of an AES-EBU digital connection.

The comprehensive and self-explanatory user manual describes the optimizing of the setup in the horizontal and vertical plane - level - in detail. In addition, there are a number of useful suggestions as to the positioning of the speakers in a stereo setup. We have not often come across this in such detail. *Kudos!*

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## The Nobilis Sonum 98 active speaker

### *A technical description*



The appearance of the Nobilis Sonum 98 is an unobtrusive striking slender column with a black color and a beautiful matte finish. The outer (visual) design is the forte of Roderick Vos, a renowned interior designer and second partner of the Noble & Noble team.

The slender Nobilis Sonum column measures 98 x 18 x 29 cm with a net weight of 22.8 kg. The two mid-woofers used are, in accordance with the Vibrations Cancellation System, back-to-back affixed 13 cm units combined with a high-quality ring radiator tweeter. All three units are sourced from a well-known European loudspeaker units manufacturer.

All three speaker units are actively driven by three powerful amplifiers, carefully chosen

from the Hypex nCore range of models. The voicing of the two mid-woofer units with one another is done by way of an active crossover which is based on a meticulously programmed Digital Signal Processor, also from Hypex. The advantage of such an active system, compared to a passive crossover — *regardless of the quality of the components and/or layout* — is huge, in all areas. All important parameters can easily be programmed into a software App; a huge step forward compared to a passive system where the trial and error method is often at the order of the day.

Measuring and finally listening to an optimum result are much closer aligned in an active speaker design. As with all of Rob Meyst’s designs, that is before actually using any speaker units, a couple of qualities / properties are prioritized. These include the acoustic properties of the speaker cabinet itself and the radiation behavior of the speaker units.



All this is very well described on the website of the Nobilis Sonum 98. In a nutshell, a good speaker is a speaker where the entire cabinet, including the front panel is a “dead” cabinet. So, no resonance and/or vibration..

..in whatever form. Due to the chosen setup of the mid-woofer units — *or the Vibrations Cancellation System* — these units are now not mounted onto the front panel and free from resonances and/or vibrations and thus the sonic result will not be altered. A tiny yet important detail: how to cancel the distortion coming from the cone surround suspension itself by way of an Inert Ring is a detail we have yet to encounter in any speaker design. This Inert Ring is efficiently incorporated into what is called, according to the website, “*the 7th side*”. The same technique is also applied to the tweeter. The tweeter has gotten, as an additional safety precaution measure, damping material inserted behind it in order to prevent any leftover resonances from occurring.

Another Unique Design Point is the use of a tapered waveguide which gives the tweeter an extra 5dB acoustic output gain with no added coloration and/or any other unwanted by-products. Being an active speaker the back panel features a connections plate with a large number of analog and digital inputs. The left speaker functions as the “master” which controls the right speaker via a coaxial S/PDIF cable. The speaker system can be operated with the included remote control.



## The Nobilis Sonum 98 active speaker *A sound wise rating*

As already described, we initially opted for a basic distance of two meters between the two speakers with the listening spot at about three meters. FYI, the listening room is about 40 m<sup>2</sup> with a height of 2.7 meters and well damped. During the first week of listening to the Nobilis Sonum 98 we mainly used the analog XLR inputs which were connected to my Mark Levinson ML320S preamplifier. To get an optimal volume setting of the system we had to play around a bit with the remote control of the Nobilis Sonum 98 in combination with the volume control of the ML. In itself this is not a problem but it is a bit awkward since the Nobilis Sonum 98 has no volume indication. Later we started using the speakers with the Metrum Acoustics Ambre network adapter as a source. In terms of the playback quality nothing changed, a compliment for the electronics used and applied.

When we evaluate speakers we use, as a guide, the criteria that were once laid out by recording engineer Jörg Jecklin in his book *Speaker Technique*. It is an attempt to apply some objectivity in judging the sound qualities of speakers. The criteria used include Resolving Power, Sound Volume, Coloration and Pulse Response. In addition, the quality of the stereo image is considered, although here the room and the positioning of the speakers in the room play a relatively large role. When it comes to Resolving Power we often use, as a reference, a recording from the Netherlands Chamber Choir (Channel Classics CCS SA 27108 (sacd) ), the Motetten from J.S. Bach with Peter Dijkstra as conductor.



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In my circle of friends there is one rabid classical music hater — *cause: the terror of an organ playing father* — who was moved to tears by the all too familiar motet Jesu Meine Freude.

Although the recording is very soft, especially compared to the average pop CD (on average 10dB softer), the phrasing of the choir and the vividness of the individual voices at different volume levels remained completely intact, as did the stereo image. Stereo depth and width always remained stable, proportion wise.

Fellow listeners were especially very positive when music was played from the album Same Girl by Youn Sun Nah (ACT). The sound qualities of the active Nobilis Sonum 98 speaker system had won us all over. With this album one listens to a particular voice, a magnificent recording and ditto production. If only the first track: My Favourite Things, with a single voice accompanied by a few simple bells. *Breathtaking.*

Resonance-free are not some hollow words it is a genuine quality criterion of the Nobilis Sonum 98. The voice stands rock solid in 3D-space and from the musical accompaniment we can hear, akin to an electrostatic, the texture of the percussion instruments without any tending to overexposure which so often leads to listening fatigue.

At the other end of the musical spectrum we found ourselves listening to a recording of film music by composer/pianist Nils Frahm - Music for the Motion Picture Victoria. Here, Frahm combines pure electronic sounds with the analog sound of one of the greatest pianos in the world. Especially the latter instrument, which he also used on his album Solo, is a test case when it comes to impulse behavior and 3D-imaging.

Here, some speakers fall flat on their face. The Nobilis Sonum 98 had no trouble at all with this kind of music. The impressive bass tones from the Überpiano including the dusty..





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..articulation of the steel strings are perfectly rendered without thuds and/or any other unwanted noises.

The subtle sounds of the mechanics are also fully included in the complete playback quality and not as a separate irritating effect; in audiophile circles this is, sometimes, mistaken for the concept of detail.

Of course, we were also very curious with the rendering of voices. From the extensive ECM catalog to a new album — *Lost Ships* — by the Albanian-German singer Elina Duni. Her voice has a wide dynamic range and is very nicely integrated into the instrumental trio thanks to the ECM technique.

The Nobilis Sonum 98 shows all aspects of this recording very precisely, the voice, the electric guitar, the piano, the percussion, the bugle, very natural, neutral. In fact, one could reason that the Nobilis Sonum 98 is a very complete universal speaker that shows off the qualities of a good recording with razor sharp

precision — *you could attribute monitor qualities to it* — but it can also deliver, at a softer level, a pleasant listening experience.

Finally, we moved the speakers around because we wanted to find out how the stereo image would behave? Some of the fellow listeners assessed that the stereo image could be a bit wider and deeper.

Furthermore, we believed that voices were not rendered correctly especially female voices in the pop/jazz/fusion area - e.g. Melanie di Biasio etc voices which are set into the final mix where we noticed some minor coloration. But after we increased the distance between the speakers — *from 2.0 meters to 2.6 meters* — that observation vanished into thin air. Acoustic recordings - e.g. Bach cantatas by Suzuki on the BIS label also benefited from this small re-positioning. It shows, one more time, that moving speakers around in your living room, whether in cooperation with your dealer, or not, can be an important part of the fine-tuning of your playback system.



## Which kind of customer?

The Noble & Noble Nobilis Sonum 98 can be described as a universal active speaker. It is of particular interest to a group of music lovers who have the interest, and the budget, to start shopping for a high-end music system in the living room but do not want to have to deal with various devices such as preamps, power amplifiers, streamers, dacs, in short “cabinets” and cables with all the associated queries and uncertainties.

An active speaker system such as this Noble & Noble Nobilis Sonum 98 would take all these queries and uncertainties away. In addition to its sound qualities its visual appearance will fit very nicely if not perfectly in many a carefully designed living room. *Noted.*

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## Wishes

In the end it is only natural to have wishes or options that would make the use of these beautiful speakers easier. Especially if one, as a reviewer, is using the product for a little while longer these kind of wishes will come to the surface. Let me start by saying that the playback qualities are not an issue but there could be room for improvement by making the day-to-day use somewhat more user friendly.

It would save another box when a streamer - Roon Ready / UPnP - would be built in. Example: A Raspberry PI solution linked to an App with input facilities is more user-friendly than the currently supplied remote control. Especially, because you, as a user, would be able to see what you are doing. Having said

this I can also imagine that there would be music lovers who do not wish to use an App on a tablet and would be happy with the supplied remote control. All in all such an option would have added value.



### Author **Bert Oling**

#### **Audio Advice & Text | Consultant & Journalist**

Born in 1948, first steps on the musical path: at the age of 5 Bert played "Robin taps against the window" on his father's Hohner harmonica and that's not all. First steps in audio: at the age of 9 he and his dad soldered, together, a diode receiver in a matchbox. Thanks to our long East-West orientated outside antenna, I listened to the spy reports of the former DDR - 23, 25, 48, 96, 3, 7 - for hours on end through high-resistance headphones in interference-free sound quality.

Secondary school, studied history and musicology, later business administration. Co-founder and designer of a chain of HiFi stores in the north of the country. Since 1996 operational as an independent consultant in business management for small and medium-sized enterprises next to being a consultant

for various (local) communities and foundations in the field of the performing arts.

Since the end of the eighties he has been busy as a freelance journalist and researcher in the audio field. At first the emphasis was on analogue techniques, now Streaming Audio is almost core-business with some excursions into other disciplines. He measures and he listens with a wide range of technical tools at his disposal to do so including a set of curious ears.

While listening, the musical experience is always the key component regardless of active or passive speakers. Large collection of music from the time-honored LP to many terabytes of digital content. The emphasis in the collection is on acoustical music, both classical and jazz, although thanks to the music services such as Qobuz and Tidal, electro-acoustic music, in the broadest sense of the word, is listened to as well.