

The Lumen White “Silver Flame” loudspeakers.



Retirement temporarily postponedI thought I was in retirement when it came to reviewing. It just didn't interest me any more. I'd run out words. The associated political industry-hassle irritated me and frankly it wasn't fun. And the review fees won't put bread on the table. And yet here I am again. Why is this?

During the 2005 Munich high-end audio show I came across a pair of loudspeakers, or more accurately a system that totally captivated me. I returned time and time again to this system. The speakers were from a hitherto unknown in the UK but very well financed audiophile maker – **Lumen White**. Their speakers had garnered numerous truly outstanding reviews from around the World, including some from the very precise and demanding Far Eastern audio press. Translations of these were available – but to date no one had reviewed their products in the English language.

I asked for the opportunity to review their entry level **Silver Flame** units. They agreed. I was overjoyed. Something of the calibre of these products rarely comes to the UK and very infrequently into the UK audio press.



In the top 5 – easily

I've been listening solidly for 7 months. They are without any qualifying statement whatsoever the most musically satisfying cone-drive loudspeakers I have heard anywhere and at any price. Not only are they the finest cone speaker, they are in my opinion one of the top 5 loudspeakers of all time – right up there with the Beveridge 2SW-2, the Infinity IRS Beta and so on.

I bought them after this review was written. I can't live without them. Having now read this, I hope you'll read further. There's so much more to say here. Perhaps you'll indulge me this final time?

Amplification and digital sources during the review process was entirely Ayre. Vinyl was the Brinkmann VRS (Vinyl replay System). Power cords were Cassiel 4 and Interconnects were LAT XLR throughout and Stereovox Colibri when I felt single-ended would make a useful alternative. Power distribution and speaker cords were LAT. No mains conditioners of any description.

Supposedly this is a review of loudspeakers. The reality of course is that like it or not, I'm commenting on the entire *system*.

No air-head triviality

As you can, these speakers look, in plan view at least, like no other. This isn't ostentation or fashion air-head triviality by the design team. This far-reaching and beautiful shape, and the precise aerodynamically crafted full height rear vent play a serious role. There's no internal damping. The shape and the complex internal bracing do the work. The standard of finish is Impeccable. There are over 4000 colour options. There are no front grilles. The pristine white ceramic drivers are clearly visible. None of the visitors here ever mentioned the need for a grille. Heavy duty single-pair terminals and decent spikes finish the package.

Helmut Brinkmann uses his Silver Flame loudspeakers on 30mm thick Nero granite cut to the exact plan view of the loudspeakers. Brilliant. Damn the cost. I'm doing the same.

Leica-like

These Silver Flames do *everything* that any super-speaker should do. They image like a manually focused Leica lens. They unleash tremendous detail – and yet they never shout. To me, the upper-range detail is like, well like real acoustic music. If you are one of those fortunate few that from time to time receive through the post a CD from CMB – the self-styled ‘Compression Martyrs Brigade’ who with a beautiful disregard to the rules send out CD copies of well known music taken from the original master tapes PRIOR to compression and equalisation, you'll know what precisely I mean.

Through the LW's, superficially the sound is as real and credible as you're likely to ever achieve. A simply but carefully miked recording of a concert grand piano, providing the amplification can cope,

though these Silver Flames shows that they neither remove nor dilute nor even enhance the natural harmonics. All the harmonics are there – exactly as they should be. A brilliant achievement. And yet that’s only *part* of the story.

Ah, my ignorance is exposed

Bass is taut and fast. Deep, but no boom. Neither intrusive nor reticent. Completely and utterly and most importantly, the bass is consistently in line with the pace and rhythm of the midrange. In previous reviews I have said that this speaker or that speaker acted like one single full range driver. I was both sincere, and wrong. Such is ignorance.

I visited Amsterdam recently to hear the mighty **Wilson Alexandra** loudspeakers (£125k UK) set up by the master himself, Mr. Peter McGrath. In terms of driver integration, speed, neutrality and musicality, those wonderful US speakers were in no way superior on music I know well to the Silver Flames. Astonishing, but true. Naturally in terms of sheer loudness, bass extension, slam and full-height imagery, these Wilsons have no rivals. But then what about the Lumen White Diamond-Light? I’m not sure yet. If I stroll out of reviewing retirement again then I might investigate.

Now that I’ve lived with these for 7 months, all of those other worthy contenders approached the sound of a single full range driver. I’ve only previously heard something like this on my two driver / two way Thiel 1.6 and various incarnations of the LS3/5a and the Alexandra system. In a 5 driver / 3-way design, this is astonishing. The LW crossover designers really know their stuff. The evidence is plain to hear.

Having said all this

I haven’t told you the best bit – the bit that moved me like almost nothing else audio has ever done. In fact, as you’ll see later, I’m having to rely in part on the words of another experienced listener, but a ‘civilian’ – Mr. Rob Alderman – who was more eloquent than me.

Before moving to this difficult and perhaps somewhat mystical or possibly ethereal description, I feel the need to answer here a few questions that I anticipate a few of you will be asking at this point.

Why didn’t I try alternative amplification? Frankly, I didn’t feel the need. The Ayre pre/power and integrated were through “accidental

magic” such a beautiful match. What would be the point? Similarly with the Ayre C5-xe. Providing the partnering equipment is built for musicality rather than standing out in an a/b shop demonstration, you’ll be fine.

Why didn’t I try different interconnects? With cables, I have a blind spot. A bit like **Ken Kessler** I suppose. Rightly or wrongly, I feel some makers are “cable bandits”. Not my phrase I regret, but to me both cogent and appropriate. Budget LAT and Stereovox were all I needed or wanted. Low cost **Cassielpower** cords were similarly all that I required.

Why not try a Linn or some other turntable? Why? To me and many others, Brinkmann is the one. Moreover Helmut Brinkmann uses Lumen Whites to develop his turntables, arms, phono stages and amplifiers.

One-to-one

The Silver Flames in my room do something I have *never* heard anywhere else. Strange though it may sound and undeveloped as these words might be, the singer, the pianist, the string quartet, the rock band, the orchestra – all of them – seemed to be playing for me and me alone. I experienced this time after time, month after month. My wife heard the effect. Every visitor here, and I mean every visitor heard it.

Mr. Alderman summed it up like this. “All you can do here is to surrender to the music. This system is egoless. The designers must be devoted to music.” Exactly.

Please don’t confuse this by thinking I mean I was in the front stalls or even in among the musicians. The original and long-deleted **Christine Collister** “Live 1994” CD is a favourite and a useful reference here. I must have played this over 500 times last year. I’ve met her. I’ve interviewed her. I’ve seen her perform live. I thought, I really thought I knew every word, every squeak, every giggle, every vocal inflection, every bass harmonic on the fretless bass and every harmony on this recording. I thought these musical components were locked into my DNA. I even wondered if there was to be a song going through my mind at the point of my death, might it be “*Outside Myself*” or “*Two Time Tango*” as I’d heard these so often.

As it turned out, I was wrong.

Prior to the LW’s, I had merely a very good working relationship

with the words she sang. Verging on an intimate relationship. But the first time I listened – expecting absolutely nothing out of the ordinary – her words and her singing truly meant something at a higher level. *A connection on another plane altogether.* The poignancy of her writing and the poignancy of her delivery were delivered as I had never, not once, ever experienced previously – other than sitting a few feet away from her.

It was like a loved one lying next to you whispering in your ear instead of the same person uttering the same words with the same intonation in the same tone of voice down a telephone line. It's like all compression and equalisation has been removed from the recording. It hasn't of course. It just seems like that.

Using the same equipment, but substituting other fine loudspeakers removed that deep intimacy. That poignancy and dare I say this because the word has been so abused in audio-writing, the emotion was lost. When I plugged the LW's back in, it returned.

Curious? No, not really.

I'm not even mildly curious as to how they've achieved this. Obviously the engineering and design are impeccable – but then so is the engineering that goes into some deadly dull and sterile loudspeakers. There's more at work here than 'merely' proven engineering theory put into practice. The LW people have a real grasp of something so fundamentally essential, something previously so ephemeral and so vitally important to credible reproduction of recorded music in the home – and so rare as to defy belief. It only takes seconds to realise.

But sadly, mere words fail me

This system has the clarity and presence that defies *words*. These loudspeakers deliver a beautifully captivating sound – a sound that exceeds the performance of their competitors. The dynamics resemble live music. There is a real life quality that is very rare to find elsewhere. There's a paradox here. You get a sound so totally relaxing that fatigue never sets in – yet the excitement and impact of the original event sets the adrenalin pumping. Extraordinary.

Neither the tonal balance nor the dynamics change when you adjust the volume. Try that with some of the other stuff out there. You'll have the retailer fumbling for excuses!

Wrung dry of emotion

Listening to **Sviatoslav Richter** playing Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 3 in C major was for me both an assault on my emotions and physically exhausting – even at a modest volume let alone a realistic one. Olympia OCD-336. I found and continue to find this via the Silver Flames on all music at all times, albeit to a greater or lesser extent.

Mitsuko Uchida's performance of Beethoven Piano Sonatas Opp109, 110 & 111 (Philips 475 6935) brought tears to my eyes. Emotionally I felt both tiny and insignificant. It's nothing to do with the sound pressure level. It wasn't unpleasant. It seemed somewhat appropriate. Of course the original music, the piano and the recording are magnificent, but so much of this can and is lost through superficially impressive loudspeakers as to defy belief.

An analogy that might work for you too

Here's something you can try at home that might just convey just how far ahead these loudspeakers are from everything else up to perhaps 5 times the price. Now then, be good and just put prejudice to one side - please. You need 2 recordings. **Elvis Presley** singing "*Heartbreak Hotel*", and **Barb Jungr** singing the same song off her magnificent "*Love Me Tender*" CD. Any reasonable system will do.

Forget she's a woman and forget the King's reputation. Just play one track and then the other. Any order will do. I grew up with the King's version. But play his against hers and his now sounds lightweight, naive, crass, bombastic and superficial. Listen to her version. If it doesn't force you to wipe away a tear, well you've got no soul. *And that my friends is indicative of the gap between LW and the others.*

Incidentally, in isolation Barb's CD is damn good. But it pales into insignificance to her live renditions of the same music. Come on Linn, record her live, uncompressed and un-equalised. Just her, the piano and the pianist. Forget all the studio overdubs, limiters and other gadgets. This woman's live talent cannot be overpraised. Ah Barb

And so, that's it really

This seems a fitting farewell on which to return to my retirement from reviewing. I have been privileged to hear and review one of the finest audio achievements in my room – and just possibly of all time. Two words sum up the experience. *Unmatched realism.*

This entire experience has made me feel inconsequential. To me, that's exactly as it should be. I've often felt that my role as a reviewer who can't play a note of music was to convey the truth as I heard it rather than proving how clever, superior or eloquent I was. My ego, my aspirations are in this context utterly irrelevant.

In some way, I seem to have come home. These Silver Flames gently but forcefully put me in my place and insisted on my humility. I'm merely and appropriately a conduit here. And even so, I'm aware of my inadequacy in this situation. If ever there was a compelling reason to listen to an audio component rather than a reviewer like me, this is absolutely it. Forget the cost. Just use it as a reference point. A benchmark if you like.

To listen to music through these is a continuing wonder. To actually be able to do so whenever I want is a happiness beyond mere words.

Data/Specifications:

Time coherent, phase coherent, resonance coherent system with 5 drivers in a 3 way, configuration.

Ultra precision monitors with a frequency response: 20Hz - 35kHz / -3db

Sensitivity of 91.5 dB.

Recommended power is 20 - 300 watts

Impedance is 5 ohm.

Sapphire-hard ultra thin ceramic high tech membranes.

1 x 1" ceramic inverted dome tweeter + 1 x 5.5" ceramic inverted dome midrange + 3 x 7" ceramic inverted dome woofers.

The basket, spider and magnet design are flow optimized.

The state-of-the-art internal wire harness, custom manufactured by Shunyata research.

115 cm (h) x 29cm (w) x 64 cm (d)

52kg weight. each