

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Lumin P1

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A glance at the Lumin range of network players is initially confusing, why is the P1 bigger than the more expensive X1 range topper? A quick comparison of the two back panels reveals the reason, the P1 is a streamer, a DAC and an analogue and digital preamplifier whereas the X1 is a dedicated network streamer with no inputs, and for that matter a separate power supply. The Lumin P1 is an elegantly finished piece of kit with not a fixing in site until you look underneath or at the rear panel, the four sides that you see are fabricated from aluminium and assembled without revealing what holds them together. We are definitely in high end territory when it comes to fit and finish.

The display is restrained by some streamer standards, there is no artwork displayed, just the track title and artist alongside format, data rate, track time etc. The only unusual figure is the one that shows which track is being played out of the total in the playlist, the Lumin app adds every track or album chosen to the playlist so this number can quickly become quite high. The back of the P1 reveals a raft of in- and outputs including multiple HDMI's, all manner of digital input plus digital outputs on coax BNC and USB. Analogue inputs extend to balanced and single ended pairs with outputs mirroring these underneath. The most unusual connection is a fibre FTP network socket next to the more conventional RJ45 ethernet option. The FTP is an optical system for network switches with the same connection and offers a lower noise means of accessing the network without the need for high end cable. Lumin eschew a wireless network connection in favour of sound quality and reliability.

Under the lid you can see a large case on the right hand side, this contains the linear power supply based around two toroidal transformers, it's the main reason for the P1 being higher than its range mates and means no external power supply to find a space for. It also promises stiff and clean power for the digital and analogue circuits. The digital side runs to dual ES9028 pro DAC chips which are good for up to DSD512 and PCM384, which is high but not as high as can be achieved, as you may be aware, numbers do not indicate sound quality. Tidal Masters enthusiasts will be pleased to hear that it offers four degrees of MQA processing from off to full decode, and Roon users will not be surprised to read that it's ready for their favourite

control app, the surprise will come when they compare that with the Lumin app in a revealing system.

The P1 has dual femto clocks and an FPGA distribution system for the clock signal which is a trickle down from the X1. An unusual feature is the use of Lundahl output transformers in the dual mono analogue output stage, these should ensure excellent signal transmission to partnering pre- or power amplifiers, or even active speakers.

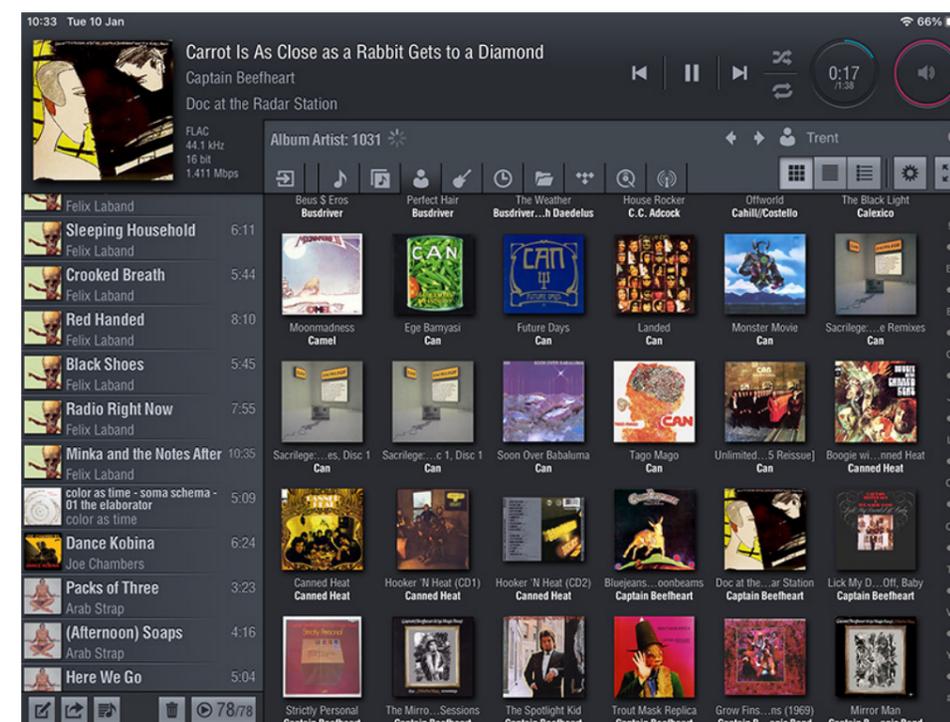


In situations where the P1 is used as a preamplifier the Leedh digital volume control can be used, this is a French designed system that is efficient with regard to processing power and modifies signal amplitude without losses, or so it says on Lumin's site. Conveniently this streamer has a remote handset, many streamers don't and you have to tap a screen a few times to get them to pause or skip a track. The Lumin remote is a nice example of the breed too with a good range of buttons including standby, there is no standby switch on the machine itself, just a full on/off rocker by the power inlet.

Being a wired streamer set up proved straightforward once everything was connected, the Lumin app lets you select local servers and uploads the data pretty quickly as it doesn't have any server functionality onboard. You can access Qobuz and Tidal directly from the app as well as a selection of internet radio stations which are represented by good size icons. The only issue with net radio is that Lumin use the Tunein service which has some issues in the UK at the moment, issues which limit accessible stations to a surprising degree. But BBC enthusiasts are well catered for at present, the corporation's plans to make radio only accessible via the BBC Sounds app will require a software update when that happens in July.

Sound quality

Previous experience with Lumin some years ago meant that expectations with the P1 were lower than they might be given its build, tech and price. The first product I tried was a bit too smooth and refined, it lacked get up and go, or so it seemed. The P1 in my system today is still refined but it is also extremely revealing and very engaging with all manner of music, it's one of those products that gets better as you peel away the layers between it and the speakers, and equally important, protect it from RFI and EMI on the network connection. Quite probably those aspects weren't as well sorted in the system I had at the time as they are today.



The P1 is very revealing indeed, if there is reverb on a recording you know all about it because the imaging seems to fill the room with some pieces, the depth apparently breaking through the wall behind the speakers. With more natural pieces the image is tightly focussed and clearly three dimensional but without the scale of real or synthesised reverb or decay. In a lot of instances newer releases sound better than older ones in this respect, digital manipulation in the studio has clearly become more sophisticated over the last 25 years and the potential for high quality of sound is greater than it ever was. Not that all record companies are looking for what we consider great sound but there's plenty of it around nonetheless.

The Lumin times well and has a good turn of speed when its required, I put on a recently discovered audiophile favourite in Duende by Black Light Syndrome which was vivid and compelling thanks to the speed and sound of Steve Stevens' guitar and the muscularity of Tony Levin's bass. Efterklang produce a detailed and expansive sound with plenty of definition but there's a little too much compression going on which makes the sound slightly fatiguing at higher levels. The price you pay for revealing hardware is the realisation that some productions leave something to be desired, it was ever thus.

Regardless of whether it's playing music from a local library or a streaming service the Lumin does an excellent job, the results are strong in terms of three dimensionality, timing and detail precision but it's not difficult to hear that locally stored files sound a lot better. Especially when playing the likes of Johnny Cash singing Hurt on his *American IV* album, his voice has a fragility and depth of feeling that only the best streamers reveal and the song has a greater



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complexity than many manage to expose. The bass is also very, very nice delivering all the texture and shape of bass guitars and synths, Arab Strap's *Philophobia* album is a raw recording and the bass playing is second only to the gritty lyrics, both of which are exceptionally clear and engaging with this streamer.

The Lumin went up in my estimation when a pair of Kii Three BXT active digital loudspeakers turned up (review soon). These are ruthlessly explicit and made it crystal clear that the Lumin is in a different league to the nearest competitor I could muster, that being the



Auralic Aries G1.1. Given that the Lumin is over three times the price this should be expected yet purely as a streamer, using its USB digital output the P1 delivers a considerably more realistic, musical and engaging sound. It sounds less like a digital source thanks to the clarity and fluidity of the music it produces, which made the Lumin/Kii combination particularly exciting, I started to go through as much music as I could, searching out the real gems and revelling in all their intricacies and nuances.

I also used the P1 as a DAC via its USB input which revealed that the converter is a first class element on its own, the aforementioned Auralic streamer sounding more lively and energised than the output of the Lumin as a whole, which is another way of saying it doesn't have the fine resolution of the streaming engine within the P1 but the result was very engaging nonetheless. As a preamplifier using the onboard volume control proved a highly enjoyable experience, the remote handset and app both allowing for fine adjustment and the sound quality being better than usual for this type of control. Both the analogue preamplifiers I contrasted it with gave a more open and detailed result but they were both pricey examples, one being more expensive than the P1. I also had a listen to the fibre optic network connection in place of ethernet using the Melco S10 switch for the purpose. Here the fibre optic link gave a brighter and more lively result that compared favourably with Melco ethernet but couldn't compete with more ambitious cable from Network Acoustics, which delivered detail in a more comprehensive and relaxed manner. The fibre cable used was pretty basic though and it's possible that this element could be improved, either way this feature offers good results for a modest outlay assuming you have a suitably equipped switch.

The more I use the Lumin P1 the better I like it. The control app is stable and while it doesn't offer the breadth of features found with some alternatives it does what you need it to with minimum fuss. The P1 is capable of very high quality results as I discovered with the Kii system, it appears to have no discernible colourations of its own and delivers extremely high resolution, probably more than most systems will be able to realise. Combine this with its broad feature set and preamplifier capabilities and the Lumin P1 looks like excellent value for money.