



Lumin lovely

If you take streaming seriously, a transport is the purist option. After hearing LUMIN's U2 Mini, **David Vivian** counts himself tempted

How much to spend on streaming is one of hi-fi's more debated subjects. If you already have a DAC – even one built into your amp or enabled access to the one in your CD player – some believe the answer couldn't be clearer cut. Buy a cheap network transport such as WiiM's £90 Mini, subscribe to one or more of the streaming services and, assuming you're already happy with the performance of your DAC, call it a job

There's an affecting focus on nuance, temporal flow and musical inflection

well done. To spend any more, it is argued, is a waste of money. Maybe. The opposing school of thought is that network transports, much like CD transports, do make a crucial difference and a better, more sophisticated and expensive transport will give a sonic uptick, whatever the standing of your DAC.

A third option is to go for a streamer with on-board digital conversion and preamp functionality, often referred to as a streaming or network-attached DAC, as a neater, technically 'optimised' solution and where many of the so-called 'giant killers' from the

likes of WiiM, Bluesound, Eversolo, Arcam, Audiolab and Cambridge Audio roam. And if any of that seems like hard work, streaming amps and all-in-one hubs will give you all the above in one box.

Use streaming enough to make it the primary source, however, and the focus on pure, audiophile-grade sound quality probably sharpens up quite a bit. So here, we're going with the idea that investing a reasonable amount in a transport (LUMIN's U2 Mini take a bow) and teaming it with a fine DAC (Chord Electronic's Hugo TT2, HFC 468) is an odds-on sound-per-pound winner. To put that to the test and establish some kind of value hierarchy in a sound quality showdown, we've roped in Primare's hilariously over-achieving £550 NP5 MK2 Prisma (HFC 494) transport and, as a reassuringly expensive high-end



DETAILS

- PRODUCT** LUMIN U2 Mini
- ORIGIN** China
- TYPE** Streaming transport
- WEIGHT** 2.5kg
- DIMENSIONS** (WxHxD) 300 x 60 x 244mm
- FEATURES**
 - Supports sample rate up to: 32-bit/768kHz
 - Native DSD512 support
 - Digital outputs: USB; optical; coaxial (RCA); coaxial (BNC); AES/EBU
 - Room ready
- DISTRIBUTOR** Sound Design Distribution
- WEBSITE** luminmusic.com sounddesigndistribution.co.uk

reference, Linn's all-singing Selekt DSM: Edition Hub configured with Linn's twin mono Organik DACs – a £16,950 *tour de force*. Tough crowd.

In LUMIN land, the entry-level U2 Mini is a comprehensively updated and upgraded U1 Mini in a more smartly finished natural or black anodised aluminium jacket, which showcases LUMIN's latest processing hardware and software. That means extra speed and flexibility: playback up to DSD512 and 768kHz, 16-32-bit architecture, MQA decoding, sampling in both directions from 44.2kHz to 384kHz/DSD256. Carried over from the U1 is LUMIN's advanced quad clocking regime. The five digital outputs comprise USB (with native DSD512 support), AES EBU, coaxial BNC, coaxial RCA and optical.

The U2 Mini is Room ready and features gapless playback. Format support is as broad as it comes and includes FLAC, ALAC, WAV, AIFF, MP3, AAC and, as mentioned, MQA. Add to that Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect, Qobuz, TuneIn radio and AirPlay. The control app embraces native support for Tidal, Qobuz and MQA, a Leedh lossless digital volume control, hi-res artwork and the saving of playlists. Intuitive and easy to use? They all say that but, for once, we don't feel inclined to quibble.

Sound quality

The first hurdle for the LUMIN to tackle is the small Primare NP5 MK2 transport, a redoubtable budget benchmark if ever there was one, sounding clean, smooth and refined with good warmth, tonal texture and acoustic 'air', plus a talent for resolving low-level detail that, in the best practice, unobtrusively dissolves into the larger musical picture. Credit here, of course, to the Chord Hugo TT2. Yet, using the same DAC, the U2 Mini raises the bar for tonal smoothness and texture, resolution, dynamic reach, soundstage space, image specificity and, ultimately, musical flow and coherence. It's as if we've gone straight from exceptional budget sonics to genuine, top-dollar high end, even though there's still another £15k left in our notional kitty to indulge the luxury of the lofty tech inside the Linn DSM.

Playing soul songstress Anita Baker's *Sweet Love*, a quite tremendous song that teeters on the knife edge of listenability thanks to a rather lean production and the afterburner heat of Baker's high note delivery, the Primare does a fine job of cooling the

The U2 Mini is Room ready and format support is about as broad as it comes

tonal temperature without sapping the emotional impetus. Its innate balance seldom gets tripped up. But again, the LUMIN allows Baker more dynamic rope to belt it out while, at the same time, managing to sound richer and more full-blooded. It's a presentation that's less edge-of-the-seat and easier to relax into. The Primare is remarkable enough to put many a pricier streamer's nose out of joint, but not the LUMIN's.

The Linn is another matter. Thanks, we've little doubt, to the contribution of its Death Star-level dual mono Organik DACs, everything immediately sounds cleaner and



Almost identical in price and riding high in the streaming hit parade is Eversolo's DMP-A8 (HFC 514) which, unlike the transport-only LUMIN, is an all-in-one streaming DAC/preamp and a hugely impressive, some say genre-defining, product. In contrast to the plain, functional U2 Mini, it has a 15cm colour LCD touchscreen and, along with just about everything but the kitchen sink, does Bluetooth too. It sounds great, but can't quite climb the sonic heights of the LUMIN teamed with a classy DAC.



clearer, more powerful and precise. Stereo perspectives are startlingly believable, imaging palpable, separation absolute. The Linn has simply astonishing powers of resolution and an ability to hear deep, deep into a recording. It's all desperately impressive and you're left in no doubt where the money has been spent.

And yet, while unable to compete on level terms or be as immaculately on point, the LUMIN holds its own in terms of musical satisfaction. No, it doesn't dig quite as deep or hit quite as hard, but things are a tad warmer and more spacious with an affecting focus on nuance, temporal flow and musical inflection. With an admittedly glossy recording such as Al Jarreau's *Through It All*, the music positively shimmers with colour and confidence. Dan Shea's slick keyboard layering sounds smooth, sweet and soulful and the U2 Mini also displays a real penchant for giving the right weighting to the subtlest ambient cues. It's a deliciously rounded and complete rendition. In matters of timing, focus and rendering of micro

dynamics, the Linn might lead the way, but the LUMIN is clearly playing in the same high-end ballpark and, more than that, hitting a home run.

Conclusion

LUMIN offers an extensive range of streaming solutions, but the U2 Mini represents a particular sweet spot as a compact transport that offers great flexibility and cutting-edge tech that will extract the best from any DAC. It's a streaming gem, simple as that ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Superb sound quality, size, design and build; intuitive control app
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing of note at the price
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** If you already have a capable DAC, this is one of the most cost-effective routes to high-end streaming
- EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

OVERALL

