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Lumin A-1 Network Player

NEW KID

Neil Gader

I know that I don't speak for everyone, but when I sit down to enjoy an evening of music I prefer to leave my entire workday behind. And that includes keeping my laptop as far from my listening room as possible. Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful for my laptop in incalculable ways, but it's still primarily a business tool, a reminder of looming deadlines and balancing my checkbook. Audio in contrast is pure pleasure. I suspect I'm not alone in this feeling either. Yet, computer media is playing a vastly stronger role in the high end than just a few years ago. The question arises then, in this age of computer media and digital downloads, how does one untether a bespoke audio system from the ubiquitous computer? One option is a network player like the Lumin A-1.

In the parlance of the day the \$7200 Lumin A-1 Network Player is technically a "renderer/DAC" not a player. It doesn't have an optical drive or internal storage; rather, it plays back what it is being "served" from outside digital sources. (By the way, I think the industry needs a more user-friendly descriptor than renderer, which is just a bit too Black Ops creepy for me.) In any case, let's define the digital environment that it's designed to prosper in. In a nutshell, the A-1 pulls audio media from external sources like a USB stick, a USB hard drive, Lumin's L-1 media server library, or ideally a network with a NAS and UPnP server. Its DAC then snaps into action and plays back a multitude of formats, including the current crop of high-resolution files up to and including 32-bit/384kHz DXD and standard DSD. Additionally it will enable PCM-to-DSD conversion. It does all this by operating wirelessly through its own controller software loaded to an iPad.

So who is Lumin? It's a new brand to TAS's pages, but its roots go back to Pixel Magic Systems Ltd, a Hong Kong firm whose core business is developing high-definition home-theater products with advanced software programming and design. More recently Pixel Magic has been a leading supplier of high-definition digital TV products under the Magic TV brand. Lumin

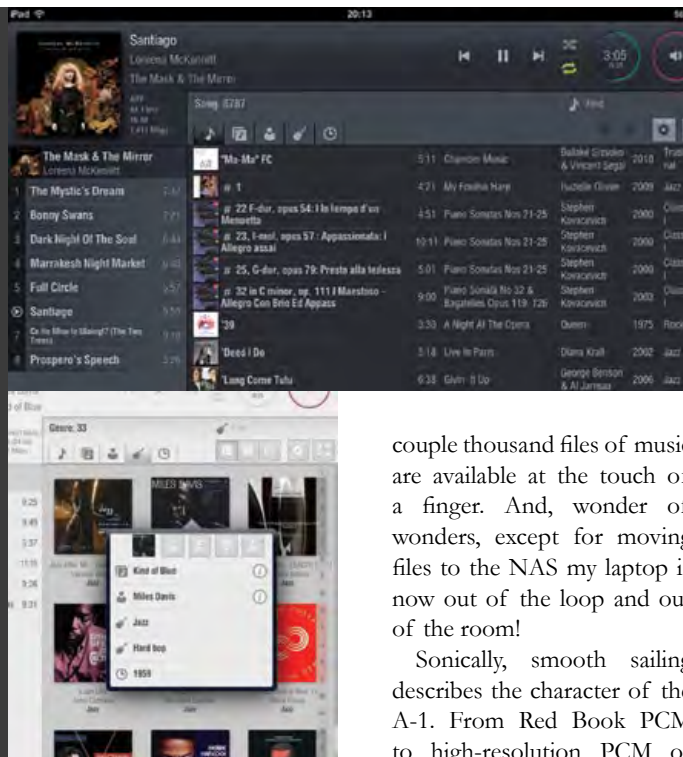
was formed by a group of Pixel Magic's commercial engineers, who wanted to leverage the company's video reputation into the nascent high-resolution-audio market. Its first product was the MediaBox, which played all type of media files and included an audiophile version, the MB200. In 2012 Pixel Magic launched the Lumin Audiophile Network Music Player, a DSD-compatible audio streamer.

The A-1 is actually Lumin's mid-tier network player in an expanding lineup that now includes the entry-level D-1 (pricing TBD), the standard \$5000 T-1, and the more advanced \$12,500 S-1, which is equipped with, count 'em, four ESS Sabre DACs. Machined from a heavy block of solid aluminum, its gracefully curved faceplate houses only a lighted display. There are no buttons or knobs to clutter the clean lines. Internally, the vault-like chassis isolates crucial components and circuitry, but Lumin takes isolation one step further by extracting the dual toroidal power supply—a common source of noise—from the main chassis and putting it in its own external case. Digital-to-analog conversion in the T-1, A-1, and A-1Black is handled by Wolfson WM8741 DAC chips, one per channel. The internal layout is fully balanced, while the analog output connectors are coupled with dual Lundahl LL7401 output transformers. The back panel has inputs for Ethernet, two USB drives (thumb drive or external HD/SSD), HDMI and SPDIF outputs, plus unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR outputs. The Lumin PSU connects via a locking multi-pin plug. My only issue with the layout involves the overhang at the rear of the top panel. Meant to hide the cables, it creates a clean overall look, but it also makes it difficult to access back panel inputs if you're reaching around from above, which is the normal approach if you don't have the room to stand at the back of the equipment rack.

Among the Lumin's features are gapless playback, DSD and PCM upsampling options, and an ultrasonic filter for DSD playback. Radio aficionado that I am, I particularly relished getting my fix of classic rock and NPR via the A-1's Internet

What You'll Need

To begin you'll need a home network with Wi-Fi (pretty common today) and an iPad (Gen 2 or later, Retina displays welcome) to run the Lumin App for Apple computers. (Kinsky is suggested for non-Apple OS. And other tablets will work but with limited functionality. Lumin is currently developing Android versions.) To get up and running the typical configuration connects the Lumin and the NAS to a router using Ethernet cables (I use a Netgear GS605 and AudioQuest Cinnamon), and the Lumin to your preamp or integrated amplifier inputs. The Lumin power supply then connects to the Lumin. Once everything is switched on simply confirm that the UPnP media server (MinimServer) is operating on the NAS drive. (Lumin recommends Synology drives for their ease of installation, legible set-up instructions, and compatibility with MinimServer, a free download. No arguments here. I use Synology's 1TB DiskStation, and it works like a charm.) The Lumin App will then automatically detect the media server and the Lumin player, and the music selection on the NAS drive will be displayed in the main Lumin App window. Once the Lumin A-1 is up and running, the only role the laptop plays is uploading music to the NAS. And even then it can be done wirelessly over the network.



couple thousand files of music are available at the touch of a finger. And, wonder of wonders, except for moving files to the NAS my laptop is now out of the loop and out of the room!

Sonically, smooth sailing describes the character of the A-1. From Red Book PCM to high-resolution PCM or DSD, music is more settled and continuous—a familiar trait that is consistent with being untethered from a spinning optical drive. Symphonies possess an enhanced fluidity across the soundstage, which goes a long way in enhancing dimensionality. Backgrounds are stunningly deep and silent on the Lumin, allowing the full range of ambient energy to emerge. A low-level image like the gently insistent concert harp that underscores one of the themes during *The Wasps* Overture is presented with virtually no veiling or smearing. Soundstage information, hall sound, various ambient cues stand out as if in greater relief. The stage expands with greater dimensionality. As I listened to Graham Nash's "I'll be There For You" the backing vocal harmonies were less etched and more smoothly integrated with the lead vocal, rather than bucking up against it. Holly Cole's "I Can See Clearly" had a more rounded, less edgy quality, particularly as regards sibilance.

Radio option. It's accessed via the TuneIn.com website. Just open a free account, browse TuneIn's radio list, and add some radio channels to an online-created Favorites folder. Then return to the Lumin app, input your TuneIn sign-in info, and all the selected stations appear, complete with graphics. Pretty straightforward with often excellent sound quality depending on the station's compression stream.

The Lumin app is a sensitive and highly intuitive navigation interface. Its visuals are attractive and adjustable, plus it's very responsive to the touch. It supports multiple servers and Lumin players, as well. Playlists are displayed on the left side of the screen, and drop-down menus allow users to choose inputs, typically between a NAS drive, the L-1 and USB inputs. The user can also configure the "look" of the display to some degree, and engage filters. Album cover view can be easily resized with just a pinch of the display between thumb and forefinger.

A couple minor gripes. The search box is too small and the input selection could be more easily accessible. Deleting a playlist while simultaneously listening to Internet Radio will lock the app, requiring a quick reset. Also the user needs to reboot the NAS after adding a new batch of music files. This is no biggie, but I'm told Lumin is working on the issue. I should add that the company appears to be keeping its pledge of upgrading the app when necessary—during the course of this review the app received a wireless upgrade one morning without a hiccup.

Once up and running, the Lumin A-1 was pretty close to trouble-free in everyday use. Engage the Lumin app from an iPad touch screen, power on the Lumin with a quick swipe, and the NAS drive springs to life from sleep mode. Seconds later, a

SPECS & PRICING

Supported formats: DSF (DSD), DIFF (DSD), DoP (DSD), PCM lossless: FLAC, Apple Lossless (ALAC), WAV, AIFF MP3, AAC (in M4A container).

Supported sample rates: PCM, 44.1kHz-384kHz/16-32-bit; DSD

Dimensions: 13.78" x 13.6" x 2.4"

Weight: 17.6 lbs.
Price: A-1 \$7200; T-1 (same electronics w/ metal casing), \$5000

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sourcesystemsltd.com
luminmusic.com

The Lumin seems to settle music into a more relaxed state, as if all the tension that accompanies a digital recording is suddenly released, an effect that actually enlivens the performance. (“Tension” in this case stands in for a sense of dryness and constriction that often is part and parcel of the digital experience.) I noted this difference in varying degrees while listening to Jane Monheit’s “Waters of March” and Rosanne Cash’s “If I Were a Man.” Both are very good recordings in any format, but the A-1 has a warmer almost velvety texture without any vestige of digital rigidity. The sound acquires the compliancy of great analog—the give, the sonic elasticity. Bass timbre, like the standup that introduces Jen Chapin’s “It Don’t Mean Nothing,” has more character, air, and bloom. Bass guitar and drums have more individual personalities rather than just playing the role of robotic timekeepers.

E-Luminating

As many of us have already discovered, sonic nirvana is far from assured when entering the world of high resolution. High-res transfers alone won’t save a sub-standard recording. However, stalwarts like Reference Recording’s HRx discs—Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and Rachmaninoff’s *Symphonic Dances*, for example—can be revelations with shocking dimensionality and orchestral layering. Over and above these traits, it’s the sheer liquidity of the upper octaves that distances these recordings from most others. This said, my most jaw-dropping moment came from the most unlikely of DSD music files, *The Carpenters Greatest Hits*. As I sat back and listened to the mega-hit “Close to You,” the clinical precision of this reverb-happy track was such that I felt like I was sliding into the chair of the recording engineer and feeling my fingers moving across the mixing board, with the power to isolate each musical element at will. From the carefully tuned drum fills to the spotless piano accents and layered vocal harmonies, nearly every song on this recording could be dissected into a collection of sound modules and analyzed. Had I not known better, I would have sworn I was listening to mastertapes.

As the deadline for this article approached, I attended a concert with the Dallas Symphony at The Meyerson Symphony Center. The program of Haydn and Beethoven further clarified a general impression I was forming of the Lumin A-1. It was an impression of resolution, soundstage integrity, and clean transient speed not unlike what I experienced with the dCS Puccini player (SACD-capable) of a few years ago. And, as I listened to young violinist Augustin Hadelich play the Beethoven Violin Concerto I recognized what I was hearing in the Lumin and dCS was more complicated than just a reduction of upper-octave edge or coarseness. In Hadelich’s hands the Strad that evening could, indeed, sound aggressive, even edgy, when prodded. The difference was that those transients were

Network Challenged? No Worries!

For those not especially interested in getting their hands dirty in the world of NAS drives and home networking, Lumin recently debuted the L-1, Lumin’s own UPnP server with internal storage capacity of 2TB. It’s roughly the size of the Lumin power supply and also sheathed in aluminum. The L-1 was developed to be the simplest way to store music for a Lumin DAC—designed to take the sweat and angst that the novice might encounter setting up a NAS drive. It meets UPnP standards and requires zero configuration. Simply plug it into your computer, drag and drop your music, just as you would from a simple USB thumb drive, and then connect it to your network. Used in conjunction with the Lumin app, it can also unlock additional browsing features. Like the player, it serves up everything from DSD128 (5.6MHz) through high-res PCM to WAV, FLAC, Apple Lossless, and MP3. Price: \$1200.

blazingly fast and didn’t overhang or blur the trailing harmonics. High-frequency distortions tend to brighten a component. It’s this lack of distortion that gives the Lumin its warmly weighted presence and overall neutrality. An equally significant “Ah, ha” moment occurred during the Haydn, when the harpsichord came in. Its delicate but steady presence was heard at a level so quiet as to suggest something subliminal. Yet rather than become submerged when the music welled up in intensity, it easily cut through the fabric of the orchestra. These instances were almost identical to my experiences with the Lumin and aforementioned dCS—the micro-events in music, a harp or a harpsichord or even the dynamic progression of a steadily building drum pattern, are always revealed unsmearred and complete.

The charms of the Lumin are pretty seductive even if at the end of most days I still prefer popping on a choice piece of vinyl. But that’s just me. The truth is I like the way the A-1 factors into my current system like just another source component. I like the way it operates and performs with a level of musicality that makes me forget its computer roots. I like that I have about 1200 titles (and g-r-o-w-i-n-g) on the NAS. I’m even surprised that the ritual of selecting songs or symphonies at will from my iPad is far more satisfying than I’d assumed it would be. And finally, I love the fact that I can indulge my passion for music with not a computer in sight. Thank you Lumin, and hats off to the new kid on the block. **tas**

