

In it to Win it

Winchester HiFi takes some well-known brands and mixes in a few surprises to keep **Ed Selley** on his toes

Stand around in Winchester for long enough and someone will tell you it was once the capital of England. Despite this, the city has not been well served for quality audio stores. Happily, this changed three years ago when Winchester HiFi – which up until that point had been in an out of town location – moved to its present address in a former hotel. Owned and operated by Andy Blockley, Winchester HiFi has a portfolio that initially looks relatively straightforward and quite compact – as Andy pared back the equipment stocked some years ago – but look a

little closer and you will see that alongside some well-known stalwarts of the audio industry are some less commonly encountered brands that put a unique spin on things. Taking full advantage of its central location, Andy has equipment that starts at affordable price points and moves up to the high end. Quite unusually for a dealer that does not operate as an AV retailer, Winchester HiFi also offers a selection of video and display equipment designed to integrate with the stereo systems and one system here looks rather different as a result. To begin with though, we start on more familiar ground.

WINCHESTER HIFI



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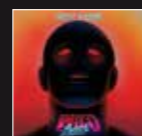
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linn.co.uk neat.co.uk isobluehifi.com rel.net



System test music



ZERO 7
Yeah Ghost
Pop Art Blue
CD



WILD BEASTS
Boy King
He The Colossus
Vinyl



YOUSSOU N'DOUR & PETER GABRIEL
Fatteliku
(Live In Athens)
In Your Eyes
FLAC 24/48kHz

System 1 – Neat thinking

YOU MIGHT BE forgiven for feeling the faintest whiff of *déjà vu* confronted with the first system, but there are logical reasons as to why Rega equipment appears in this position quite as often as it does. Where this system differs from many we've seen is in the choice of speakers used to partner it.

The Rega equipment in use is one of Andy's tried and tested combinations. The Apollo-R CD player is a phenomenal performer in its own right, but partnered with the equally sensational Rega DAC-R, you have a pairing that takes up the same amount of space as a full-width component and offers exceptional audio performance. You also get a selection of additional inputs and the ability to handle hi-res audio as well when the fancy takes you.

Family fortunes

If you are in the fortunate position of owning the latest and greatest Planar 3 turntable, the chances are that hi-res audio is not likely to be a big priority for you. The newest member of a very long-running family of turntables, the Planar 3 doesn't look too different to its predecessors but offers a level of performance that is scintillating. This particular example makes use of the optional external power supply for higher performance.

Amplification comes courtesy of the Elex-R integrated amplifier. This is a simplified relation of the Elicit and offers a beefy 72W into 8ohm and an

excellent moving-magnet phono stage for the Planar 3.

Rega can easily supply the speakers for this system too, but Andy has gone with the Neat Motive SX1 instead as he feels the two brands work together extremely well. This compact 2.5-way floorstander features some key facets of the Neat brand like an anodised tweeter and has a very distinctive rearward lean to assist with the time alignment. Unlikely to be too much for any UK lounge, it finishes off a very handsome system indeed.

Kicking off with Zero 7's *Yeah Ghost* on CD, the system immediately shows that it has an effortless grasp of what

A performance that leaps into the room and leaves you wanting to join in

matters in the musical message. Martha Tilston's vocals in *Pop Art Blue* are stunningly rich and detailed. Where the Neat has an ace up its sleeve is that despite its slender cabinets, its performance has a weight to it that eludes many similar designs. And this isn't simply outright bass weight, there's a presence and impact to the midrange that really aids realism.

The partnership that the Motive makes with the Elex-R is especially fruitful. The Rega amp has the required horsepower to take hold of the Neat and ensure that it gives its best. Feed the effortlessly musical

digital signal from the digital pairing, and you have a system that punches well above its weight.

Switch to the Planar 3 and things manage to improve further. Wild Beasts' *Boy King* is a swaggering montage of falsetto and electronic riffs and this system knows that the only thing to do when confronted with such a thing is to enjoy it. The result is a performance that leaps into the room and has you wanting to join in. Behind the joy, though, is the same refined but effortlessly accurate tonality that ensures that this is not simply an over developed house party apparatus.

It might get loud

The more time I spend with this system, the more I'm won over by its charms. This is a collection of equipment that is joyously easy to listen to across analogue and digital. It has the headroom to go effortlessly loud if you need it to, but the qualities that make it a great listen are still present at lower levels. Changing tack from Wild Beasts and putting on Black Mountain's *IV* doesn't phase this system in the slightest. It moves from electronic silliness to crunching rock as effortlessly as turning a page. This is a tremendous opening gambit from Winchester HiFi, but lurking at the other end of the listening room is something completely different that demands further investigation. ▶

Two great British brands combine for musical bliss



- 1 NEAT MOTIVE SX1 £1,999
 - 2 REGA PLANAR 3 WITH ELYS 2 £625
 - 3 REGA TT-PSU £198
 - 4 REGA APOLLO-R CD PLAYER £548
 - 5 REGA DAC-R DAC £598
 - 6 REGA ELEX-R INTEGRATED AMP £898
- REGA COUPLE 2 RCA INTERCONNECT £99
REGA SPEAKER CABLE £99
ISOBLUE HIFI 60 SERIES RACK £700
- TOTAL £5,764**



System 2 – Look and listen

WHAT YOU SEE here is a compact but ferociously capable audio setup that has sufficient connectivity that it can easily augment your viewing habits too.

Linn's Exakt system should be seen as a logical development of the company's longstanding affection for active speakers, but what it does is far smarter than that. By combining active speakers with digital crossovers that can be used to help optimise the performance of the speaker in the room, the result is a compact but seriously clever piece of equipment. The Akurate Exakt DSM is a single-chassis streamer and preamp that connects directly to speakers via RJ45 connections. The DSM in this case takes audio from a Melco N1A NAS drive (see p102).

Stand by me

The Akudorik Exakt is notionally a standmount speaker, except the stand contains the amplification and processing. It uses Linn's distinctive 3k driver array combined with a single midbass driver, which is then placed in a cabinet that is compact and extremely attractive. Linn doesn't use the phrase 'room correction' instead preferring 'room optimisation' and this means you can input placement data and room behaviour and tweak the performance to take this into account. Naturally, the whole effect is app driven.

The Akurate DSM really comes into its own thanks to the sheer variety of inputs Linn has fitted to the rear. As you might expect, there is a selection of analogue, coaxial and optical connections, but where the DSM deviates from the norm is the row of HDMI's, which allow it to receive audio and act as a video hub. Andy partners the DSM with an Oppo BDP-103 Blu-ray player and Loewe Connect 4K TV to demonstrate a very elegant one-stop solution.

The bass response is deeper than you'd expect from a small speaker in a big space

This convenience shouldn't be seen as any impediment to the sound performance, though. Every time I've heard an Exakt system, I have a slightly confused few seconds trying to 'dial in'. When you hear this system – particularly if you've been listening to a conventional system in the same space – the Linn units can sound oddly stark right up until the point you realise there's nothing missing from the performance except the room itself.

Once you've adjusted your brain to suit, the way the Linn handles the 24/48kHz download of Peter Gabriel and Youssou N'Dour is exceptional.

With all traces of overhang or interaction completely removed from the performance, you are treated to a startlingly involving take on the music which is pared back to just you and the performers. Voices leap out and have outstanding texture and detail to them meaning that their placement in the wider context of what you hear is absolutely rock solid.

Home bass

This spatial ability is not limited to live material either. The way the Linn handles Annie Lennox's *Legend In My Living Room* is no less three dimensional and confident despite its studio origins. It also shows off the Akudorik's bass response, which is deeper than you might expect from a small speaker in a big space and has an exceptional turn of speed to it.

It knows how to groove too. The funky fifties-style swing rock of Eileen Jewell's *Queen Of The Minor Key* is presented with electrifying energy and punch. Where the Exakt technology really comes into its own is that once you're content with what it does, it allows you to achieve antisocial levels without the slightest sign of strain or stress. Regardless of your requirements, it seems to have an inexhaustible supply of power to deliver on your requirements whatever they are.



Don't let the simple looks fool you, this is a very clever system

- 1 LINN AKUDORIK EXAKT £15,000
 - 2 LINN AKURATE EXAKT DSM £2,500
 - 3 MELCO N1A £1,750
- TOTAL £19,250



System 3 – Perfect Circle

THE CORE OF this system comes from Naim and features some of the company's most flexible products. The NAC-N 272 (p103) is capable of acting as both a network streamer and preamp without detriment to either. This is given a performance boost from an XPS DR external power supply while the evergreen Naim 250 DR power amp provides the grunt and an NS01 ripper and server acts as storage for streaming.

Full circle

The other source is a rather rarer beast. Andy partners Wilson Benesch's Circle 25 turntable with an Attwood phono stage and power supply – which are designed by a man who also rebuilds jet engines.

Speakers are provided by Focal in the form of the Sopra No2. This enormously capable floorstander has a huge sound but each speaker has a partnering REL S/5 SHO subwoofer. The aim is to fill out the bottom octave in a way that befits the room.

Some systems take a little while to show what they are about, but this one needs no more than 30 seconds of *In Your Eyes* to give an all encompassing view of what it does. This is a big system and it has a sound to match. The scale and weight it brings to recordings is

exceptional. At the same time, it never becomes intrusive or unnatural. The role of the REL subs is deeply impressive as they integrate perfectly with the Sopras and effortlessly fill in the lower registers, never drawing attention to themselves, just delivering wonderfully deep, clean bass.

Throwing the Wilson Benesch into the mix reveals that Andy's thoughts on how capable it is are very much on the money. This is not a showy sort of deck with slabs of analogue warmth and softness, but a means of effortlessly hearing what is in the grooves of your collection without favouritism or weakness. John Martyn's *Solid Air* flows effortlessly with the sort of tonal accuracy that only the very best analogue sources can manage.

Take the strain

Nobody Speak by DJ Shadow is a ballistic, organ jarring, shouting monster of a track, but this system simply rolls up its sleeves and delivers every crunching beat and machine gun lyric without showing any sign of strain. I've had the Sopra No2 in my own room in the past and didn't feel for a second that it ever needed any bass augmentation, but having heard it like this, I'd be tempted even if it's akin to using a hand grenade to win at conkers.



A room-filling monster of a system that can fill any space to great effect



What is most impressive of all is that the second you've finished behaving like a child with poor impulse control, everything instantly snaps back into a performance that is accurate, detailed and joyously easy to listen to. The greatest compliment you can pay it is that it is hard to pull apart the roles and responsibilities of the equipment and what's doing what. Simply listen to it, accept that you'll need to put yourself into a mild fiscal crisis to own one and then realise you need it in your life. As a way to finish the day, it's an impressive showing.

- 1 FOCAL SOPRA NO2 SPEAKERS £10,500
 - 2 REL S/5 SHO X2 £1,745 EACH
 - 3 WILSON BENESCH CIRCLE 25 WITH A.C.T 25 TONEARM AND DYNVECTOR DV-20X2L CARTRIDGE £4,719
 - 4 ATTWOOD CENTRE STAGE MK1 PHONO STAGE WITH STAGE POWER PSU £1,790
 - 5 NAIM NAC-N 272 £3,400
 - 6 NAIM XPS DR £3,745
 - 7 NAIM NAP 250 DR £3,745
 - 8 NAIM NS01 £2,995
 - NAIM SUPER LUMINA DIN £1,545
 - NAIM A5 SPEAKER CABLE £324
 - ISOBLUEHIFI SPECIAL BRANCH (FIVE TIER) RACK £1,250
- TOTAL £37,503



The more time you spend at Winchester HIFI, the more you realise that behind some headline brands you can see in a variety of locations, Andy has invested a huge amount of time and effort into delivering systems that meet the requirements of the local area. The string

that ties these three setups together is the flexibility they offer in terms of supporting multiple sources and working in real-world conditions.

These are systems designed to deliver excellence from whatever you play through them, whenever you

choose to play it. The clever use of additional brands to add functionality and performance results in systems that aren't different for the sake of it, but instead do things that they would otherwise be unable to do. The result is three very fine systems indeed.