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Storm Chaser

Acoustic Signature's new Storm is gunning for top seat at the table of the ultra-competitive £4,000 turntable market. Rafael Todes gives it shelter...



Having sold my Linn Sondek LP12 and Ittok just over ten years ago, I was rather taken with an Acoustic Signature Challenger that had just received a favourable review in a *Hi-Fi World* group test. It was the cheaper brother of The Storm, but shares a number of its characteristics. I lived with this deck for a few years, and greatly appreciated this foray into the higher end. It was tonally quite neutral, and represented superb value for money. Acoustic Signature make a wide range of decks, ranging from the Manfred at £1,699 to the newly released Ascona for a whopping £16,500; as for the Grande Reference (weighing in at a massive 200kg), if you need to ask the price then you can't afford it! Seventy five per cent of the company's decks are for export outside Germany and are particularly popular in the Netherlands and Asia.

Weighing in at a mighty 28kg, this new version of The Storm has a 50mm platter, built from aluminium; into this are inserted eight brass

silencers, not unlike the Feichert Woodpecker. They have a couple of rubber rings around them, and there is no metal-to-metal contact with the rest of the platter. Tapping the platter yields a very dead sound, thus they seem to be doing their job well. The main bearing is made with hardened and polished steel, with a hard tungsten carbide ball at its base. The housing of the bearing uses sintered bronze inserts, which do not require any oil. The other contact point of the bearing uses a specially developed material called Tidorfolon. This is used in high-pressure pumps in the food industry, where oil contamination is not a possibility. It is very hard, and above all, self-lubricating

The motor is a substantial unit, and is controlled by a so-called S-Alpha unit, which takes the DC supply from a wall wart, and regenerates a sine wave at 12VAC. A thin belt drives the circumference of the platter. The base of the deck is 45mm of aluminium, and has room for three different arms if so required. The arm base is attached to the chassis with an Allen screw on

a track. Thus the arm board can be pulled out to accommodate 12 inch arms, as well as 9 inch arms.

The three aluminium legs are adjustable, although the mass of the deck makes adjustment a bit uncomfortable, as the mass of the deck rests on your other hand whilst performing the operation of raising or lowering the leg. A felt mat is included, and annoyingly seems to attach itself to outgoing records. The deck looks like a shiny spacecraft in miniature and is very solidly constructed, as befitting a high end product from Germany.

Visually, the deck gives off an *über-solid* sense to it. It is almost totally constructed out of aluminium, and is visually a stark contrast to the Fletcher Point 5 (which combines two different materials, namely aluminium alloy for the platter and wood for the chassis).

The chassis below the platter slopes down, leading to three feet, around three inches in diameter. They have a touch of the elephantine about them; is this an aesthetic statement, or does it serve an engineering



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purpose? Apparently, there were great sonic differences between the more basic decks in the range and those which had substantial feet, not within the footprint of the deck. The size of them is required to make a substantial bond with the subchassis of the deck; I wouldn't call it beautiful, it's more a case of function over form.

Tapping the shelf on which the deck sits, yields more of a thud than a Technics SL1200 for example, and indeed many decks I have reviewed. So I feel the deck will hugely benefit from both an absorbing platform and careful location.

For the purposes of the review, the distributor (Air Audio Ltd.) supplied an SME IV arm and cable, and I used a Cadenza Bronze on both the deck, and a Timestep Technics

1210 MkII with an SME V, and Sound Dead Steel mat, and a Fletcher Audio Omega Point 5 with a Conductor Air-Bearing Tonearm, with the Cadenza Bronze cartridge.

SOUND QUALITY

Listening to Frank Sinatra's 1961 recording of 'That Old Black Magic', the Acoustic Signature Storm really throws up the presence of Frank Sinatra high in the room. It projects the nuances of his voice, with a smoothness and naturalness that is highly impressive. It is a particularly well recorded track, richly orchestrated, and the deck does a fine job of separating the brass/percussion textures, particularly the xylophone, which you can hear in its own glorious bubble. There is a feeling that the musicians are enjoying themselves

as the music smiles.

Colin Davis' 1970's recording of Handel's 'Messiah' is a little dated in terms of performance practice by today's standards, but makes for an interesting listen on this deck. In the large chorus 'The Glory of the Lord', the deck makes a detailed and rounded sound of the choir's output in a way that so many other decks don't manage half so well. A section of sopranos can sometimes shriek, and hurt the ears when not adequately reproduced, and this deck really excels here. There is a good sense of the weight of sound of the choir as well.

Mendelssohn's incidental music to the 'Midsummer Night's Dream' has a huge dynamic range, with barely audible fairies dancing to full-blooded orchestral fortissimos. On

this Philips recording conducted by Sir Colin Davis again, the Storm takes the bull by the horns in terms of dynamics, but never loses control of the performance. The violins sound precise when quiet, particularly in their staccato off the string passages, and there is a lovely sparkly but rich string timbre, ably assisted by the Ortofon Cadenza Bronze, which shines sunlight on the texture.

Turning to my own field of Chamber Music, and specifically the Mozart Eb Quintet played by the Amadeus Quartet with Cecil Aronowitz as second viola on DG, I noticed that compared with my

the violins buzz all over the top string whilst the cellos and basses strum like a banjo, provides a great turntable test piece. I am struck by the largesse of the violins; it's a huge sound oozing with depth and punch. Sometimes this can sound on lesser decks like a solitary few violins, but here there is the gravitas of a substantial section. You can even feel the air generated by the cellos strumming away maniacally. I suspect the SME IV is doing a fabulous job keeping control of the proceedings and is exceptional in this respect.

Listening to the famous Tchaikovsky 'Piano Concerto No. 1', superbly played by Vladimir Ashkenazi on a vintage Decca recording, the beginning starts with a brass call, and the soloist answering by sweeping the keyboard with bombastic chords. Ashkenazi plays this now cliché-ridden classic in a quietly understated, and highly musical way, finding the musical line ahead of the mindless bravura that sometimes finds its way into this piece. It strikes me that this deck has something in common with this approach. It isn't trying to impress you with its prowess, or show you its ability to spotlight details, it just gives an accurate, well-staged exposition of the musical line, with some genuinely beautiful sounds and textures. It's like going to a party and meeting someone, who afterwards you discover has achieved something remarkable, and you had no inkling of this when talking to them!

By contrast, with the Timestep Technics SLI200 reference, I really feel the showiness of the piece; the deck is making me aware of every accent in the score, the rise and fall of every phrase close up. It is a very different approach to the Storm, which tends to smooth out the attack at the front of notes, producing a really mellow sound and is a matter of personal taste. If there is a line which represents the 'transient speed' of a turntable, the rapidity that the note speaks, the Technics would be at one end of the line, the Storm would be at the other, and the Fletcher Audio would be between the two, but far closer to the Storm than the Technics.

Fletcher Audio Omega Point 5, there is less attack at the beginnings of notes – the Storm seems to tone down the shock of the articulation; not in an unpleasant way, just it homogenises and even pasteurises the sound. I also notice that Martin Lovett's cello sounds a tad less full with the Storm, as compared to the Fletcher Audio. The sound is underpinned by skillful bass reproduction, full but not bloated. This is a substantial improvement on the way I remember the cheaper model (The Acoustic Signature Challenger) sounding, where the bass was never this controlled.

Listening to Mozart's glorious 29th Symphony conducted by Sir Neville Marriner, I am immediately struck by the fact that the deck is producing a smooth, vivacious sound. It isn't the last word in audio realism, the imaging is generally very good, but not quite holographic, the sound of the strings is flexible and bouncy, dare I say 'lithe' [if you must! Ed.]?

Benjamin Britten's 'Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge', and in particular the 'Aria Italiana', where

REFERENCE SYSTEM
 Fletcher Audio 0.5/Cartridge Man Conductor turntable
 Technics SL1210Mk2/SME Series V turntable
 Ortofon Cadenza Bronze cartridge
 Audio Research SP9 mk2 preamplifier
 Icon Audio PS3 signature phono stage
 VAC Auricle Musicblocs power amplifiers
 B&W 802D loudspeakers

CONCLUSION

This is a highly capable deck, which sits at the price point comfortably and against stiff competition; it is sonically pleasing and at times beguiling to listen to, its temperament is even-keeled and rational, but perhaps the soubriquet 'Storm' is a bit of a misnomer. There seems to be very little that is stormy about it, maybe it should have been called 'The Sunshine' instead! It is excellent value for money and I personally would be happy to live with it for its innate musical abilities, and mellow sound. It does however require careful location and a suitable platform on which to sit.



VERDICT 
 Another excellent high end turntable joins the fray, with a smooth, solid, open and lyrical sound guaranteed to please.

ACOUSTIC SIGNATURE
STORM £3,612
 Air Audio Ltd.
 ☎ +44 (0) 1491 629629
 www.airaudio.co.uk

FOR
 - stable, expansive sound
 - easy musicality
 - fulsome tonality

AGAINST
 - lacks ultimate transient speed

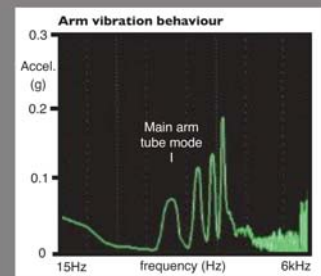
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The SME IV arm fitted has a first bending mode at 360Hz, the first peak at left in our vibration analysis, and the common related third order mode at 1080Hz, the highest peak at right in the cluster. This makes the arm stiff, and quite well damped, as expected from a tapered tube. However, the four peak cluster is surprisingly more than an SME V produces, even though it is physically similar. The IV is more lively than a Rega RB301 in this area, although it is better damped in the midband and at higher frequencies, and this likely accounts for the uncoloured midband nature of SMEs. There is very little high frequency excitation in the structure.

Speed error of the Acoustic Signature turntable was negligible at +0.2%, so it is very accurate. Speed stability (wow and flutter) unweighted measured a very low 0.094% unweighted and 0.043% IEC weighted, extremely low values, making the turntable very speed stable. NK

Speed accuracy	+0.2%
Wow & flutter	0.094%
Wow & flutter (IEC weighted)	0.043%

ARM VIBRATION



WOW & FLUTTER

