



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Storm Audio V35 Vertigo Integrated Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a decent hi-fi system. What is admitted less often, is that the more complex that system, (and *ipso facto*) the more expensive it is, the less likely it is to succeed – or even work. That might seem like a strange proposition, coming from someone who spends considerable amounts of his valuable time reviewing items of almost impossibly exotic hi-fi, but in support of my argument I deploy Pearson's First Law Of Audio, an equally universal truth that states that, "If it works first time, then it isn't High-End!" And let's face it; if anybody is in a position to know, then it's certainly Harry Pearson.

Which is one way of explaining the enduring appeal of the super-integrated amplifier – the one-box solution that promises to do it all on a fraction of the budget, while occupying a fraction of the domestic real estate. Of course, it's not hard to understand the attraction of just such a beast as an almost obligatory step on the notional upgrade path to audio nirvana, a mid-term examination en route to full pre/power graduation. But try using the same logic to explain just why so many fully committed (and heavily invested) audiophiles are throwing in their multi-box amplifiers, replete with multiple power supplies and "down grading" to integrated solutions like the Devialet digital amp. The truth is, that in many cases, the apparently backward step gains more on the swings of simplicity than it loses on the roundabouts of extra power and inter-stage isolation. Far from being a downgrade, a well-designed integrated, operating within its comfort zone, can offer a more musically coherent performance than a mismatched pre/power hooked up with a mish-mash of

mix and match cabling. Done right, the one-box solution can (and all too often does) trump the multi-box set-up done badly. The result is more elegant, more cost-effective and sounds better; what's not to like?

The genesis of the super-integrated really got going with the introduction of the Audiolab 8000, although its DNA reaches further back to the Lentek. Unlike those budget giant-killers, the Rotel 820B and Mission Cyrus 1, the Audiolab threatened to match the load tolerance of then current pre-power offerings, undermining one of their major claims to sonic superiority. Its substantial casework and even more substantial power supply were the foundation on which an audio dynasty were built, but its true legacy lies in the subsequently unbroken line of super-integrated amps vying for our attention. Of course, the advent of CD and resulting marginalisation of the phono-stage did no harm, further undermining the arguments in support of dedicated, standalone pre-amps, so that looking back, we can see audiophile illuminati as august as Krell, Levinson and Audio Research all attempting to hitch themselves to the tailboard of this fast-moving bandwagon. But the really stellar offerings have always

arrived, unheralded and winging in from somewhere out in left field – which more often than not, means France.

The latest contender in the super-integrated stakes has duly arrived from exactly that direction. The (less than catchily named) Storm Audio V35 Vertigo is a predictably prosaic black box, hailing from Laval, located roughly half way between Rennes and Le Mans. The casework is deep, pays some attention to styling and sports the obligatory two control knobs, all that are permitted by the minimalist dictates of the modernist audiophile aesthetic. It's also reassuringly heavy, even in the case of the V35; it's bigger brother offers more elaborate, machined casework and even more mass, but that's another, rather more expensive story.

So far, so very ordinary. Indeed, there's little to visually separate the V35 from any number of other contenders, past or present. One thing's for certain, it definitely lacks the bling factor (and price tag) of current audiophile darling, the Devialet. But look around the back and you discover its secret weapon,

“A rotary control that allows the user to impedance match the amplifier's output stage to the speakers being used.”

its claim to fame, its USP... for here lurks (and I kid you not) the Storm Focus control. All the really successful super-integrateds have had something to set them apart, whether it is load tolerance (Audiolab), name recognition (Krell and Levinson), quirky looks (the recently resurgent Adyton) or quirky technology (Lavardin). Storm Force have pinned their hopes on the aforementioned Storm Focus, a rotary control that allows the user to impedance match the amplifier's output stage to the speakers being used, something that should offer significant sonic benefits if the theoretical advantages can be realized in practice, not least because it will allow the system to make the most of the V35's fairly modest 70 Watt output.

More conventional facilities are provided in the shape of five single-ended line inputs, a record out, pre-amp out and power amp input (the bigger V55 offers a balanced input option and 170 Watts per channel). There is an optional phono input that can be ordered for MM or MC cartridges, and fitted internally to replace one of the line inputs. Either version costs £150, although no specifics were supplied. Speaker connections are via single pairs of shrouded five-way binding posts. And that is all she wrote – apart from a surprisingly reasonable price ticket of £2,000.

Hooking up the V35 is simplicity itself; I ran it between the Wadia 861 and a variety of speakers, including (the sublime) Heco Statements and (the ridiculous) Focal Stella Utopia EMs. Greater (electrical) resistance was provided by the Sonics Amerigo and Magneplanar MG1.6 in an attempt to push the Storm Audio amplifier outside of its comfort zone, the mid-80s efficiency of the Maggies simply serving to demonstrate that 70 watts is, and always will be, 70 Watts.

Which brings us to the Storm Focus control. Faced with legendary power-sponges like the Magneplanars, speakers that need Watts like a human-being needs oxygen, the V35 was (unsurprisingly) incapable of achieving anything like realistic orchestral levels. But, keeping the volume reasonable and rotating the Storm Focus control towards the four ohm setting wrought an astonishing change in performance. Whereas previously, the system had struggled to generate both bandwidth and dynamics, sounding thin and pinched, adjusting the rear-panel rotary knob injected a sense of easy flow and rhythmic security to proceedings. Bass went deeper and quicker, the treble gained more space and air, but most importantly of all, everything fell into line, bringing a welcome sense of life and poise to proceedings. No, it didn't have me reaching for a recently arrived Ma Vlast, but the angular precision and musical symmetry of Julia Fischer's Bach Concertos, ▶





▶ recording for Decca, was another matter, the technical perfection of her playing and the instrumental interplay with Alexander Sitkovetsky (in the BWV 1043 double concerto) springing to life, the clarity and lightness of touch allowing the violins to sparkle whilst still maintaining the proper balance with, and centre of gravity from, the Academy Of St Martin. While the Storm Audio/Magneplanar pairing is not a combination I'd ever recommend, the amplifier's ability to rise above the challenge of the situation and bring musical structure and order to proceedings served as a salutary indicator of its capabilities. After all, if you can't bring structure to Bach, why bother with anything else?

Moving to rather more forgiving partners allowed the V35 to show its true colours – and the extent of the Storm Focus control's impact, because

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it's impossible to separate the two. In fact, being able to dial the amplifier in to match the speakers in use actually removes one of the biggest variables in amplifier performance, meaning that the sound of a properly adjusted V35 is remarkably consistent. But please note the caveat; in this instance “proper adjustment” of the Storm Focus control is critical to achieving the best results.

So, hooking the V35 up to your speakers, what should you expect? The Storm Focus amp should reward you with a lively, open and agile sound that is quick, clean and energetic. It delivers a broad, open soundstage with excellent depth and air for an amp at this price. It also does a better than expected job with instrumental separation and texture. But what really sets the V35 apart from the crowd is its ability to bind all these aspects together into a musically convincing and engaging whole. If the goal of hi-fi is to breathe life into recorded performances, then the Storm Audio V35 is definitely a resounding success – helped in no small part by the Storm Focus facility. And therein lies the rub, because as impressively effective as the Storm Focus control undoubtedly is when properly adjusted, it does raise the twin spectres of misuse and abuse.

Take a look at said control and you'll see that it runs through 270 degrees, with a range from zero to 16 Ohms. You should

set it (at least initially) to match the nominal impedance of your speakers. You then fine-tune it by ear, which is actually a lot simpler than it sounds. Bearing in mind that you need to reset the control each time you change speakers (or cables) I've had quite a lot of practice. I'm sure that there's more than one technique, but the one I settled on runs as follows: play a piece of reasonably energetic violin or acoustic guitar and gently adjust the control, first one way and then the other. What you are listening for is an increased level of musical energy and sense of purpose in the performance. If the setting is too high, then the sound starts to get pinched, thin and dry; if it is too low then it gets soft, soggy and indistinct. But when it's right the sound locks in, with a sense of both body and drive that brings the music to life. That's because as well as adjusting the output impedance of the amp, the control also tweaks the global feedback – no wonder you can hear the effect.

Which brings us back to the question of misuse and abuse. Of the two, misuse is the easiest to deal with. If you can't hear what the Storm Focus control does (meaning that you won't be able to adjust it correctly) do not buy this amplifier: Be honest and be sensible. Besides which, if you can't hear Storm Focus at work you've probably already spent too much on hi-fi. More worrying is the potential for abuse, the temptation to use the control to “tune” the system to taste. This totally misses



► the point. Storm Focus is not a “little bit warmer, little bit drier” sliding scale, nothing but a glorified tone control. There is one, correct setting in any given system; anything else and you’ll be short-changing your system, your self and your music. Think of it more like an adjustable version of the output taps on a valve amp. You set it once, set it right and then forget it – unless you change the system. The good news is that shouldn’t be hard to do, as you’ll be spending all your time listening.

Hooked up to either the Hecos or the Stellas, the V35 was an engagingly vivacious performer, easily belying its modest cost, even in this exalted company. The sense of life and energy that comes from precise trimming of the Storm Focus control imbues the musical performance with a sense of verve and purpose. It also brings that all-important (and illusive) sense of human agency to proceedings – assuming of course, that it was captured in the original recording. So, it’s no surprise to find an infectious immediacy in the likes of Michelle Shocked or Stewboss. You hear it in the measured, fuzz-power chords that drive ‘Fill Station’, you hear it more clearly still in the plaintive lament of ‘Wanted A Girl’, especially the fragile delicacy and layered complexity of that track’s opening bars. But you hear it just as clearly in the driven electronica of the Pet Shop Boys. ‘It’s A Sin’ is unashamedly dance music – but it’s also beautifully and intelligently crafted dance music, that played with tempo and ramped dynamics long before the rave culture or trance. The V35 doesn’t just drive the track along, it unravels the complex layers and textures, drawing you in, leading you into ill-advised little flurries of dance steps and shamelessly egging you on to further advance the volume control.

The sheer enthusiasm that the V35 is capable of bringing to its musical reproduction shouldn’t be mistaken for a lack of poise or precision. Yes, it does the PRAT thing with aplomb, but it’s almost as an after thought, a natural result of the amplifier’s innate sense of place and order, clarity and separation. So it doesn’t just sort out the multi-layered density of ‘It’s A Sin’, it gets each beat and each wash of synth sound precisely in the right place. Likewise, the deft bass melody that so subtly underpins ‘Wanted A Girl’ is both tactile and clear of pitch and pace, holding the track and anchoring its more ethereal elements. That’s why each track brings its own, very different musical and emotional power to the party. Is there a price to pay for the pleasure? Inevitably – and here it’s extracted in the shape of a subtle leanness, a slight coolness to the tonal balance. For me, that’s a small price to pay. In fact, in the vast majority of systems and with most speakers the V35 is likely to be paired with, it’s a more than likely to be a positive attribute. What worries me more is that it might tempt users to attempt to “warm” the sound with the Storm Focus facility. Don’t do it. It won’t work and all you will do is destroy the very qualities of musical communication and organisation that make the V35 special in the first place. This amp is all about a place for everything and everything in its place and that sense of order will be the first casualty of ill-considered adjustment.

Can the Storm Audio V35 become the latest incumbent of the Super Integrated throne? Well, it has all the credentials, both conceptually and sonically speaking, and at £2,000 it constitutes a price/performance bargain of heroic proportions. Should we all be selling off our expensive pre-power set ups and downsizing? One track back on the Connoisseur/Berning combination and you realize that there are no free lunches in the world of audio. Which is not

to say that the V35 isn’t capable of embarrassing many an expensive, multi-box amplifier, especially one that’s not sitting too comfortably in its system context. Big amps will always beat it for power at the bandwidth extremes, but that’s exactly where they can also get into trouble – and exactly where the V35’s musical coherence really hits home. Cool, classy and seamlessly energetic right across its range, the Storm Audio V35 is more than equipped to both engage and seduce. Only time will tell whether its talents will be matched by its popularity, but any shortfall won’t be for want of trying. In this instance it’s very much a case of, “new name, same old story” – in the best possible way. Those looking for more music should go looking for Storm Audio’s V35; it may be the new kid on the block, but I’ve a sneaking suspicion it’s going to become a familiar face. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state integrated amplifier

Inputs: 5x single-ended, line level
Optional MM or MC stage

Input Impedance: 25 kOhms

Outputs: Pre-amp output
Record output

Rated Output Power: 70 Watts/8 Ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 440 x 80 x 410mm

Weight: 13kg

Price: £2,000

UK Distributor

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Manufacturer

STORM Audio SARL

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