

ENGL STEVE MORSE SIGNATURE 100 HEAD £2,199
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY GAVIN ROBERTS



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Engl's latest superhead lands in the UK – do more controls mean more tone? We decode it... *by Nick Guppy*

What we want to know

1 Is this amp okay for playing small pub gigs?

It may well be overkill, but compared to some big amps the Engl can sound cranked at relatively low volume, so you can get a good tone from it without shaking the foundations.

2 Is it point-to-point or PCB?

Printed circuit board – and one of the best you'll find in any amp. There's no way you can build an amp this complex and do it consistently without a PCB.

3 Who is this amp for?

Well-heeled fans of Steve Morse and serious pros who want a powerful head with a high level of flexibility.

As well as having a reputation for being one of the best players on the planet, Steve Morse is known for being an uncompromising perfectionist when it comes to equipment, resulting in some complex and unusual set-ups over the years. These days Steve is probably best known for his work with Deep Purple, one of rock's most successful and enduring

franchises. However, many of us will always think first of the instrumental classic *Take It Off The Top*, recorded by Steve with the band he formed back in 1972 – the Dixie Dregs – and used by the late Tommy Vance as the theme tune for BBC Radio 1's seminal *Friday Rock Show* as far back as 1978. In between, Steve has also managed to form his own band and reform the Dregs on several occasions, not to mention filling in the odd idle moment by becoming an airline pilot! So when Engl announced the Steve Morse Signature head we were keen to see how complex – or simple – it would turn out to be.

As you'd expect, given that Engl isn't shy of setting itself challenges either, the Steve Morse Signature 100 is not the simplest design to ever land on our test bench – but it's not the most complicated either. One thing Engl doesn't compromise on is build quality and the Morse is a head of titanic proportion, with massive transformers bolted to a deep heavy-duty steel chassis. Inside that you'll find all the electronics supported on Engl's printed circuit board, which is fabricated to the obsessively high standard we've come to expect. There's nothing wrong with printed circuit boards on a valve amp as long as they're done properly – and while very few manufacturers meet our expectations in this area,

Engl is one of just a handful that consistently exceeds them. The Morse 100's internals are up to the sort of standard you'd want if you were building passenger jets or satellites, let alone something as down to earth as a guitar amp.

Although after a quick glance at the control panel, you'd be left in no doubt that this amp is far from mundane, with no less than 23 control knobs to tweak. Ten of these make up the Morse 100's first two channels, with standard gain, three-band EQ and master volume arrangements. Then we come to channel three, which features not one but four mid controls – two differently voiced lo mids and two similarly different hi mids, both pairs of which are switchable. There's a switch called high gain that kicks all three channels up to an extra level of filth, and channel three also gets two separate master volumes to provide separate levels for high and low gain operation. Another small switch is the tone control that simultaneously reconfigures each channel for a different, expanded voicing: adding more treble to channel one, scooping the mids of channel two or altering the frequency range of channel three's four mid-range controls. Added on to that little lot, there are global controls for presence and depth as well as two separate global master volumes, which are again switchable.

Around the back there are two entirely separate effects loops (that can be run in series or parallel), preamp and fixed level line outs, a noise gate and sockets for switching all of those functions' provisions, which on this amp include MIDI.

Wrapped up in a tough ply shell with a fetching blue control panel, with blue LEDs lighting up the valves and a cool chrome logo, the Steve Morse 100 looks every inch the super head you want it to be. Can this amp cook up tone that sounds as good as it looks?

Sounds

When switched on it is immediately apparent that, like all Engls, the Morse is practically noise-free – and that's no mean feat in an amp this complicated.

Channel one has that bright glassy clean tone that most modern multi-channel amps have (except here you can also boost it into a fairly mean crunch if you want), while channel two can be wound up to the kind of sustain that many amps would be proud to have on their lead channel. Using the tone switch to scoop out channel two's mids is particularly effective for getting that eighties LA grind, which is still a popular sound for many.

Figuring out the functionality of channel three's four mid-range knobs was made easy thanks to a well-written and informative manual – lo mid one has a woody, vintage Brit-influenced effect while lo mid two offers a smoother more rounded character. Same thing goes for the two hi mid

The Rivals

The **Knucklehead 100 Reverb** (£1,934) is **Rivera's** current flagship and packs stellar tone with the power of a nuclear reactor – three channels of riotous rock from one of the world's top amp designers. The **Hughes & Kettner TriAmp Alex Lifeson Signature** (£2,139) also benefits from a rock star name, not to mention three dual-mode channels with nine 12AX7s! Four EL34s provide the not inconsiderable grunt. **Custom Audio's OD100** (£2,299) is a sonic powerhouse with two channels that epitomise the best in British and American tone.





Steve Morse is known for complicated set-ups so this signature isn't the simplest head

The Engl's solo lead voice is a soaring treble that cuts through practically everything without being harsh

controls, so you can emphasise woody low mids with smooth hi mids or vice versa. And, of course, there are still treble and bass as well as the tone and gain switches.

While it's possible to use the amp without it, the MIDI switching option is definitely the best way to maximise the Morse's potential – you can not only change channels but also toggle effects loops, gain boost, tone shift and master volumes, as well as those switchable mid-range controls, making this an amp that will delight those who enjoy tweaking every possible setting.

The Engl's solo lead voice is characterised by a powerful soaring treble that cuts through practically everything without being harsh or piercing, with powerful bass and massive headroom that creates the impression of virtually limitless power, even at extreme volume. We plugged it into a Vintage 30-loaded 4 x 12 and, with the masters at around halfway, the loudspeakers were already sounding a little stressed, indicating that this is a serious power tool capable of filling football stadium stages with ease. Undeniably it sounds very good indeed, and it is operationally superb with silent switching and mains hum levels pegged so low that the rear panel noise gate is a luxury rather than a necessity.

Verdict

All in all it's another perfectly executed feature-laden head from one of the few designers who can do this kind of amp really well.

But does the Steve Morse Signature 100 excite enough to make us want to part with over two grand? That's a tricky one. The Morse does its job very efficiently and there's absolutely nothing that you could point out as needing improvement. However, compared to the competition (including Engl's own staggering SE model) the lead channel doesn't quite hit the bull's eye.

The multiple mid-range controls on channel three add flexibility

and choice but make it difficult to dial in, which is a problem that many former rack effects users will identify with. When you spend this kind of money you'd expect every control setting to be a gratifying adventure in sonic supremacy, yet despite its perfectly honed EQ curves and practically non-existent mains hum, the Morse's over-specialised lead channel is fiddly to set up and not quite as rewarding to use as you'd expect for an amplifier at this level. You can get great sounds from it – but finding them is tricky and repeating them isn't so easy either. If you just want to plug in and get a great sound then channel two is quicker and easier. Steve Morse fans might see past all that and buy this head just for its association with a truly unique world-class player; others may find it harder to justify the price.

Nevertheless, in every other area this is a brilliantly made and versatile amp that is certainly up to the most demanding of pro applications: if you regularly play huge concert halls and outdoor festivals then this Engl is definitely one to pilot. **G**

The Bottom Line

We like: Huge tonal range and flexibility; world-class build quality; massively loud!

We dislike: Morse's desire for tweakability may lead to confusion for mere mortals

Guitarist says: A potentially great amp that comes close to perfection, but that lead channel is a little too complex for its own good



Engl Steve Morse Signature 100 head

PRICE: £2,199

ORIGIN: Germany

TYPE: All valve, three-channel head with solid-state rectification

OUTPUT: 100 watts RMS

VALVES: 4 x ECC83/12AX7 preamp, 4 x EL34 power amp

DIMENSIONS: 280 (h) x 710 (w) x 290mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 22/49

CABINET: 18mm ply.

CHANNELS: Three.

CONTROLS: Channels 1 and 2: gain, bass, mid, treble, volume. Channel 3: gain, bass, lo mid x 2, hi mid x 2, treble, lo gain volume, hi gain volume, master volume x 2, depth punch, presence

FOOTSWITCH: Engl Z9 controller (not supplied) or any MIDI controller.

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Dual series/parallel effects loops, switchable global gain boost and tone shift switches, noise gate, preamp and line out sockets, MIDI control over all channel and function switching

OPTIONS: Engl Z9 foot controller (£189)

RANGE OPTIONS: None

Synergy Distribution 0121 270 6485

www.engl-amps.com

Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



An impressive array of 23 controls adorn the front of the Engl head