



PEERLESS

Martin Taylor Virtuoso

A signature model from one of the world's greatest players...
David Mead dons a jazz beret and thoughtfully strokes his goatee.

There are two Martin Taylor signature models in the Peerless range, the Virtuoso that you see here and the Maestro which retails at just one penny short of £2000. I have to admit that when I first opened the case on receipt of this guitar I thought that this must be the more expensive model as it positively shrieked quality at me from the outset. Imagine my surprise when I found out that this is in fact the cheaper of the two...

BUILD QUALITY

The full story of how this guitar came about is to be found in our accompanying interview with Martin, but meanwhile let's take a look at the Virtuoso in detail.

To begin with, it's probably not possible to tell from the photographs just how compact this guitar really is. Like Martin's Warden Artistry before it, this is a very trim and slim instrument, measuring in at just 381mm (15in) across the lower bout and a very sweet 70mm (2.75in) deep. This is perfectly in proportion with the short 625mm (24.6in) scale length and 44.68mm (1.76in) nut width and I was immediately taken by how functional, and yet how beautiful, this guitar looks.

The top of this model is laminated spruce - and we have to remember here that a laminated top on an archtop is not as much an issue as it would be on a flat-top acoustic. Indeed, the top of the workhorse Gibson ES-175, the apple of many a jazzier's eye, is laminated, too. Having

said that, the Maestro comes with a carved spruce top and solid back and sides and so even if this were an issue for you, you have been accommodated for elsewhere in the range!

Back and sides are laminated flame maple which is especially effective on the back where it peeks out at you from under the antique sunburst finish.

The tailpiece, bridge and pickguard are dark rosewood, contrasting nicely with the dark

amber of the finish and the aged binding around the edges of the body and soundholes.

The neck is maple with a bound rosewood fingerboard with mother of pearl position markers. Martin told me that he decided to leave the position markers off the neck of the Maestro as experienced players often don't either want or need them. But seeing as the Virtuoso could be perceived as being the student model, he elected to have them included here. This sort of detail really does sum up Peerless' collaboration with Martin; everything present has purpose and has been carefully thought through before being put into practice.

The electronics reflect this same kind of thinking, too. The single pick-up has been mounted on the neck - a standard practice on some jazz guitars as it means not having to cut into the instrument or dampen the top's vibrations by surface mounting. The single rotary thumbwheel volume control is hidden away underneath the pickguard and represents the only control over the electric sound the player has available. Martin explained t h e

lack of a tone control by saying that very few jazz players actually use them and it really is better to control the tonal shape of the guitar using an outboard preamp as many acoustic players do. In fact, he told me, he's even had the volume control removed on his Warden so that the pick-up is effectively

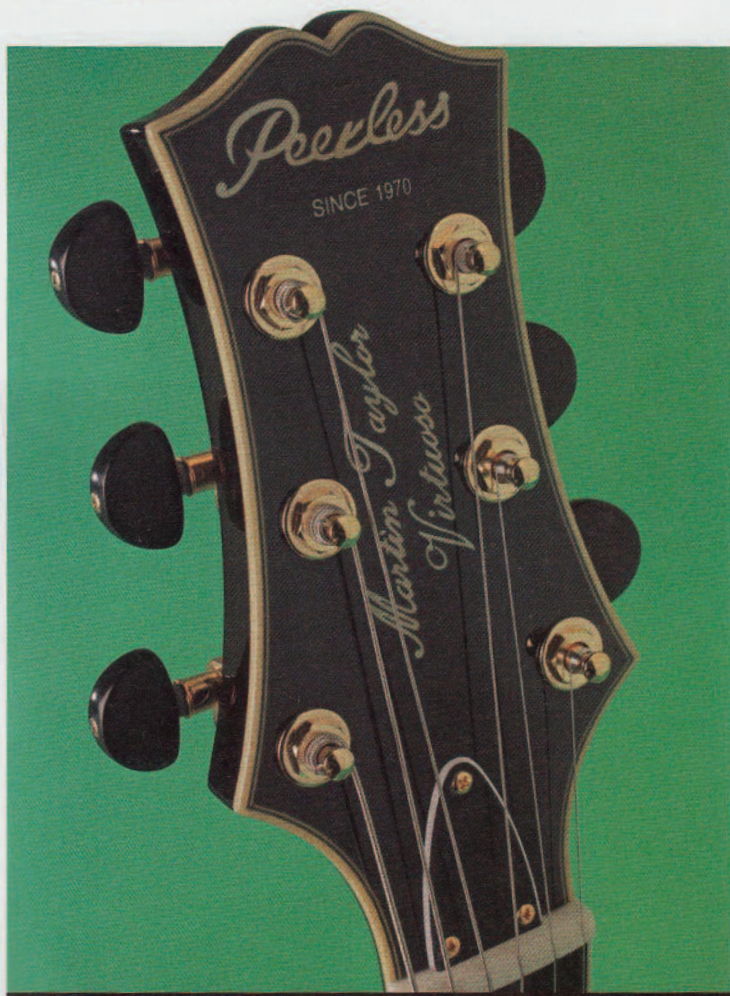


hotwired straight to the output jack, meaning that all tonal control is handed to external devices. Furthermore, this way there's less to go wrong or break when the guitar spends most of its life on the road and at the mercy of airport baggage handlers!

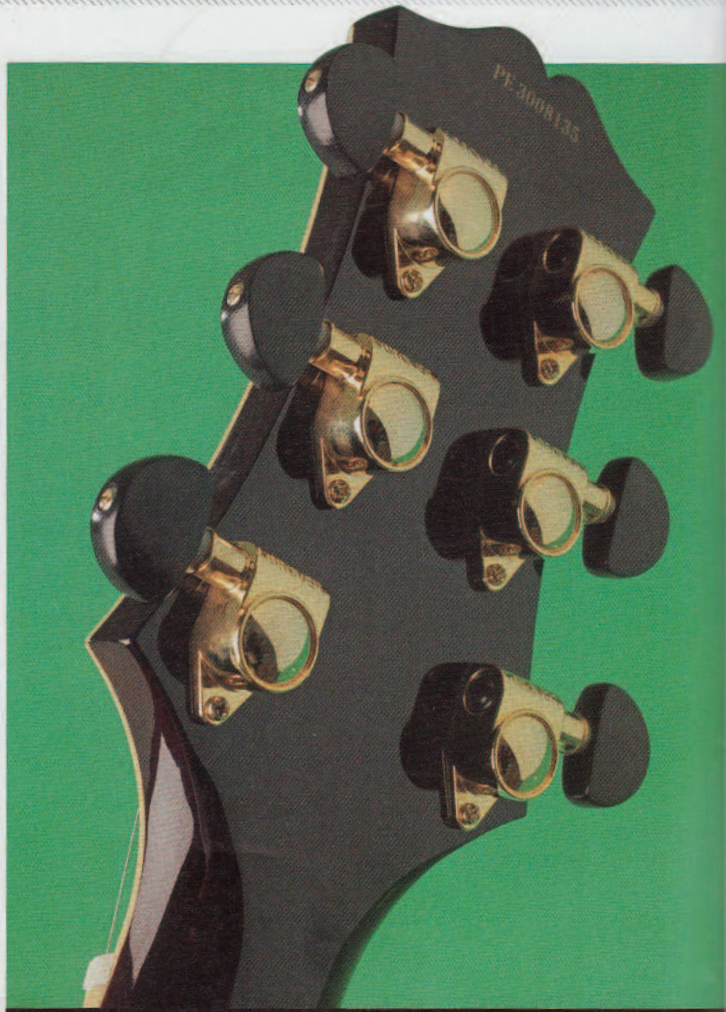


WOODS USED

This Martin Taylor Signature Peerless uses laminated maple for the top, laminated flamed maple for the back and sides, maple neck with a rosewood fingerboard, all made in Korea. If you want to know about the construction methods and Martin's input, check out the interview we have with him in the following pages...



The Martin Taylor Virtuoso is the cheaper one of his signature guitars...



...but this feels like it should be the much more expensive version!

SOUND QUALITY

The Virtuoso has been expertly set up with a medium to low action and its slight body and moderate weight all add up to a really great playing experience. It's quite usual for an archtop at this end of the range to have a fairly nondescript acoustic sound, the mainstay being its electric personality; but

the Virtuoso really does have a lot of character to its unamplified voice. It's no surprise that Martin chooses to mic up his guitar live, as there is plenty of sparkle to be had here.

There's an evenness of tone across the whole range of the fretboard, too; both chords and single notes are clean and crisp and the width makes fingerstyle a comfortable experience, too.

Through an amp, the Virtuoso springs into life with a full and rich sound. Sometimes archtops can get a little muddy with the neck pick-up but that really isn't the case here. The sound is creamy but not cloying, rich but not muted

and once again it was easy to dial up a sound that suited fingerstyle jazz or plectrum work without any undue hassle at all.

CONCLUSION

I have to return to my original statement at the top of this review and say that if I didn't know otherwise, I would swear that the build quality, playability and sound of this guitar all belonged to an instrument in quite a high price range. It has maturity about it, not surprising seeing as it was the brainchild of one of the greatest jazz players of our generation, but I find myself looking at the price tag and shaking my head in disbelief.

I don't hand out five star reviews casually or often, but the Peerless Virtuoso genuinely deserves it!

David Mead

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: A pro instrument at an unbelievable price.

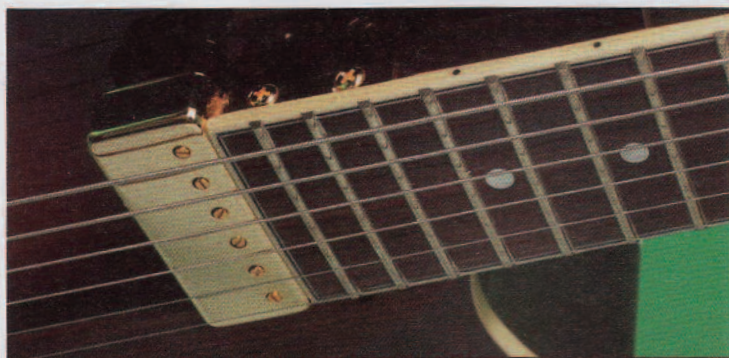
Cons: Virtually impossible to criticise this kind of design and workmanship!

Overall: If you're in the market for an arch-top with oodles of style, class and sonic elegance, look no further.

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality ○○○○○
Sound Quality ○○○○○
Value for Money ○○○○○

5 Stars: Superb, Almost faultless.
4 Stars: Excellent, Hard to beat.
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well.
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor.



Made in Korea and comes with the Peerless pick-up onboard.

PEERLESS Martin Taylor Virtuoso

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Manufacturer: Peerless
Model: Martin Taylor Virtuoso
Retail Price: £1050
Body Size: Archtop
Made In: Korea
Top: Laminated maple
Back and Sides: Laminated flame maple
Neck: Maple
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Frets: 20
Tuners: Grover GH10Z
Nut Width: 44.58mm
Scale Length: 625mm
Onboard Electronics: Peerless pick-up
Strings Fitted: D'Addario YB-J21
Left Handers: No
Gig Bag/Case Included: Deluxe fitted case

CONTACT DETAILS

Web: www.peerlessguitars.com

Martin Taylor

Peerless virtuosity from a fingerstyle maestro...

All of us are probably much the same - we get a new guitar and can't wait to show it to everyone. But you imagine if you've just created a range of guitars that bear your name with a forward-thinking Korean company - the chances are you'd want to tell the world! I caught up with Martin Taylor during a brief lull in his busy touring schedule and asked him to tell the story of his new Peerless Virtuoso and Maestro guitars and here it is in Martin's own words...

I visited a friend called Keith Mackintosh at Rainbow Music in Dundee and I tried a Peerless Monarch guitar. I looked at the price and saw it was £750 and I thought it must be second-hand but Keith said no, that was the price, because they are coming straight to the retailers from Peerless in Korea and it cuts the middle man out. In any case they were having their annual get together and Keith told me that it was their 40th anniversary and asked me if I would like to go along and play something and plug my guitar academy. He also said that Peerless would like to give me a 40th Anniversary Monarch guitar for coming along and I thought that was very nice - certainly not something I was expecting. So I went along and it turned out that I knew a lot of the retailers who were there from over the years and I got talking with Graham from Peerless Europe and he asked me what I thought of the guitars. I told him that I thought Peerless make fantastic guitars and I said that I had some ideas for a signature model.

My other signature guitars, the Vanden Aristry models are probably the best part of £12,000 to buy now because they are all handmade. I'd spoken to Mike Vanden before and said wouldn't it be good to get a really good guitar manufacturer to build production models that would be affordable for more people. Mike was never that keen because he's a real artist and the whole point is that his guitars are hand-built - even the pick-ups. That's his thing and he didn't feel comfortable working with another company, which I fully understood. So he

wasn't keen about going down that route and I told Peerless that the other problem was that in order for them to build the Aristry, they had to tool up the production line which is incredibly time consuming and expensive. So I started to study their guitars and realised that with everything that they have already got and are already geared up to make, I could actually make the type of guitar that I would want. I wanted a 15-inch lower bout like the Aristry and I found that they already had a semi-acoustic electric guitar that had the right shape body except that it was very thin. So I said

"It wasn't just me saying that I thought this would be good or that would be good it was me asking other guitar players what they thought about it and we all came to pretty much the same conclusion."

if we could use that body and shorten it by just an inch or so and make the depth just under three inches then that could work. So they made the first two prototypes, the Maestro and the Virtuoso, and we just had to make a few very minor changes. The neck dimensions we used were the same as the Monarch but for some reason it just didn't feel right on these guitars. So I got together with a few guitar players and got them to play the guitars and asked them what they thought of the neck. Everyone agreed that we should change the width so that it's slightly wider and change the contour, too. This is an important thing because many manufacturers will make guitars and not consult guitar players. So it wasn't just me saying that I thought this or that would be good it was me asking other guitar players what they thought about it and we all came to pretty much the same conclusion.

What you have to remember, of course, is that archtop guitars are basically acoustic guitars and if they're approached from an electric guitar point of view they don't really work and they become more of a hybrid. So we took the contour pretty much from one of the acoustic flat tops in the Peerless range and it felt comfortable. We did another couple of things - the bridge and tailpiece actually come from a bigger guitar and so they looked a little big and clumsy so we got them to refine them slightly. Then we changed the jack so it was an endpin jack, but that was about it.

They sent me another Virtuoso with all these changes and I said, "Yes that's great and it's exactly what we need - so could you make me a Maestro as well with all the changes aboard?" and it took about six weeks for me to get the new version. But during that time I was touring with the Virtuoso and I really liked it. The only difference that I find is that because the Maestro has got a carved spruce top, if you want to dig in with a pick like a straight ahead jazz player then it has more of a fullness and guts to it and can take that kind of playing. For fingerstyle playing both guitars work great and obviously you can still play with a pick on the Virtuoso but for some players who play with a pick they might prefer the Maestro. I know quite a few guitar players who have told me that they have gone out and tried both and some prefer the Maestro, some the Virtuoso and so their decisions weren't made on price; some said that there was just something about the Virtuoso that suited their style better.

The Maestro has a Kent Armstrong pick-up and the Virtuoso has one of Peerless' own pick-ups and to be honest I don't know which one I prefer. They do sound slightly different but I can't say that one sounds better than the other. Maybe the Kent Armstrong pick-up has a slightly fuller and more plummy sound than the one on the Virtuoso; I'm not sure but that could be affected by the top.

image © Allen Clark



Live I treat the Peerless exactly the same as the Vanden.

When Mike and I did the Artistry we had a piezo pick-up in there as well but I got him to take it out because I don't think there's a piezo pick-up been made yet that really works convincingly. I certainly haven't found one. It was OK as long as you only used a tiny amount of it but once you started hearing the piezo it wasn't so good. So I went a different way anyway and I now use one of these little AER Pocket Tools Dual Mix and I plug the guitar direct into channel one and then in channel two I have my microphone, a Milab DC-96B condenser mic, and then I blend the two together. I put the mic on a low boom stand and I place it just slightly below where the bridge and the tailpiece meet. I don't use a lot of microphone, but it does make a difference. It adds a bit of sparkle and a bit of air because when you play direct you get that kind of "direct sound" which can be a bit flat. Sometimes I'll add a valve in there as well. There's this guy in Scotland called Dennis Marshall who makes some very high-end devices and he's built me a valve preamp which is quite small, but it warms up the sound, too. There's also another one that I use from T-Rex which is a valve reverb unit and I use that more for the valve than the actual reverb.

Both guitars sound great acoustically; I think it's long been proved that a small body guitar doesn't necessarily mean a smaller or quieter sound. If you played it alongside a Gibson Super 400 you'd probably find that the Super 400 had a bigger, louder sound, but that's an enormous guitar! We're not looking so much for the volume of the sound, more the quality of the acoustic sound, which is important for me because I use a mic live.