Five Alive

Yamaha APX4A, **Washburn** EA18, **Aria** Sandpiper Std, **Ovation** CC047S & **Takamine** EG541C



GOT THREE OR FOUR HUNDRED quid to blow? Fancy a cutaway electro that isn't a dreadnought? Try these five fellas for size – four newcomers and an established fave. Review by Jerry Uwins

YAMAHA	RRP: £429
WASHBURN	RRP: £425
ARIA	RRP: £379
OVATION	RRP: £399
TAKAMINE	RRP: £299



YAMAHA APX4A

The original APX4 appeared seven or so years ago, the cheapest in a range of medium-bodied electros that have enjoyed considerable, and consistent, success ever since their launch in 1986. In the mid-'90s the instrument gained its 'A' suffix – denoting, if I recall correctly, a change from resin-coated agathis back and sides to conventional laminated nato, and an upgrading of preamp from the old push-to-lock three-knob unit to the present-day slider affair with parametric midrange. In other respects, the guitar has remained pretty much unchanged.

The compact, folk-derived styling measures 384mm (just over 15") wide, with the maximum rim depth a fairly shallow 85mm and a quite flat Venetianesque cutaway. Sitting atop the brown-stained, satin-finish nato back and sides is a laminated spruce top, nicely gloss lacquered in a bursted, darkish ruby red that Yamaha call violin sunburst. Cosmetics on the front comprise six-ply cream/black binding and an Ovation-style, raised decorative rosette for the oval soundhole. The bridge, listed as rosewood, is given a semi-gloss ebonising. Save for a little excess glue here and there along the kerfed linings, everything is tidily crafted, and full marks for one very practical addition: a second strap button underneath the heel. Among our test instruments, only this APX



A forward-sited proprietary preamp powers the APX


The APX's brown-stained nato back and white binding

and the Ovation are thus equipped.

The three-band preamp, handily sited forward of the waist with a separate battery holder round by the shoulder, provides a midrange sweep between 600Hz and 3kHz, and also has a system mute button and battery status LED. Rotaries are used for volume and mid-sweep, with the usual notched sliders for the EQ bands. All the controls feel nicely damped without being too stiff.

The APX's neck, three-piece nato including a scarf joint under the black-faced peghead, is finished to the same satin brown as the back and sides and carries a 650mm-scale rosewood fingerboard bound in black and fitted with 22 well dressed medium-oval frets. The neck's evenly rounded profile is sensibly poised between the interests of both acoustic and electric players, with sufficient width, string airiness and low-position grip to keep the former happy, and a modest graduation in depth that helps retain a reasonably electric-like feel at higher positions. General action slickness could be improved by lowering the action at the saddle, but it has perhaps been left on the high side because of a slight twist on our sample's neck, where there is more relief on the bass side than the treble. It's not enough to be worried about, though.

FACTFILE

YAMAHA APX4A
RRP: £429

Medium-bodied cutaway electro-acoustic. Made in Taiwan. Spruce top, nato back and sides. Nato neck with bound 22-fret rosewood fingerboard. Rosewood bridge, chrome die-cast tuners. Under-bridge piezo pickup, preamp with volume, three-band EQ, sweepable midrange, battery status and system mute. Twin strap buttons.

Options: APX4A Special (459) with figured sycamore top, and APX4-12A 12-string (449).

Left-hander: Available on the APX6LA at 679.

Finish: Violin sunburst – gloss top, satin back/sides and neck. (Natural, black and translucent blue burst also available.)

Contact: Yamaha-Kemble, Sherbourne Drive, Tilbrook, Milton Keynes MK7 8BL. 01908-366700.

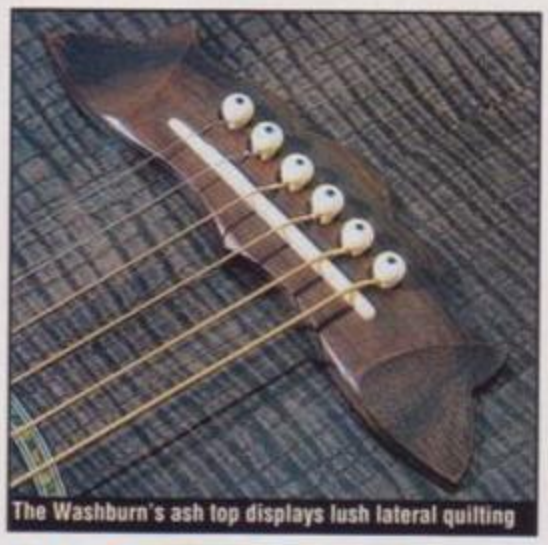
Dimensions
(In mm unless stated)

Scale length	648 (25.51")
Width of neck	
...at nut	43
...at 12th fret	53.5
Depth of neck	
...at 1st fret	19
...at 10th fret	21.5
String spacing	
...at nut	34.5
...at bridge	55.5
Action as supplied	
...at 12th fret treb	1.8
...at 12th fret bass	2.0
F'board radius (approx)	35 (14")
Max rim depth	86
Max body width	390
Approx weight (kg/lbs)	2.4/5.25

SOUNDS

Electros of this size can sometimes sound wiry and thin when played acoustically but the APX has a pleasantly musical timbre and enough volume to hold its own against some non-powered folk designs. There's a nice, warm chiffiness in the otherwise quite bright treble response, and a commendable degree of balancing depth at the other end of the spectrum.

Plugged in, the preamp offers plenty of gain – which it delivers in a smoothly ascending way – and the quantity of sound on tap doesn't overshadow the instrument's intrinsic musicality. As is usually the case with a parametric midrange, a little cut around or below 1kHz is beneficial for tonal transparency, and the system handles this with ease. The only aspect calling for some temperance is the treble, which will sound insistent rather than just more sparkling if pushed – in fact I preferred applying some cut below the half-way mark.


The Washburn's ash top displays lush lateral quilting


Washburn's own 3-band Equis preamp drives the EA18

WASHBURN EA18

In contrast to the rest of Washburn's Festival Series electros – larger instruments with Florentine cutaways – this new EA18 aims itself at Yamaha's medium-bodied territory, looking very much like an APX, complete with cutaway and oval soundhole.

Inspect the instrument in detail, though, and constructional difference emerge. The rims are a couple of mill deeper and the body a little wider, but the most obvious variation is that the top and back are both arched, the latter quite noticeably so. The front remains braced with a conventional X pattern, but the back, because of the added rigidity endowed by the arching, is able to do without any strutting.

When the first EA18s were shipped, the laminated body wood was ash, recognisable for its prominent, often widely spaced, linear graining. Our sample's still ash, but upgraded to a highly figured variety which adds a close lateral quilting – particularly lush on the top – that's strongly reminiscent of maple. It's an handsome visual mixture which sits very tastefully with our instrument's high-gloss translucent black finish, and the factory has bothered to use a quilted veneer for the back's inside laminate.

Defining this figured finery is simple cream edging around the back, while the top's multi-ply purfling is inlaid with an abalone-like decoration which is also used within the soundhole ring. The rosewood bridge is Washburn's attractive butterfly design, and cosmetics are well spec'd-up elsewhere, including cross/diamond fingerboard inlays, cream board binding that continues around the headstock, and the peghead itself faced with a quilted wood and carrying a pearl-inlaid logo and motif.

An Equis Standard preamp provides its three main bands of EQ on sliders, plus a supplementary presence control on a rotary. The aft-of-waist positioning is necessary because of the shaping of the panel surround, and one neat feature is that the control unit is a slot-in module that can be popped out by releasing two spring clips when a change of battery is required. As on other Festival Series, Washburn provide an XLR output in addition to the jack socket, so the signal can be routed

FACTFILE

WASHBURN EA18
RRP: £425

Cutaway, medium-bodied Korean electro-acoustic.Quilted ash top, figured ash back and sides. Mahogany neck with bound 22-fret rosewood fingerboard. Rosewood bridge, chrome Grovers. Under-bridge piezo pickup, Equis Standard preamp with volume, three-band EQ, presence and battery status. Options: Deep-bodied, Florentine-cutaway EA10 (£399) – also with Equis Standard preamp.

Left-hander: No.

Finish: Translucent black. (Cherry sunburst, tobacco sunburst, translucent red, blue and antique natural also available.)

Contact: Washburn UK, 15 Amor Way, Letchworth, Herts SG6 1UG ☎ 01462-482466.

Dimensions
(In mm unless stated)

Scale length	648 (25.51")
Width of neck	
...at nut	43
...at 12th fret	53.5
Depth of neck	
...at 1st fret	19
...at 10th fret	21.5
String spacing	
...at nut	34.5
...at bridge	55.5
Action as supplied	
...at 12th fret treb	1.8
...at 12th fret bass	2.0
F'board radius (approx)	35 (14")
Max rim depth	86
Max body width	390
Approx weight (kg/lbs)	2.4/5.25



Aria opts for the straightforward Fishman System 1

either to backline or mixing desk, or simultaneously to both.

In depth, the EA18's gloss-lacquered, body-matching neck is the shallowest on test, starting off at just 19mm and only a couple of mill deeper come the heel turn. It's very electric-friendly – something enhanced by a nice action – though some acousticists will find the grip a little insubstantial, particularly around the lower positions. Width is average – not that dissimilar to the Yamaha's – though by way of comparison, the Washburn has a tighter string spacing across the nut, yet is airier down by the bridge. The fretting, also 22 frets-worth, is of a medium-thin variety, generally well fitted though our sample had a high 11th causing some 1st-string choking, and the fret ends could do with more smoothing off.

SOUNDS

The Washburn's acoustic delivery is a shade more muted than the Yamaha's, not because there's less volume, but because of a gentler midrange response which gives the impression of a slightly less forward sound – though, paradoxically, there's a hint of hardness in the sustain that's not evident on the Yamaha. For all that, though, the EA has an unpowered smoothness that earns equal marks.

The Equis preamp has quite different characteristics to the APX system. There's less volume on tap, though it's adequate, and where the Yamaha can easily sound too toppy, the Washburn needs a fair wodge of both treble and presence to sparkle. This isn't to say that the EA18 has an undynamic sound – in fact its slightly creamier electric tone is very likeable in its own way – it's just that the EQ as a whole is far less extreme at its maximum or minimum settings. Some players will prefer that, others won't. What no one will like is our sample's noticeable low-gain imbalance on the top string, though that's presumably a piezo set-up glitch which can be remedied.

ARIA SANDPIPER STANDARD

Aria have had Sandpipers in their catalogue since 1994, but this brand new Standard is the cheapest in a revamped and expanded range. Like its stablemates, the instrument is cutaway jumbo in plan view, with a 16"-wide body, but on this model the rims are semi-thinline with a maximum depth of 84mm. The deepest point occurs at the waist because the back is arched (or domed, to be more precise). Down by the baseblock the measurement is under 80mm, and up by the shoulder an even more modest 65mm.

The body employs a solid cedar top – a light-hued, wide-grained example with some nice medullary cross-flecking – and sides and a bookmatched, black-



FACTFILE

ARIA SP STANDARD
RRP: £379

Cutaway jumbo-esque, semi-thinline electro-acoustic. Made in China. Solid cedar top, mahogany back and sides. Mahogany neck with 21-fret bound rosewood fingerboard. Rosewood bridge, chrome die-cast tuners with pearloid buttons. Under-bridge piezo pickup, Fishman System 1 preamp with volume, treble and bass.

Options: SP Std-12 12-string – £419. Aria also do the APX-style, Fishman-equipped FET Deluxe at £299.

Left-hander: Yes – £417.

Finish: Gloss natural (also see-thru blue, red and brown sunburst).

Contact: Aria UK, Unit 12, Heston Industrial Mall, Church Road, Heston, Middx TW5 0LD ☎ 0181-572-0033.

Dimensions
(in mm unless stated)

Scale length	650 (25.59")
Width of neck	
...at nut	43.5
...at 12th fret	52.5
Depth of neck...	
at 1st fret	19.5
...at 10th fret	23.5
String spacing	
...at nut	35.5
...at bridge	53.5
Action as supplied	
...at 12th fret treb	1.7
...at 12th fret bass	2.0
F'board radius (approx)	43 (17")
Max rim depth	84
Max body width	407
Approx weight (kg/lbs)	1.9/4.1



Model behaviour: Aria emphasises 'Sandpiper' logo

bound back of laminated mahogany. The top is purfled in a liquorice-allsort multi-ply, a broader, more elaborate version of which is used for the soundhole rosette. The whole instrument is very nicely gloss lacquered and the standard of external cosmetics is excellent, not least the elaborate pearl motifs on the rosewood-faced headstock and the 9th-fret Aria logo (though it's a pity the dot markers aren't lighter in colour for a better visual contrast). The tuners' pearloid buttons are another sympathetic touch.

Not so worthy of an accolade is the untidy internal workmanship. The kerfed linings are unevenly cut, there's excess glue dotted about, and the preamp hole the looks decidedly raggedy-edged. While squinting inside, you'll notice that unlike Washburn's EA18 the Sandpiper plays it safe and has a conventionally strutted back.

The preamp is Fishman's simplest US-made unit, the System 1, which couldn't be more straightforward with just sliders for volume and centre-notched treble and bass. Of necessity it's mounted aft of the waist, since the edges of a hole cut nearer the shoulder would likely run too close to the internal linings because of the rim's tapering depth. One minor pain is that, because the the battery is held on the rear of the preamp, the strings will need loosening off when a change is required.

The Aria's neck is three-piece mahogany, stained to the same shade as the body and carrying a 650mm-scale, black-bound rosewood fingerboard – naturally dark, not ebonised. Depth graduates from shallow to medium, and the evenly rounded 'C' section offers a slinky grip, enhanced by very smoothly dressed medium-oval fretting. From an average nut width, the board widens fairly gently (which I like for higher-position playing) while string spacing at the bridge, at 53.5mm, is a tad under the norm but doesn't feel cramped.

SOUNDS

Despite its relatively skinny sides, this guitar has an amazingly strong, resonant acoustic delivery – a little less low-end warmth and punch, perhaps, than a dreadnought, but not actually that far short. Such fulsomeness may partly be due to the domed back, which theoretically should help focus and throw the sound forward, and of course the guitar's not lacking in girth, either. Also impressive is the SP's precise articulation and sustaining clarity, giving it a tonal maturity comfortably beyond its price tag.

It's a rewarding electro, too, with a rich, piano-like quality and a sufficiently well-balanced and transparent tone not to lament the absence of a midrange control. The existing EQ needs very little tinkering for a good sound, though there's plenty of well-tempered scope in both bands if you need it. One small quirk is that the preamp delivers most of its gain towards maximum, though that's hardly a

Holiday Music
25th ANNIVERSARY 1974 1999
Holiday Music
THE SPECIALIST GUITAR SHOP
TEL: 0181 558 2666 / 3773 FAX: 0181 556 3000
FREEPHONE MAIL ORDER: 0800 328 7629
0% FINANCE OVER 4 MONTHLY PAYMENTS
INSTANT NO DEPOSIT CREDIT UP TO 36 MONTHS
CREDIT CARDS ACCEPTED
579 HIGH ROAD, LEYTONSTONE, LONDON E11 4PB

Godin

LGX III, (2 voice) 3 x Duncan duckbuckers & baggs acoustic/transducer, trem bridge, custom pre amp, black
LGX (2 voice). Stunning figured (quilt) maple top, 2 x custom humbuckers & baggs saddle transducer, trans green
LGX SA. Flagship of the range, as LGX 2 voice plus synth access, trans red flametop. Left hand LGX SA in stock now.
A6 Acoustic, solid body style with sound chambers acoustic/electric
ACS-2 voice. Nylon strung, solid chambered body, electro acoustic with synth access



Taylor



Taylor guitars and Holiday share there 25th anniversary this year. Both companys have been dedicated to serving the needs of guitar players from day one. This special year is the perfect time to offer Taylor Guitars to our customers and we feel they represent the finest hand made American instruments available today. Call now for a very special anniversary deal. In stock

Model 312CE Grand Concert, Cutaway/Electro
Model 310 Dreadnought
Model 314CE Grand Auditorium Cutaway/Electro
Model 310CE Dreadnought Cutaway/Electro
Model 412 Grand Concert
Model 415 Jumbo
Model 512 Grand Concert (Left Hand)
Model 712 Grand Concert (Left Hand)
Model Baby Dreadnought
Model K22 Grand Concert, KOA (Left Hand)

AER

AER ACOUSTIC AMPLIFICATION

Simply the finest acoustic amplification we have heard in stock now.
Compact 60, twin channel (instrument mic), 8" twin cone speaker, 2 x digital effects, mic stand mounting.
NEW Domino combo, 100watt, 2x8" speakers, 4 x channel, digital effects, AG/60A multi application, monitor style, mic/instrument/aux channels, 60 watt, twin cone speaker, mic stand mountable



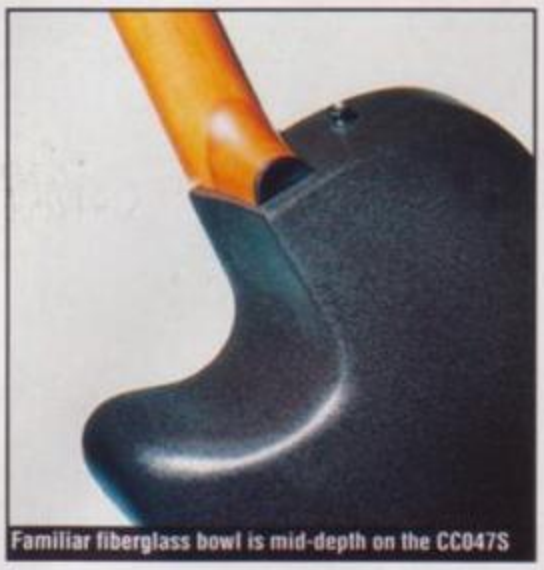
ALSO...

We are main dealers for:
Ibanez, Fender, Gibson, Epiphone, Yamaha, Ovation, Takamine, Martin, K.Yiari, Gordon Smith, Vicente Sanchis, Aria, Washburn, Laney, Marshall, Peavey, Line 6 Flextone, Boss, Zoom, Digitech, Sansamp, Korg, Danelectro, PRS.

PLUS we have a large selection of spares, accessories, reference books and tuition videos and used guitars and amps.

We also have a very well stocked left-handed room and Guitar and Amp repair workshops on site.

FREEPHONE MAIL ORDER LINE 0800 3287629


Familiar fiberglass bowl is mid-depth on the CC047S


Ovation's 'lowlier' but functional DJ-4 preamp

problem. Our sample's bottom two strings were also a tad strong on output but, as on the Washburn, that's probably a pickup imbalance and it wasn't much out of kilter anyway.

OVATION CC047S CELEBRITY STANDARD

The latest round of introductions from Ovation's Celebrity Standard camp serves to reduce prices against former equivalent models. This new solid spruce-top, mid-depth-bowl CC047S has a broadly similar spec to the previous, also solid-fronted, CS148 yet the asking price is over £100 less.

How do they do that? Well, aside from any margin massaging that might have taken place, the only obvious difference is the preamp. The CS148 carried Ovation's pukka if fiddly OP-24Plus unit (the one with EQ pre-shape, bypass and mid-shift); the CC047S is fitted with the lowlier DJ-4, the model that features on the company's budget Applause range. With a separate battery holder, this provides a conventional array of three-band EQ, volume and a battery-test button, though as we shall see, a simpler, cheaper spec needn't mean inferior sound quality.

Accoutrements elsewhere are familiar Celebrity fare. The multi-ply-bound top is braced with an A pattern and carries a decorative plastic soundhole ring and rear-strung walnut bridge; the 135mm-deep fibreglass bowl has the ubiquitous anti-slip patch on the lower waist and, like Yamaha's APX, provides the distinct benefit of two strap buttons, a feature of all Ovations. Also like the APX, our sample's top is smartly gloss lacquered with a ruby red burst finish, a more accurate description than Yamaha's slightly odd violin sunburst designation.

The CC's neck – three-piece, satin-finish nato rather than the lengthwise laminated affairs that grace more expensive Ovations – carries a cream-bound 641mm-scale, mid-hued rosewood fingerboard which though only blessed with 20 medium-thin frets has excellent up-top access thanks to the cutaway extending beyond the last fret.



FACTFILE

OVATION CC047S CELEBRITY STANDARD
RRP: £399

Mid-depth bowlback cutaway electro-acoustic. Made in Korea. Solid spruce top, fibreglass bowlback. Nato neck with bound 20-fret rosewood fingerboard. Walnut bridge, chrome die-cast tuners. Under-bridge piezo pickup, DJ-4 preamp with volume, three-band EQ and battery status check. Twin strap buttons.
Options: Laminated-top mid-depth CC047 (£349) and shallow-bowl CC057 (£349).
Left-hander: No.
Finish: Gloss ruby red burst top, satin neck (honeyburst also available).
Contact: JHS, Salem House, Parkinson Approach, Garforth, Leeds LS25 2HR ☎ 0113-286-5381.

Dimensions
(In mm unless stated)

Scale length	641 (25.24")
Width of neck	
...at nut	42.5
...at 12th fret	52
Depth of neck	
...at 1st fret	22.5
...at 10th fret	25
String spacing	
...at nut	34
...at bridge	56
Action as supplied	
...at 12th fret treb	1.3
...at 12th fret bass	1.9
F'board radius (approx)	254 (10")
Max bowl depth	135
Max body width	400
Approx weight (kg/lbs)	2.4/5.3


Takamine's versatile preamp: hot stuff for the money

The only mark-down on the instrument's generally smart cosmetic turnout is some rather obvious filler around the diamond position markers, though the dots elsewhere are precisely inlaid.

The neck profile brings no surprises. In typical Ovation fashion it's relatively slender in width, with a moderate-to-deepish, evenly V'd section and a fairly tight fingerboard camber. A string spacing of 34mm across the nut isn't generous but things widen out to a more spacious 56mm come the bridge. Depending on your point of view, our sample's set-up is either deeply fab or distinctly over-ambitious. Basically Mr Fretless Wonder of the JHS guitar-tech team has been at work here, achieving a board-hugging slinkiness that wouldn't disgrace a solidbody speed machine but a set-up that, for an acoustic instrument, is risky. Already there's a hint of choking on high-position runs and bends and even subtle movements in the neck or table induced by temperature or humidity changes could make things a whole lot worse. More leeway please, Mr Wonder!

SOUNDS

For all that the set-up pushes the envelope of acoustic feasibility, the CC047S is a generally well behaved player, with a very pleasant sound – both powered and unplugged – that in subtle ways is less Ovation-like than I'd expected. Acoustically, there's a hint of metallic-edged chiff in the treble, but it's far from clangy, and the whole sound is suffused with a friendly compression-like warmth that makes for a fluid, easy-breathing delivery. Unpowered volume is pretty much on a par with the Aria, though somewhat surprisingly the tonal nuances are softer.

Amplified, the instrument retains this underlying blend of sparkly-edged warmth. The DJ-4, despite its budget connotations, does an excellent job. The amount of gain on tap is reasonably punchy and evenly sloped, and the EQ, rather like the Washburn's Equis, is relatively gentle between its extremes of cut and boost so you can make fairly wide-ranging slider adjustments without fear of overdoing things. The preamp may not have the ancillary features of the OP-24Plus but in everyday practical circumstances it's none the worse for that.

TAKAMINE EG541C

Takamine's cheapest stylish NEX-bodied cutaway mini-jumbo electros have been getting ever-cheaper. The trend continues with this EG541C, one of a handful of new instruments made, for the first time for this company, in Korea.

Understandably for an electro under £300, the body construction is all-laminated, with a spruce top and nato back and sides, the latter being 110mm at their deepest point, the same as other



FACTFILE

TAKAMINE EG541C
RRP: £299

Cutaway mini-jumbo electro-acoustic. Made in Korea. Laminated spruce top, nato back and sides. Nato neck with bound 21-fret rosewood fingerboard. Rosewood bridge, chrome die-cast tuners. Under-bridge piezo pickup, TK-4 preamp with volume, three-band EQ, mid-shift, EQ bypass, notch filter and low-battery status LED.

Options: EG540C in natural gloss finish (£299). Takamine's cheapest Taiwanese-made cutaway mini-jumbo is the solid cedar-top EGS430SC at £499.

Left-hander: No.

Finish: Gloss black.

Contact: Korg UK, 9 Newmarket Court, Kingston, Milton Keynes MK10 0AU. ☎ 01908-857100.

Dimensions
(In mm unless stated)

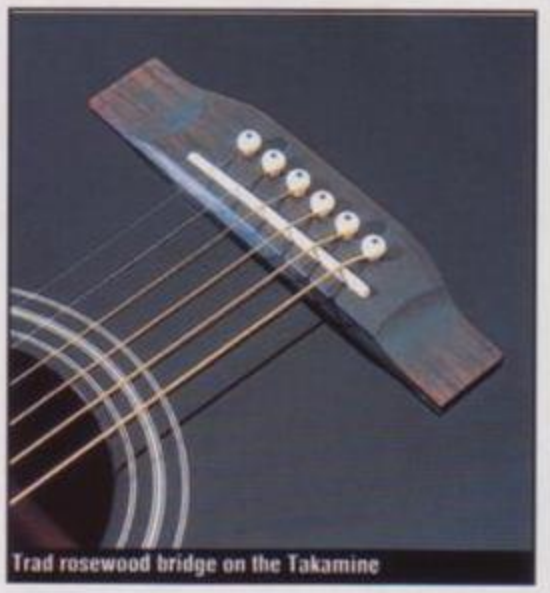
Scale length	38 (25.12")
Width of neck	
...at nut	42.5
...at 12th fret	53
Depth of neck	
...at 1st fret	20
...at 9th fret	23
String spacing	
...at nut	34.5
...at bridge	53.5
Action as supplied	
...at 12th fret treb	1.3
...at 12th fret bass	2.1
F'board radius (approx)	381 (15")
Max rim depth	110
Max body width	399
Approx weight (kg/lbs)	2.1/4.7

CHECK OUT...

Seeking dosh-friendly cutaway electros of medium-ish dimensions? Locate then inspect the following...

New **CRAFTER** Professionals include the grand auditorium GAE-21 (£349), a similar-size GAE-33 (£439) and the smaller SE-33 (£439),the last two with abalone inlays and EMF New Frontier preamp; all carry Engelmann solid spruce tops, **contact** Hohner UK ☎ 01222-887333. **DEAN** have the mini-jumbo Performer Series which includes the quilted maple-backed PQSE (£379) and rosewood PDSE (£410). Both these solid-toppers sport five-band Shadow preamps, **contact** Bill Lewington ☎ 01268-413366. **FENDER** offer the Fishman-powered, mini-jumbo JG26SCE (£498) with solid cedar top and mahogany back/sides, **contact** Arbiter ☎ 0181-202-1199. **TANGLEWOOD**'s new Auditorium Series includes the solid cedar/mahogany TW45 (£399) and the glossy, quilted maple-top TW47 (£449). Both have Fishman Prefix systems, **contact** EMC ☎ 01959-571600. **VINTAGE**'s contender is the folk-size, semi-thinline, solid spruce/rosewood V588CEQ (£329) with abalone inlays and four-band preamp, **contact** JHS ☎ 0113-286-5381. **WESTONE** present a not dissimilar spec on their WSS588 at £349, **contact** FCN ☎ 01732-366421.


Takamine's NEX-style body sports all-over black finish


Trad rosewood bridge on the Takamine

NEXs. Finish is a handsome all-over gloss black, nicely contrasted by the top's five-ply cream/black binding and the soundhole rosette's triple multi-ply rings. Internal detailing is commendably neat and tidy, with a style of kerfed linings closely resembling the Washburn's. Maybe they're made in the same factory...

The EG541C features a new preamp, the TK-4. For what must be a relatively low-cost unit, the facilities are versatile. In addition to a three-band EQ there's a switchable notch filter operating a preset amount of cut (probably about 10dB) between 40Hz and 400Hz, an EQ bypass, a low-battery check light, and a mid-shift button that selects either 400Hz or 800Hz as the frequency at which the midrange slider operates. The fairly large panel means that the controls are well spaced and easy to handle and, in a similar manner to the Washburn's Equis, the whole module unclips for a quick battery change.

The EG's neck, which underneath its black lacquering is fashioned from nato, is topped by a 21-fret bound rosewood fingerboard with well-buffed medium-sized fretting and offering, like the Ovation, good access to the dusty end because of the adjacency of the cutaway. Scale lengths differ on NEX models – this one's a medium 638mm, just over 25". Neck feel is not untypically Takamine-like, which means a relatively moderate width, ditto the depth of the smoothly rounded C-shaped section and a slightly tighter than mainstream string spacing. It comes across as a comfortable, general-purpose compromise.

SOUNDS

Frankly the EG541C's acoustic capabilities fall short of those of our other test instruments, even making allowances for its humbler price. You'd expect a soundbox of this size to pack a respectable punch yet the delivery is on the thin side, noticeably lacking in low-end depth and with a treble response that is, well, a shade tinny. In short it's a rather unsophisticated sound, possessing little of the sweetness I usually associate with this Takamine design.

Fortunately, the instrument redeems itself to a considerable degree when fired up. The 'missing' bass is replaced without even having to boost the relevant EQ slider beyond its mid-way setting, and though the high end can still be a little scratchy at times, the whole sound assumes a much, much better tonal balance and maturity. Pretty good, in fact. All the auxiliary controls work as they should – the mid-shift is especially useful for setting up alternative characters of mid-scooping – and the preamp pushes out plenty of gain. TK-4 saves the day, then.

VERDICT

You don't have to spend an arm and a leg these days to buy a decent, performance-capable cutaway electro. There's a lot of choice out there – not just of visual style, aesthetics and handling, but of sounds too.

So, priorities. If you need an electro as much for unplugged as powered work, the Takamine trails behind: its thin acoustic sound doesn't cut it, even at this review-beating price. The smaller Yamaha and Washburn perform well in this regard, both having an even-handed, reasonably strong tonal character for their size. Detractors of the 'Ovation sound' should have a re-think: the Celebrity underpins its trademark brightness with an acoustic warmth and fluidity that's as appealing as it is mildly surprising. By a short head, though, my acoustic laurels go to the semi-thinline Aria for its mature and eager sound, a traditional timbre very much in keeping with its natural look.

Battle lines are much more closely drawn when considering these guitars purely as electros. Aria's Sandpiper earns high marks by mirroring its acoustic sound most accurately of all; the Ovation puts in another sympathetic performance, and Takamine's EG541C makes up a lot of lost ground thanks to a well-equipped and tonally balanced preamp system. The Washburn EA18 is a capable performer with a tonal lushness that matches its luxy-plush looks, while Yamaha's APX4A is the belter of the bunch with bags of gain-laden punch, albeit a treble-happiness that can be tiring unless EQ'd under control.

As for styling, well... that's subjective. The smaller Yamaha and Washburn will instinctively appeal to electric-minded players, particularly the EA18 for its skinny-depth neck, but all our test instruments offer good comfort and each is smartly turned out in its own fashion. Go exercise your preference. G