

MARTIN GPCPA3 & GCPA MAHOGANY \$2,100 & \$2,729
ELECTRO-ACOUSTICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS



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The third generation of Martin's Performing Artist Series electros are more affordable versions of the £3K+ first generation guitars, but are they as good? *by Steve Harvey*

Martin has been making guitars now for more than 175 years – well before anyone ever considered plugging one in. Yet the release of new models within the Performing Artist Series of electros gives evidence of its desire to look to the future rather than back at its past.

Launched at Winter NAMM 2010, the GPCPA1 was generally well received. But its price tag of £3,200 made what was a desirable guitar unattainable for the majority of those that would arguably make best use of its F1 Aura 'sound reinforcement' electro system. The GPCPA2 followed shortly after and featured a three-piece rosewood back, but was priced at equally wince-inducing levels. However, by reducing the use of expensive materials and simplifying the design, the third generation of Performing Artist Series guitars prove more affordable. The exception to this being the GPCPA Mahogany, which has been constructed mostly using FSC-certified tonewoods, keeping the price up towards the £3,000 mark.

Both our review models boast clean, crisp visuals with little to

complicate what is a simple, unfussy design. Some would argue that at first glance both guitars, but particularly the GPCPA3, look like Taylors and we'd find it hard to disagree. The guitars measure just less than 16-inches across their lower bout and are a shade under 20-inches tall, putting these models in Grand Auditorium territory – slightly wider and taller than a Martin OM's 15-inch wide, 19.4-inch long body. All Performing Artist Series guitars sport a

new signature pickguard design which, again, looks very 'Taylor' at first glance. We like the shape, and the choice of tortoiseshell suits the guitars.

As is increasingly common with Martin, new materials have been used instead of endangered traditional woods. Black Richlite, a composite also found in worktops, is used for the bridge and fingerboard, while another less new and widely used composite, white Corian, has been used for the nut. Graph Tech's Tusq, the

bone/ivory substitute, is used for the saddle.

While employing the familiar mortise and tenon bolted neck joint, Martin has designed a new neck shape for the Performing Artist Series. Described by its creators as the 'Performing Artist profile' the one piece, satin-finished necks are a shallow 'C', which doesn't thicken until after the 10th fret – it feels mega-comfortable, slick and super-fast. We also find the string spacing to be a great compromise between the needs of flat- and fingerpickers alike. The nut measures 45mm, widening to 54mm at the 12th fret and 57mm at the bridge. We'd suggest that this 'hybrid' string spacing would particularly suit a player who enjoys genre-hopping.

Both guitars feature a Venetian cutaway, which is fractionally deeper than that seen on Martin OM cutaways and thus provides further access to the upper registers.



It might look odd but this is the best location for the second strap pin

The Rivals

GPCPA3

Yamaha's mic-modelling technology is found within the **CPX1200** (£1,219) and features three presets and a five-band anti-feedback reduction. The **Adamas CVT2080** (£2,299) offers the VIP5 onboard blender, providing five images, a three-band EQ and built-in tuner. We were also recently impressed with the **Takamine TF740FS** (£1,679) fitted with the CT-P2.



The integrated battery compartment is found at the base of the guitar with the input jack sitting within it. It's therefore impossible to change the battery while plugged in. Adjacent is the strap button, which has been positioned off-centre, towards the top of the guitar. This cleverly pulls the guitar in towards the body and makes playing while standing more comfortable, with the guitar feeling more stable. As previously mentioned, however, should you be unlucky enough for the battery to go flat on you while the guitar is hanging on its strap mid-gig, then you're going to have problems...

The F1 isn't Fishman's first foray into the world of digital modelling (or 'sound imaging' as it prefers), but it does represent a significant step forward in terms of the functionality available within one unit. In its simplest form, the F1 is a blend system mixing the signal from the undersaddle pickup with one of nine preset images. These images are the result of recording a GPCPA1 with one of nine world-class, high-fidelity microphones as listed in the accompanying box on page 110. The amount of blend is adjustable, as is the ability to alter the EQ for both the pickup and mic image.

The F1 also features a variable-level compressor, a tuner (which works whether the guitar is plugged in or not) and a 'search and destroy' anti-feedback system. The guitar's signal can also be switched between in and out of phase.

In what must be viewed as a considerable achievement for Fishman, the F1 requires just

two rotaries and a simple LED. That's right; the tuner, blend, compressor, automatic anti-feedback and mic modelling are all accessed and adjusted with just two knobs. Granted, the rotaries have three different operations; turn, press and press 'n' hold, but it's an impressively minimalist control panel. By way of comparison Fishman's own Ellipse Aura, as fitted to a Martin OMC28, offers less functionality and sounds but uses three switches, two sliders, one push-button and a rotary!

As you'd expect with so much on offer from so few controls, the F1 takes a lot of getting used to in terms of its menus and adjustment possibilities. In the early stages of the test we became frustrated at how easy it was to turn the wrong knob, or turn the right knob the wrong way, and seemingly wipe out any progress made. On occasion, the feeling is akin to accidentally closing a document before saving the changes. In reality, this wasn't the case, but it's noteworthy that the 'restore factory settings' facility is an uncomplicated procedure and users can bypass the second level menu with a 'tune up, turn up', plug-in-and-go option.

The LED screen measures just 16mm in diameter and in most applications it works well, but we found its position a little awkward when using the tuner. With the guitar in the normal playing position we found it difficult to see all three tuning indicators simultaneously. Remediating this requires dropping the headstock to such a low angle it makes retuning an uncomfortable stretch.

Some will initially struggle with getting the desired settings out of the F1, but for those who persevere the rewards are great

These minor niggles aside, we grew to love the F1. Just as when becoming accustomed to a new mobile phone or other gadget, familiarity and ease of use come with time and practice. In some ways, the F1's design is a brave move by Fishman and, by extension, Martin too. On trial, the initial hours can be confusing, frustrating and complicated. Prospective buyers in guitar shops could easily give up and hand the guitar back. We'd suggest this would be a mistake. Our advice would be to hang in there; the rewards are just around the corner, next to patience and diligence.

The Performing Artist Series guitars come with Martin-branded hard cases, which contain a 20-page user guide and instructional DVD for the F1 Aura. Martin has also launched a brand new website solely for the Performing Artist Series (see spec check) that features instructional videos and guides.

GPCPA3

The GPCPA3 is an all-solid guitar; solid Sitka spruce for the top and East Indian rosewood for the sides and two-piece back. The back and front are bound with white Boltaron, as is the fingerboard. The triple-line black and white coachlining match the simple

The Rivals

GPCPA Mahogany

Taylor is an obvious inclusion here. The **514ce** (£2,599) is a cedar/mahogany Grand Auditorium featuring the Expression System. Perhaps not so obvious is **Patrick James Eggle's Saluda Cutaway** (£2,850), which is a super electro available with Fishman, AER or LR Baggs pickup systems; the choice is yours. The UK-made **Fylde Alchemist** (£2,300) is sublime, complete with its three-piece walnut back and Headway FEQ pickup system.

soundhole rosette. While the GPCPA3 is a modest guitar, aesthetically speaking, it's no plain Jane. The clean lines of this new body shape, along with the new shapes for the bridge and pickguard, make for a guitar that's both eye-catching and appealing in appearance.

A peek at the guitar's innards reveals the hybrid scalloped 'X' bracing. As you'd expect for a £2,100 Martin, everything is super-clean and tidy in here. It almost feels superfluous to say, but Martin's general build quality and finish remains truly top-drawer and it's great to see the company maintain such



Unplugged, the GPCPA3 does nothing less than astound... It offers a plump, rich timbre full of warm overtones

high levels of quality control and craftsmanship.

Sounds

Unplugged, the GPCPA3 does nothing less than astound. We half expected tone to be a casualty of the cost-cutting sacrifices but we couldn't have been more wrong. The GPCPA3 is possibly the most versatile electro this writer has had his mitts on. From softly strummed chords to choppy riff-work, the GPCPA3 offers a plump, rich timbre full of character and warm overtones. Slightly more aggressive playing opens the door to more snap but, try as we may, it was hard to overdrive this guitar. Fingerstyle players will enjoy the clarity offered across the dynamic spectrum. Responsive, balanced, pulsating and with bags of soul, it's hard to justifiably want more from an acoustic. Simply inspiring.

Employing the F1 is equally impressive. As you can imagine, extensive experimentation is required to get the best from the onboard intelligence. Perhaps the most impressive aspect to the F1's capabilities lies in being able to shape the EQ for both the pickup and the

selected image. On offer are a wide range of variations that would suit recording and live settings alike. The compressor works very well and manages to tame even the most 'enthusiastic' player.

Another plus is the ability to 'destroy' any feedback virtually mid-song. Pressing and holding down both buttons engages the automated system and within no more than a couple of seconds feedback is nuked. All in all, the F1's output is clear, versatile and it does an impressive job in capturing the soul of the GPCPA3.

GPCPA Mahogany

The first thing you notice about the GPCPA Mahogany is its cherry-stained back and sides (and headstock). Contrasting with its European spruce top, the coloured mahogany is vibrant and lively without appearing garish.

Many of the same decorative finishes have been used for this sister model, though Martin has chosen gold tuners instead of the chrome used on the GPCPA3. One key difference is the use of FSC-certified timbers for this guitar. The



Fishman F1 Aura Images

Image	Microphone	Type
1	GT Velo 8	Ribbon
2	AKG C414-B	Omni Large Diaphragm Condenser
3	Neumann U87	Large Diaphragm Condenser
4	Neumann KM 84	Small Diaphragm Condenser
5	Soundelux E47	Large Diaphragm Condenser
6	DPA 4011	Small Diaphragm Condenser
7	Shure SM57	Dynamic Cardioid
8	Earthworks QTC 30	Omni Condenser
9	Neumann M147	Large Diaphragm Condenser



The guitars are clean, modern and simple aesthetically, but they're certainly not drab



The GPCPA Mahogany uses FSC certified timbers, but it'll cost you...

bracing, headplate, top, neck, back, sides, neck block and end block are all 'certified' meaning that the woods have been farmed in accordance with the FSC's exacting standards. Recent years have seen Martin looking hard at eco issues and this guitar clearly ticks the green box, though you'll have to pay considerably more for it.

Sounds

Acoustically, the GPCPA Mahogany has a different voice to the GPCPA3 though they're clearly from the same family. The GPCPA offers a dry, woody mid-biased timbre particularly well suited to blues fingerstyle playing. Full, clear and bright upper register notes are underpinned with a snappy 'zing'. Tonal separation is excellent, with solo work benefiting from individual notes being strong and clear. Like its sibling, the GPCPA Mahogany has real character and depth to its tone. The low end of things is perhaps not as defined as the GPCPA3, but the bass certainly couldn't be described as lacking. Overall, the GPCPA Mahogany produces a capable, instantly likeable and usable tone.

Again, calling the F1 into action impresses greatly. The EQ controls do an excellent job in offering a variety of tones and dynamic variations to fit virtually any scenario. The undersaddle pickup performs superbly and we found the most likeable tones when blending more of its output (60-70 per cent). As with our earlier findings, it's hard not to be

impressed with this electro's amplified performance.

Verdict

Martin must be congratulated for two superb guitars. Build quality is high, acoustic tone is compelling (read stunning in the case of the GPCPA3) and the onboard electronics first class. Some will initially struggle with getting the desired settings out of the F1, but for those who persevere the rewards are great. Perhaps what's most impressive about these guitars is that although designed as class-leading electros, they don't forget the need to serve as great acoustics as well. **G**

The Bottom Line

Martin GPCPA3

We like: Stunning acoustic tone; F1's performance
We dislike: The F1's steep learning curve
Guitarist says: For its versatility, playability and performance this is our new favourite electro

Martin GPCPA Mahogany

We like: Eye-catching looks; great all-round tone
We dislike: The F1 learning curve again... and the price
Guitarist says: For those looking for more punch than your average electro, this offers it in abundance, with green credentials to boot

Guitarist
CHOICE



Martin GPCPA3

PRICE: £2,100
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Grand Performance
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: East Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 112mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 399mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm (25.4 inches)
TUNERS: Chrome enclosed
NUT/WIDTH: White Corian/45mm
FINGERBOARD: Black Richlite
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Black Richlite/56mm
ELECTRICS: Gold Plus undersaddle pickup; Fishman F1 Aura blender preamp with two multi-function controls plus display, covering volume, image select (1-9), pickup/image blend, separate image and pickup three-band EQ, phase, anti-feedback, compressor and auto-chromatic tuner. End-block battery housing with separate strap button and jack socket
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.0/4.41
RANGE OPTIONS: OMCPA3 (£2,100) OM version and DCPA3 (£2,100) dreadnought version
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no additional charge.
FINISH: Natural high-gloss top, satin back, sides and neck (as reviewed)
Westside Distribution
0141 248 4812
www.performingartistseries.com

Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Playability ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Martin GPCPA Mahogany

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ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Grand Performance
TOP: Certified European spruce
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MAX RIM DEPTH: 112mm
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NECK: Certified mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm (25.4 inches)
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NUT/WIDTH: White Corian/45mm
FINGERBOARD: Black Richlite
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ELECTRICS: Gold Plus undersaddle pickup; Fishman F1 Aura blender preamp with two multi-function controls plus display, covering volume, image select (1-9), pickup/image blend, separate image and pickup three-band EQ, phase, anti-feedback, compressor and auto-chromatic tuner. End-block battery housing with separate strap button and jack socket
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.9/4.18
OPTIONS: OMCPA3 (£2,100) OM version and DCPA3 (£2,100) dreadnought version
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no additional charge
FINISH: Natural high-gloss top; red-toned back and sides; satin neck (as reviewed)

Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Playability ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★