

MARTIN OM-21 SPECIAL & SANTA CRUZ OMS £2,299 & £2,999
ACOUSTICS



The Martin's response is supple, vibrant and sustainful, allied to a degree of punch and projection that demonstrates just how capable the less than full-bodied OM design can be



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Two prestige makers offering new vintage-influenced Orchestra models, one long-scale, the other short. So which does the business? *by Jim Chapman*

What we want to know

- 1 The OM and 000: hands up who's confused?**
You're forgiven, but it's simple really. The short answer: more or less the same body, but OMs normally have a longer scale length. There are exceptions, of course...
- 2 Can't we buy the same thing for £399 these days?**
Resolutely no. While the Far East is producing some brilliant guitars under £500, we've yet to see any that are this light, this strong and this fabulous sounding.
- 3 How come Martin doesn't sue its 'copyists'?**
Firstly because Martin doesn't own the shape, even though it invented it. Moreover, the Martin company remains philosophical about imitators, simply stating that nobody else builds guitars like it does. It has a point.
- 4 Who are they for?**
These are professional-grade instruments aimed at discerning players and collectors alike, with prices to match.

The Orchestral Model seems never to have been so popular. But it wasn't always thus. Martin, its originator, launched the first OMs in 1929, but discontinued them five years later, due mainly to its concentrating on the fast-selling 000s which by then, and thanks largely to Perry Bechtel, had changed from a 12th- to 14th-fret neck-to-body join. OMs didn't reappear regularly in the catalogue until the late seventies, and then only in very modest numbers. The early 1990s marked the beginning of an upturn in the model's fortunes: today Martin offers no fewer than 35 OM variants, among which is the new OM-21 Special.

Not that Martin has the market to itself. Many of the influential, pro-market acoustic companies build OM-inspired instruments, not least Santa Cruz. This prestigious California brand, headed by Richard Hoover and formed in 1976, introduced its first OM in 1984, based aptly enough on a 1930s Martin OM-28. This body style has been a consistently popular seller, and late last year – due to customer demand and bucking received wisdom that an OM should always have a long scale length – it added our second reviewee, a short-scale OMS version. If you're a stickler for

designations, this should perhaps be called a 000, but Santa Cruz's take on the 000 is a slot-headed 12-frets-to-the-body instrument, a different boiling pot of sea-dwelling creatures.

Martin OM-21 Special

Style 21 – denoting the simplest cosmetic appointments to be applied to a rosewood-backed Martin – dates back to at least the 1870s. The vast majority of Style 21s were smaller-bodied 00s plus, during the 1940s and 1950s, a goodly number of 000s and dreadnoughts. A standard-production OM-21 didn't appear in the catalogue until 1992, although a short-run OM-21 Special had been made the previous year as a 'Guitar Of The Month'. The regular OM-21 has been in production ever since.

Martin's promotional thrust for the present-day OM-21 Special, which is a stock model and not a limited edition, is paying homage to the company's 'Golden Era' styling. It's open to interpretation exactly what span of years this slogan refers to, but treat it as 'vintage' – especially the early decades of the 20th century – and you won't be too far off the mark. One clue here is the guitar's slender, pyramid-ended bridge,

The Rivals

Martin OM-21 Special & Santa Cruz OMS

Based on an early 1930s Martin, the **Collings OM2H** (£2,699) has ivoroid-bound herringbone purfling and nickel Waverly tuners. The neck is full scale with a 43mm nut width. Also with a 649mm scale length but wider 44.5mm neck, the **Larivee OM-09 Rosewood Artist** (£1,750) has maple body bindings, abalone rosette and a sterling silver peghead border. Smaller-bodied but in the 000/OM ballpark, the **Taylor GC8** (£1,999) Grand Concert has a similar nut span, a shorter 632mm scale length, and abalone rosette and slot headstock with open-g geared tuners. All are solid spruce top with rosewood back and sides.

a design which has its origins as early as the 1840s. Other retro pointers are the set of open-backed, nickel Gotoh tuners whose antiqued patina lends an agreeably lived-in look, and the Sitka spruce top's orangey toner staining. This used to be a common finish option on Martins, and clearly it's meant here to evoke a vintage aura. Seen as new it's a tad too perma-tan, though will probably mellow over time to appear not quite so vivid. In fact, it's bordering on gaudy at the moment, which is a shame.

Carrying a traditional small teardrop tortie scratchplate, the gloss body is bound in rosewood with inner maple purfling strips, while the rosette has a herringbone >

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inlay, also used for the back's centre strip. Like the top, the rosewood back and sides are pleasingly straight grained and high quality, and no internal reinforcing strips are deemed necessary on the rims, something the similar-depth Santa Cruz does have.

The standard of finish and detailing is as clean as a whistle. The only thing to detract are the bridge pins. They sit fairly high in their holes, reducing comfort if you're a hand-resting-on-bridge player. This is a Martin trait – something you'll find on many of its instruments, given that they can become more loose over time.

Unlike on some cheaper Martin ranges, which use a mortise-and-tenon bolt-on attachment, the OM-21's one-piece, satin-finish mahogany neck is jointed with a traditional glued dovetail, and in line with the OM formula has a 645mm (25.4-inch) scale length rather than the 000's usual 632mm (24.9-inch). Span across the nut is a fingerstyle-friendly 44.5mm, broadening quite considerably

further up the fingerboard and providing a super-airy 59mm string spacing at the bridge. Smaller-handed players may find the broad high-position span a bit forbidding, but the neck's quite slender depth, gentle 'board camber and very good action set-up keep things comfortably grippable and slick.

At first glance the ebony fingerboard appears to be bound, but in fact it's not, employing what Martin calls 'pocketed frets' whereby the fret tangs and the slots are cut short of the width of the board to give a bound effect: neat. Not quite so neat is a little scratchiness on the fret tops when bending. These are gradually becoming self-polished with playing, but it's something this reviewer has noticed on new Martins, and is an area that merits more attention on an otherwise easy-playing instrument.

Sounds

There are absolutely no gripes here at all. The response is supple, vibrant and sustainful, allied to a

degree of punch and projection showing just how capable the less than full-bodied OM design can be at delivering a generously endowed sound. Tonally, the texture has the expected richness of rosewood, especially in the low end, coupled with a sunnily edged, open-voiced attack across the spectrum providing excellent articulation. This, of course, is important for fingerstyle, but the ensemble sound is well integrated for underpinned chord accompaniment too. And the sustain? Breathtaking: no sooner had editor Mick Taylor demoed the guitar on this month's CD than he was on the phone and bubbling over about it. We often say that despite everybody's best efforts, very few if any of the big M's competitors capture that classic, quintessential Martin timbre, which this guitar has in spades.

Santa Cruz OMS

Where the Martin has its own heritage to draw upon, Santa Cruz's OMS takes a Martin-influenced approach without being tied to any one 'style'. So, yes, we find the same kind of small tortie teardrop pickguard, but the ebony bridge is a subtle variation on Martin's later rear-belly variety, while the rosette's herringbone inlay is accompanied by similar purfling around the ivory-bound body. The ebony fingerboard is bound in ivory too, while on the back, the centre strip is a zipper rather than herringbone pattern.

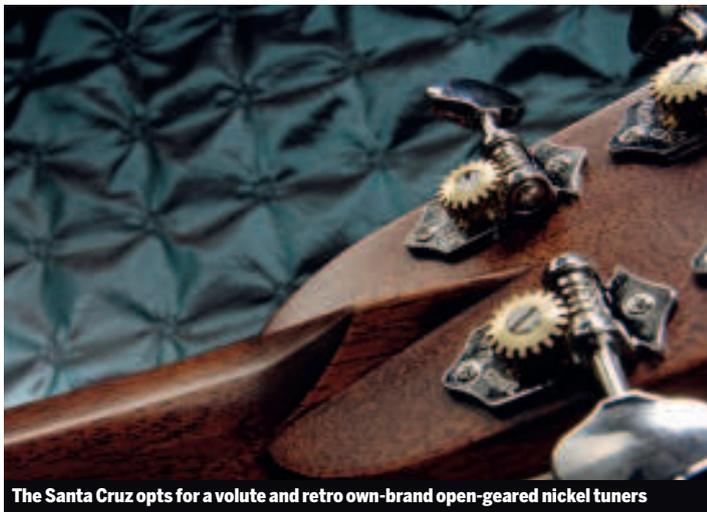
Using a similar combination of Sitka spruce top and rosewood back and sides, the former is a little more widely grained than the Martin's and not so richly cross-silked. It still looks a quality piece of timber, though, even if the graining is slightly wavy and there's

a small area of random patterning behind the bridge on the treble side that isn't matched on the opposing half of the sheet. This often happens when a sheet of spruce is split for a top and it either offends one's sense of symmetry or adds positive, individual character. One thing's for sure, the detailing on the whole instrument has a superbly crisp and elegant precision, perhaps exemplified at its best by the SCGC-logo'd spade headstock with its ivory-bound gloss ebony overlay and the retro set of Waverly-style open-backed tuners. As on the Martin, the body's gloss lacquering – in this case, nitro-cellulose – is immaculately buffed. And if the OM-21 is as clean as a whistle inside, the OMS is as clean as two whistles, with pristinely fashioned kerfing and strutting.

One thing that's quickly noticeable is the OMS's table has more distinct arching behind the bridge area. You might wonder whether this was an undesirable early sign of bellying, but judging from the good action set-up and the healthy amount of break angle over the saddle, it is something that's designed in – indeed this is an aspect of construction that varies from manufacturer to manufacturer when bracing tops.

Rather than exactly ape Martin's shorter 632mm (24.9-inch) 000 scale length, Santa Cruz has gone a small step further and reduced it to a Gibson-like 629mm (24.75-inch). String tension doesn't really feel any bendier with what look like similar-gauge strings, but the whole neck (again dovetail-jointed one-piece satin mahogany, though this time with a volute under the peghead) does feel more compact. This isn't just down to the short scale but also because of the profile. >





The Santa Cruz opts for a volute and retro own-brand open-geared nickel tuners

It's the same span – 44.5mm or thereabouts – across the nut, but it broadens less as you move up the 'board, giving a correspondingly closer string spacing of 55mm at the bridge. This is still airy enough, of course, for easy fingerstyle. The section, too, is a tad deeper come the octave and the fingerboard radiusing is slightly more pronounced, but a more obvious difference in grip comes from the slightly V'd profile as opposed to the Martin's flattish, rounded fashioning. The V'ing, we stress, is only modest, so those who instinctively recoil at the thought of such necks shouldn't be put off.

Sounds

The OMS is a subtly gentler-sounding instrument than the Martin. While it doesn't feel tight and isn't far short on absolute volume, it doesn't pack such an ebullient punch, or have quite the same sense of headroom and dynamics, which is perhaps to be expected of a shorter-scale instrument; there's less of that piano-like quality to projection and string separation. The upside of this, and one aspect that will definitely have a strong appeal, is a noticeably warmer tone – not richer per se, but certainly with mellower, more maturely textured mids and low end which makes for a lovely, rounded strum. Santa Cruz highlight this tonal emphasis on its website and, based on this sample, it's right.

Verdict

The Martin edges it performance-wise as an enthusiastic-sounding, more versatile all-rounder, yet with the caveat that some players may find the neck's overall dimensions a little broad if their technique

doesn't rely totally on fingerstyle. Santa Cruz successfully addresses this via the OMS's short-scale, more compact neck, and though it concedes a few points for its more demure sound, it then nigh-on makes up the difference via its warmer, more lyrical voicing.

Value is ostensibly less taxing. It could be argued if you're spending £2,000-plus anyway, another £700 for the Santa Cruz isn't a fighting point. Yet the difference is still a significant sum of money, and were you to be confronted with a stark choice, it's fair to assume most would opt for the cheaper. But that doesn't take account of those vital criteria of personal preference and suitability for purpose. Those are up to you. **G**

The bottom line

Martin OM-21 Special

We like: Retro vibe; great neck for fingerstyle; exuberant, supple
We dislike: That vintage-toner top looks a bit too Dale Winton. Slightly scratchy fret-tops
Guitarist says: A near flawless example of what a good OM should be: highly resonant with a strong yet balanced tone.

Santa Cruz OMS

We like: Elegant build quality and looks; warmly voiced tones
We dislike: Lacks some of the Martin's sheer vibrancy
Guitarist says: A refined, high quality guitar that'll suit discerning strummers and pickers with a deft touch.



Martin OM-21 Special

PRICE: £2,299 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Orchestra-size acoustic
TOP: Solid spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 102mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 387mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm
TUNERS: Open-geared antique-nickel Gotohs
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/44.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Bound-look ebony with abalone slotted-square markers, 381mm radius
FRETS: 20, thin
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with bone saddle/59mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.14/4.7
OPTIONS: Regular spruce/rosewood OM-21 including standard belly bridge and diecast tuners is £1,649. Also try the spruce/mahogany OM-18V at £1,999
LEFT-HANDERS: To order, no extra cost
FINISH: Gloss body with vintage toner top, satin neck
Westside Distribution
0141 248 4812
www.martinguitar.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Santa Cruz OMS

PRICE: £2,999 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Orchestra-size acoustic
TOP: Solid spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 105mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 387mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm
TUNERS: Santa Cruz-branded nickel open-back
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/44.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Ivoroid-bound ebony, pearl micro-dot markers, 305mm radius
FRETS: 20, thin
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with bone saddle/55mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.86/4.1
OPTIONS: 645mm-scale OM is £2,899. OM and OMS also both offered with mahogany back and sides – same respective prices. Also try the spruce/rosewood OM-PW (Pre-War) in plainer trim at £2,299
LEFT-HANDERS: To order, no extra cost
FINISH: Gloss body, satin neck
Santa Cruz UK
0115 945 9452
www.santacruzguitars.co.uk

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★