



Martin D-15 and 000-15

£1,250 each

These guitars hark back to bygone days, and with them Martin has created instruments that are well priced, but also insanely desirable. Fancy that... *by Neville Marten*

The first all-mahogany guitar was Martin's 2-17, introduced in the early 1920s. Possibly borne out of the Hawaiian music and ukulele explosion that hit America in the interwar period – Martin ukes were mostly all-mahogany – this small-bodied instrument became a trendsetter for the burgeoning acoustic blues scene. Later that same decade, arch rival Gibson jumped on the bandwagon with its own mahogany-top effort, the L-0.

Blues players loved these instruments with their bright but sweet trebles and a mid-range that cuts through loud vocals. They were also cheap – \$25 at the time.

The Style 15 came into being in 1940, but various American companies continued to make all-mahogany instruments up until the sixties, when availability of spruce (which had been a problem post-WWII) was no longer an issue. As a result the popularity of these 'austerity' instruments waned to the point where the big firms no longer bothered with them, although a couple of notable exceptions were Guild's D-25 and the cool-looking bolt-on-necked Fender Newporter.

When Taylor successfully debuted the 412-M in 1996 it

suggested that the time was perhaps right for this intriguing style of acoustic to return. Martin launched the strictly budget D-15 in 1997, followed by the 000-15 and others. For 2010, Martin has added the dreadnought sized D-15M and its smaller bodied sibling, the 000-15M – the M suffix indicates a number of spec changes over the existing 15 Series guitars that result in a small price increase.

Both instruments feature Martin's bolt-assisted mortise and tenon joint, first seen on the D-1. Not only helping to keep costs down, this 'glued and screwed' assembly has also proved structurally stable and tonally more than up to the job. Featuring the no-frills look and satin finish of the existing 15 Series these are darker stained over genuine mahogany (including the neck) instead of sapele – a close relative that possesses very similar qualities.

000-15M

There's something to be said for the plain and purposeful approach. An acoustic guitar's worth has too often been measured by the quantity of molluscs who sacrificed their lives to decorate it, the length of fancy materials that bind every

conceivable body, neck or headstock; or indeed the sheen emanating from the precious plating of its metal ware. What you get here instead are the barest essentials for good, workable, pro-standard, six-stringed musical instruments.

Solid timbers are used throughout the 000-15M's construction. Where Martin

could have skimped with laminated sides, back or neck, it has remained faithful to the ethos of quality not frills. So here we see no bindings, yet the subtle lines where the top and back join the rims and where the East Indian rosewood peghead veneer meets the headstock, leave a tasteful impression of such things. Martin has chosen East Indian for both fingerboard and the traditional belly bridge (now with ebony bridge pins) too.

Saddle and nut are both bone (the standard 15s use a Corian nut and a Tusq saddle) and the simple white-black-white soundhole rosette is inlaid, not a decal as on the standard models. The pickguard is pucker Delmar, the Waverly-style open-gear tuners differ

This 000-15 displays nothing but clarity and articulation across its tonal spectrum



The simple looks of these guitars have won over everyone who has seen them



from the standard model's enclosed type and we have an old-style Martin headstock decal. Even the fingerboard inlays are changed from standard dots to abalone diamond position markers and we get an ebony endpin.

The mortise and tenon neck joint, that Martin has used on certain models for almost two decades now, utilises a glue and bolt system that keeps the structure solid and yet simple to make. The traditional dovetail method requires woodworking mastery and is altogether more time consuming. A stamped wooden model and serial number plate covers the bolt's entrance hole in the neck block, and can be removed should major surgery ever be required.

Inside, a simplified A-frame version of Martin's X-bracing system incorporates an offset box section that houses the reinforcing bridge plate. Sitka spruce struts and mahogany kerfing tie the body's

components together to create a taut and vibrant tone chamber that's ready to amplify the strings' vibrations. Internal fit and finish are all exceptional and there's no excess glue or unwanted debris to mar the quality evident elsewhere.

This is a 14-frets-to-the-body design and the neck itself is what Martin calls its 'modified low oval' – a slender 'C meets V' profile that's 43mm (1 11/16-inch) at the nut rather than the wider and traditional, more fingerstyle-friendly 44.5mm (1 3/4-inch). These dimensions give it a great 'all-round' player appeal, though, and Martin has set the action perfectly for pretty much anything you care to throw at it. Even without a cutaway (which would spoil the look entirely) there's enough top-end clearance for most needs – first position blues licks at the 12th fret are no problem and that's the main reason most 000-15 players would venture that far up. You might want

slightly meatier strings for serious slide duties, but we encountered no problems tuned to E and with a more restrained bottleneck approach.

Sounds

Think mahogany top and you'll probably think acoustic blues. Think acoustic blues and you'll doubtless imagine a raspy, almost resonator-like mid-range 'honk' that's deeply unpleasant for anything other than accompanying Delta-style hollers. Well, think again, because this 000-15 displays nothing but clarity and articulation across its entire tonal spectrum.

The mahogany top seems to deliver a supremely balanced tone with no 'sag' but just delightfully responsive and tuneful results. It's hard to be certain but the impression is that the overall sound spectrum is a tad narrower than that of spruce – not quite so much treble or bass – but this in no

The Rivals

The UK-designed **Vintage** range has the **V400MH** dreadnought style (£169), which certainly looks the part with matt finish and solid mahogany top; sides and back are laminated but this is excellent value. If smaller bodies are more your thing the **V300MH** (£139) may better suit. **Guild's GADM20** (£540) fills the halfway price point with its solid mahogany construction. Great quality, cool price! The **GAD25** (£529) is again all-solid with bone nut and saddle, mock tortie pickguard and pearl dot markers. A snip at this price!

way hampers the guitar; in fact it could even make it better for vocal accompaniment since the tones of instrument and voice are that much more evenly matched. Sure, its size offers a limit to how much brute force can be extracted, but treat it with respect and this little guitar will reward you with a level of class that belies its price and humble beginnings.

D-15M

Everything that applies to the 000-15M's construction, timbers, neck, ornamentation and quality pertains equally to its bigger bodied brother, the D-15M. There's literally nothing to separate them in fit and finish, and the only point of difference from a playability standpoint is that the 000's neater size finds greater favour with the more diminutive members of the Guitarist staff. Where these instruments differ >



The rosewood bridge is mated well with a bone saddle and ebony bridge pins

MARTIN D-15M AND 000-15M £1,250 EACH
ACOUSTICS



The vintage-style tuners and Martin logo add to the stripped-down feel

Hold it close to your chest, beat out 16th-note rhythms and the D-15M will pump out the goods for hours

is in perhaps the most important area of all – the tone.

Sounds

If the 000's sonic spectrum seems marginally reined in, then it returns in spades with the dreadnought. While apparently no louder, even with its greater body size, the extra bass response and subtly sweeter trebles mean it's the one you'll want to strum. Hold it close to your chest and feel it humming; beat out 16th-note rhythms and the D-15M will pump out the goods for hours.

The balance is extraordinary, no one frequency dominating but everything coming together to create a spectacular accompanist's tool – two of these and a 000 in a folk trio could scarcely be bettered.

The dreadnought does do fingerstyle, but seems to prefer the lighter touch to the 'nails digging-in' approach of today's big pickers. Strap a Shubb on at fret two for instant Sweet Baby James; at fret seven, Here Comes The Sun – indeed!

Verdict

When a company with Martin's heritage takes quality materials but removes all the fuss, what we're left with is its guitar maker's art, laid bare. These two new additions to the long-standing 15-Series feature a slew of improvements making, we think, what were already very good guitars that bit better. Martin's artistry is alive, well – and kicking!

Even though they're identical on so many levels, each of these guitars displays such individual

personality in tone and vibe that players will know instinctively which one is right for them.

The 000 has a bold speaking voice that punches single notes or plucked chords to the front of any vocal ensemble. Put it in an open tuning and get out your slide and it will equally oblige, just as those original mahogany Martins did almost 100 years ago.

Strum the dreadnought behind three-part harmonies and its perfectly balanced frequencies will help meld the vocals together. Strap on a capo to accompany yourself, and the D-15M's round bass tones support your voice while the tuneful trebles add their own musical sheen.

We don't recall any acoustic guitars – from any maker and at whatever price point – that have caused the stir that these two simple-looking 'brown' Martins have managed. But it's their total, non-frilled fitness for purpose that has galvanised us all into wanting one so much. They look brilliant, they play and sound individually amazing and at this price point their Guitarist Gold awards are the no-brainer of the century. **G**

The Bottom Line

We like: Beauty; simplicity; personality of tone; playability; value...

We dislike: That Kellogg's isn't giving them away with boxes of Cornflakes!



Martin 000-15M

PRICE: £1,250 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Non-cutaway folk-sized acoustic
TOP: Solid mahogany
BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 100mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 386mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm (25.4-inch)
TUNERS: Nickel-plated Waverly-style open-geared
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43mm
FINGERBOARD: East Indian rosewood, with abalone diamonds and squares inlays
FRETS: 20, medium/fine
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/57mm
ELECTRICS: None
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.81/4
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The non-'M' 15s include the 00-15, 000-15, D-15 and J-15 (all £1,069) plus there's DC-15E at £1,649
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, at no extra cost
FINISHES: Satin finish over dark stained mahogany
Westside Distribution
0141 248 4812
www.martinguitar.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Martin D-15M

PRICE: £1,250 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Non-cutaway dreadnought acoustic
TOP: Solid mahogany
BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 116mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 398mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm (25.4-inch)
TUNERS: Nickel-plated Waverly-style open-geared
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43mm
FINGERBOARD: East Indian rosewood, with abalone diamonds and squares inlays
FRETS: 20, medium/fine
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/57.15mm
ELECTRICS: None
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.9/4.2
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See 000-15M
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, at no extra cost
FINISHES: Satin finish over dark stained mahogany

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★