




PHOTOGRAPHY KATHARINE LANE-SIMS



PARKER FLY DELUXE & LINE 6 VARIAX 600 £1,999 & £565

ELECTRICS

Parker Fly Deluxe & Line 6 Variax 600

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It's 13 years since the Fly debuted to an astonished audience; Line 6's Variax is equally forward looking. We evaluate both future visions by Dave Burrluck

You can count on the fingers of one hand the number of true innovations that have occurred in the electric guitar since the seventies. Few wouldn't include Ken Parker and Larry Fishman's Fly Deluxe. Likewise, Line 6's Variax must be in there.

While Line 6 has pioneered the digital guitar, its latest model still uses the same 'engine' that appeared on the original Variax (later called the 500) on its debut in late 2002. The latest model, the 600, is the most Fender-like to date. Ironical, really, that such cutting edge technology has to be wrapped in such a vintage-looking appearance.

Not so the Parker Fly. From its birth in 1992 it really did (and still does) evoke some extreme love it/loathe it reactions. Combining both magnetic and piezo tones wasn't new – Hamer's DuoTone predates the Fly, as do other lesser known models – but the combination of this, the otherworldly outline and equally revolutionary construction was too much for many. Eventually, in 2004, Parker was sold to the US Music Corp (the company behind Washburn) and the factory moved to Mundelein, Illinois.

Parker Fly Deluxe

Although a few features have changed, the current Fly Deluxe stays pretty true to Ken Parker's vision. And what a vision it was. Not only did Parker design a radical-looking guitar, he conceived an equally radical method of construction. With its

minimalist six-in-a-line headstock, it's the thin angular horns that are the most eye-catching element. But the way these modern-looking forms meld into the offset lower bouts is beautiful – as is the substantial carving and contouring of the body. While the base has a fairly conventional depth, as you move towards the neck the body thins out dramatically – and there's no neck heel. In this opaque finish – like the originals – the complex shape appears to be moulded.

The guitar is, of course, made from wood: a basswood body and poplar neck (with thin wire truss rod). The two components are mated with a complex finger-joint and the entire structure is strengthened by a thin epoxy, glass and carbon fibre composite 'exoskeleton' that covers the back of the body, neck and headstock. Finishing a guitar with so many complex curves caused Parker a nightmare and it looks like US Music Corp is having its own problems. Through the obviously thin finish you can see the weave of the synthetic material on the back and clear grain lines on the front. However, that's only by looking very closely – the overall effect of the subtly metallic deep blue finish is beautiful.

Of course, the Fly's innovations didn't stop there. More of the synthetic material is used for the thin fingerboard. The frets are stainless steel – unheard of back in 1992, although a few makers now use this ultra hard-wearing material – and are glued, with a space-age adhesive, to the 'board. With its subtly conical fingerboard camber and a thin-depted but quite wide 'C'-shaped neck profile, the Fly's playability is effortless: likewise the access to the top 24th fret. It's a really lightweight guitar, balances superbly on a strap and almost melds itself to your body. A Les Paul it's not. ➔

The Fly and Variax are aimed at very different markets but both, if you're prepared to put the time in, could surprise the die-hard traditionalist

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ELECTRICS



PARKER FLY DELUXE

PRICE: £1,999 (inc case and stereo cable)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric with magnetic and piezo tones

BODY: One-piece poplar with carbon, glass fibre and epoxy exoskeleton reinforcement

NECK: Basswood, as above

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/42.7mm

FINGERBOARD:

Carbon/glass fibre, compound radius 254mm to 330mm (10-13 inches)

FRETS: 24, jumbo stainless steel

HARDWARE: Parker vibrato bridge with six-element Fishman piezo pickup system and three-mode step stop; Sperzel Trim-Lok tuners

STRING SPACING,

BRIDGE: 54.5mm

ELECTRICS: Magnetic: two custom wound DiMarzio humbuckers, volume, tone (with pull/push coil-split), three-way selector. Piezo: volume. Three-way mode switch (magnetic/piezo/both), 'smart' switching output jack senses mono or stereo cable

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.3/5

RANGE OPTIONS:

Glued-neck Flies include the mahogany bodied/basswood neck Classic (£POA), the all mahogany Mojo (from £2,399) and the Mojo Singlecut (£2,099). US Flies start with the bolt-on Southern NiteFly (£1,299)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Dusty black and majik blue (as here). Mint 'burst, green tea 'burst, butterscotch 'burst, ice 'burst, heather grey, emerald green and ruby red (add £200)

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→ The locking Sperzel tuners are the only parts not designed specifically for the Fly. The Parker vibrato bridge, which pivots on ball bearings, is unique to the Fly with its bolt-down, distinctively shaped stainless steel saddles that house the piezo elements. Due to the thinness of the body a metal plate spring is used and overall height adjustment is accessed at the rear. Originally a visible balance wheel adjusted the tension of the spring – this is now done with a knurled knob on the back accessible through the large plastic coverplate. There's another nifty feature – the Step-Stop – also accessed through the coverplate. This allows the bridge to function as a standard vibrato (balanced mode), or as a down-bend only system. If you

tighten the balance wheel with the Step-Stop in the latter position it'll effectively fix the bridge so that as you bend one string the other won't go flat. Add in a stainless steel push-fit foam-tipped vibrato arm (with swing tension adjustment) and you have a wonderfully responsive system that will bend down to slack and up around five semi-tones on the G string. Tuning stability is excellent.

The thinness of the body means that regular humbuckers weren't possible to fit. Instead DiMarzio conceived

custom-designed 'buckers that screw directly to the body without the need for springs and mounting rings.

Originally the control system was more complex than we see here. Back in 2003 Parker conceived the Fly Mojo, which brought about many changes including the electronics. Larry Fishman designed a new preamp (basically a Fishman Power Chip), and standard wire hooked up the controls, switches and circuit board instead of the original hard-to-service ribbon connectors. There's no battery-

The Fly Deluxe uses the simplified control system developed for the Mojo

LINE 6 VARIAX 600	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** The unique Variax concept, the vibrato and the best 'chassis' to-date

■ **WE DISLIKED** Still no nylon string acoustic model and it's a shame there's no hard-tail option





indicating LED but the new circuit is designed for 200 hours of battery life and we have a flip-top compartment for easy access. The side mounted mono/stereo switch has gone as the new preamp design includes Fishman's 'smart jack' which automatically senses if you're using a stereo or mono cable and either splits the output of the two pickup systems into stereo for two amps, or mixed mono for a single amp.

The guitar's controls have been simplified too. We lose the original master volume and the stacked piezo control – the upper portion of which affected volume, the lower piezo EQ. So now we have volume (with treble bleed capacitor) and tone (with coil-split pull/push switch) for the magnetic pickups and volume for the piezo. There are two three-way toggle switches (as opposed to the previous, chunkier-looking metal-tip switches): the upper switch selects the magnetic pickups and the lower one switches between magnetic, piezo, or both.

Line 6 Variax 600

Nearly three years after the launch of the original Variax, Line 6 has created quite a family. There's Variax acoustic, bass (four- and five-string), and three electrics – the 700, the 300 (launched earlier this year) and now the 600, which replaces the original 500 model. While the arched top 700 is aimed at the 'posh' guitarist and the 300 is the entry level model, the new 600 is clearly designed to tempt the would-be Fender player away from the vintage-reissue Classic Series or even the start-up American series.

The fundamental design changes here started with the lower-cost 300: the scratchplate-mounted controls and six-in-a-line Fender-inspired

PARKER FLY DELUXE	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** The radical concept; sounds; playability; improved preamp/control layout

■ **WE DISLIKED** The radical concept! Seriously, you either love it or you don't

headstock. The 600, however, adds the vibrato bridge of the 700 and – perhaps most importantly – a feel and quality level equal to anything of similar price.

Like the 500, the 600 uses a basswood body (seemingly of three-piece construction) finished here in a vintage-accurate two-tone burst. The deep yellow centre of both the back and front creates an unusual but attractive lightly figured grain. The contouring seems a little smoother than the original 500,

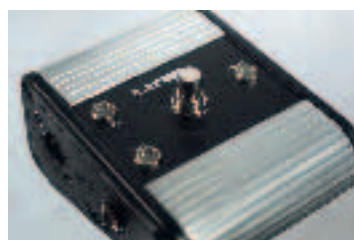
though the forearm contour could still be deeper to create a sexier shape.

The neck is again maple, but its one-piece construction uses the face – cambered to a 9.5-inch radius, the smallest of all Variaxes – as the fingerboard complete with necessary contrasting 'skunk' strip on the rear. The vintage vibe is enhanced with a nicely nicotine-coloured tone to the gloss, as opposed to satin, finish and the neck back is full but well shaped with slight chamfering to the fingerboard edges plus nicely polished and profiled medium gauge frets.

Parchment coloured (off white) plastic laminate is used for the scratchplate and rear spring cavity coverplate, which again adds to the vintage look. Line 6 could have gone further with old-style Kluson tuners, for example, but the generic enclosed and chromed tuners here work fine and the white synthetic nut is well cut.



Variax can be connected to a normal amp, or Line 6's PODxt, Vetta or Workbench technology



Like the 700, the vibrato is LR Baggs' X-Bridge unit with two-post fulcrum and six individual height-adjustable saddles that house the piezo elements to provide the string information for the digital engine to work its magic.

And here is the true innovation: Variax offers some 28 digital models of solidbody, semi and hollowbody electrics, and acoustic instruments. For the most part these are created from original vintage instruments. Not only are the sounds themselves modelled but also the way in which the volume and tone control work. Of course, Variax needs power...

Unlike the 300, which comes with a more flimsy XPS Mini power supply, we get the pucker XPS A/B footswitch/power supply that not only powers up Variax but allows you to instantly switch between your guitar amp (standard 6.4mm jack output) and an acoustic amp/PA via the balanced XLR →

The rivals

PRS 513	£4,795
Music Man Silhouette w/ vibrato & piezo	£1,435
Peavey Generation EXP	from £329

Both the Fly and Variax are about creating more sounds – that was exactly the reason behind PRS's 513. This highly expensive top-of-the range guitar, via unique proprietary pickups/switching, creates three guitars in one. Variax may be the only digital guitar out there but there's more choice among magnetic/piezo 'hybrids'. Music Man's Silhouette is a beautifully made electric that with piezo and vibrato options will challenge the Fly in the sound department. Over a grand cheaper is Peavey's well-received Tele-shaped Generation EXP that employs H/S/S magnetic pickups and Graph Tech piezo system (both undersaddle and neck-pocket mounted): a good introduction to the hybrid concept

ELECTRICS

LINE 6 VARIAX 600

PRICE: £565 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Korea

TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody featuring 28 digital models of solidbody, semi, and hollowbody electrics and acoustic instruments

BODY: Basswood

NECK: Maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH:

648mm (25.5-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: White

synthetic/42.3mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple, black dot markers, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: Unlogo'd enclosed tuners, LR Baggs vibrato X-Bridge (to sense string info for digital processing)

STRING SPACING,

BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: Variax has no magnetic pickups. All the sounds are generated via the onboard DSP that is phantom powered from supplied XPS A/B (included with PSA).

Alternatively you can use either six AA (12 hours approx) or a single PP3 (1-2 hours approx).

Controls are modelled volume and tone, five-way lever sound selector plus 12-position rotary model selector. Jack output (stereo cable supplied). An additional RJ-45 connector allows hook-up to Workbench, Vetta II, PODxt Live (and future upgrades etc)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/8

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS:

Variax 300 (£340) is the same style as 600 but with agathis body, rosewood fingerboard and no vibrato. The carved-front Variax 700 costs £989 in solid black, trans colours £1,049 – available in both hardtail and vibrato at same price. Variax Acoustic is £899 and Variax bass costs £949 (5-string £1,079)

LEFT-HANDERS: Only the original Variax 500 (£627)

FINISHES: Sunburst (as reviewed), vintage white, blue, black

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→ output. Alternatively you can power the 600 with batteries (six AA or a single 9V block) – a flip top compartment is provided on the back.

Controls are simply volume and tone plus the rather flimsy-feeling rotary model selector that selects one of 12 banks (Spank and Lester etc). The five-way lever selector voices the five sounds within each bank. There are two custom banks that you can load with your favourite sounds from those supplied – ideal for live work.

Output-wise we have the same jack output – the supplied stereo lead is intended for use with the XPS power supply – and digital in/output that hooks Variax up to PODxt Live, Vetta II and Workbench. But don't get too worried, use batteries and you can use a standard mono cable and plug into any guitar or acoustic amp.

SOUNDS: Firstly we need to set a couple of ground rules here. This is not a 'which is best' test. Variax is a quarter of the price of the Fly. However, the tonal evaluation proves more than interesting and illustrates perhaps why we have such problems accepting new designs and technologies.

For all of its ergonomic design, strapped on you can't help but feel the Fly is insubstantial. It really takes a while to adjust to the light weight. There's no doubting the excellent playability, though, and the sounds the Fly produces are way bigger than the feel and weight suggest. Both humbuckers have plenty of power and the tone is rich, responsive and resonant. The high end is a little muted, perhaps, but this rounds out the sound nicely so that introducing the coil-splits you have a highly musical, percussive Fender-like tonality. The piezo 'acoustic' tone again impresses, though it's more of a picker than a strummer just by the nature of the instrument itself. The sound itself is modern, but not over-light, and although it has that piezo 'pingy' hallmark there's plenty of mileage here. Combine the

two sound sources through an electric and acoustic amp and the magnetic pickups can warm up the lower end of the piezo nicely: there are excellent hybrid jazz tones here and for the creative musician, especially using different effects on the two sources, the sound colours seem limitless.

By comparison the feel of Variax is much more mainstream – it feels very like a brand new Mexican Fender Classic with that all too new feeling gloss neck finish. It makes playability a little sticky initially and you have to

A world of guitars at your fingertips: the Variax 600's model selector control



fight this one – certainly compared to the fluidity of the Fly. The temptation is to set up one amp sound and flick through the models: we all do it. But trying to nail a great Fender twang or a Les Paul grunt needs a different amp setting (or even a different amp). As a control, we set up a PRS Singlecut to maximum Slash-esque tone. Selecting Lester (the Les Paul models) on Variax produced a brighter sound, with a little less depth, but you're certainly in the ball-park. It's the same comparing a real Fender Strat with the Spank models here, which incidentally sound brighter to these ears than Variax 500. In some ways the Fender models make more sense on this platform but having a pair of open ears is crucial. All in all, there are a lot of sounds here – some, as ever, work better than others and it wouldn't

be our first choice for acoustic tones. Maybe it's the vibrato – shame there's no hard-tail option – but they don't sound as accurate, or useable, as on this writer's hardtail Variax.

It's interesting that both instruments

need a little time and thought to coax their best sounds. If you're demo'ing either in a store make sure you get set up with two amps (electric and acoustic) and ensure, especially with Variax, that you listen to the models with sympathetic amp tones.

Verdict

Ken Parker once told this reviewer that while everyone had an opinion about the Fly, yet most of those opinions weren't based on actually playing one! We'd suspect the same is true of Variax.

Yet the point is interesting because the Fly (too radical looking?) and Variax (digital? No thanks) have suffered from their challenging visual presentations and unusual sound sources – so much so that many people have never even tried one.

We can happily report that the Fly is being made with all the skill, love and care that Ken Parker originally applied to his ground-breaking design. It remains a wonderful piece of engineering even though, ironically, it is its otherworldly looks that got it so much attention and it's precisely those looks that turn some people off.

Variax 600 is a substantial improvement over the 500: it goes for a vintage vibe and succeeds. The modelled sounds certainly summon up the characters of the originals and, especially for recording, there's an awful lot of guitar here. However, with its vibrato it seems to suit electric more than acoustic. But again the lack of pickups, not to mention the digital 'engine', is simply too much for many of us (not least its connectivity with other Line 6 products).

So, two challenging instruments that demand a little time to find the 'sweet spots'. Maybe that's the real dilemma: in our fast-paced world, isn't it just easier to buy something that we're familiar with? The Fly and Variax are aimed at very different markets but both, if you're prepared to put the time in, could surprise even the die-hard traditionalist. **G**

Parker Fly Deluxe

Guitarist RATING

★★★★★

Line 6 Variax 600

Guitarist RATING

★★★★★