

TAKAMINE EF340SCO, EF444S-TBS & EF508KC £749, £799 & £899

ELECTRO-ACOUSTICS

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Break the catalogue codes and discover a limited-edition dreadnought and two tasty mini-jumbos from Japan's electro-master
by Jim Chapman

PHOTOGRAPHY JESSE WILD

Much of Takamine's focus this year has centred on the company's budget models, many of which are now being sourced from China rather than Korea. However, the brand's core business – in prestige terms if not quantity – continues to be its Japanese-made instruments, now being produced in a recently opened state-of-the-art factory (see p121). All three of our review electros are not only examples of this new facility's workmanship but are debuts to boot.

EF340SCO

Strictly speaking it's slightly inaccurate to describe this cutaway dreadnought

as new, since the EF340SC has been a popular model for some years. However, this one is a limited-run incarnation, the added 'O' suffix signifying ovankol back and sides instead of the regular version's mahogany. Just under 100 pieces are scheduled for the UK.

Ovankol, an African tonewood, is a popular substitute for rosewood. Though invariably stripier in its graining, it can often resemble rosewood in colour (as it does here), and it attracts tonal comparison too, although some luthiers consider it contributes a more mahogany-like sound. (That's a movable feast in itself,

as mahogany backed acoustics can sound vastly different from one another.) The EF340SCO's back and sides are laminated, which in one sense is a downgrade from the SC since that features a solid back. Still, the timber is visually well chosen, and the laminations are genuine ovankol, rather than some anonymous wood being used for the inner plies. The guitar's solid spruce top is a little 'dirty' in some of its complexion, but it's close grained with a reassuring smattering of cross-silking.

Cosmetic shortcomings were rare from Takamine's old factory, and the presentation here is nigh on faultless



The CT4BII preamp provides only the most useable of tones

dreadnought has a little more wood along the shoulder than the other two. A depth of 24.5mm up near the start of the heel turn is fairly full, but it doesn't feel too chunky thanks to the modest width. Fretting on the bound rosewood fingerboard is very well fitted, nicely polished and with smoothly rounded ends. It's good to find a second strap button at the heel too, which all review models came fitted with.

Something else our trio share in common is the powering combination of Takamine's palathetic under-saddle pickup and CT4BII preamp. One of the company's interchangeable slot-in units, the CT4BII provides slider-based volume and three-band EQ, and includes a versatile auto-chromatic tuner that can be calibrated between 438Hz and 445Hz to allow for accompanying, say, dodgy acoustic pianos or other slightly 'off-key' instruments. When activated the tuner usefully mutes the output, it can be used whether or not the guitar is plugged in, and is generally very easy to use and accurate. The preamp's only drawback – applicable to all other slot-in Takamine systems too – is that its shoulder mounting gives an annoyingly oblique view of the controls. We always raise this point, but probably in vain, since the company isn't likely to completely redesign or relocate a housing arrangement that is so well established. Still, you never know.

SOUNDS: As dreadnoughts go, the EF340SCO isn't the ultimate bruiser, but it's not meek either. The tone is pleasantly and quite neutrally poised between brightness and warmth, and though a little more low-end gusto might be desirable in purely acoustic terms, that could run the risk of skewing the balance electro-wise.

Indeed, when powered up the CT4BII supplies plenty of low-end range as things stand, even though each of the EQ bands offers only a modest +/-5dB

of boost and cut. There's an advantage to this: it's pretty much impossible to set up a duff sound, because you can't take things to daft extremes. So what we find is a mid-range that's never going to sound too meagre or nastily honky, and a top end that can either be relatively muted or sparkling but never too dull or too brittle. It's an arrangement that works well.

EF444S-TBS

Takamine's NEX body shape, first seen on Santa Fe guitars in the early nineties, in effect defined what we now call the mini-jumbo (or grand auditorium if you're that way inclined). Over the years, however, most such models – particular the electros – have been cutaway NEXC versions, so it's refreshing to welcome this non-cut EF444S-TBS.

Without the cutaway, the design assumes a quite different persona to the obviously stage electro personality of the NEXCs. It more clearly shows its vintage-like folk roots, which Takamine emphasises on the EF444S, courtesy of a tobacco sunburst top that nicely evokes an old Gibson picker. The lighter central area is a little patchy in colour here and there on the solid spruce top (you often don't know how stains will take to a piece of wood until you actually do it), but the general appearance is mightily attractive, and the body's gloss lacquering comes very well buffed. The laminated mahogany back and sides – the latter a relatively capacious 110mm deep at their maximum point – aren't bursted, but stained to a reddish brown that's fairly dark but still light enough for you to appreciate the graining of the timber. There was early talk that the UK model would come with cheaper nato back and sides, but be assured this is genuine mahogany. And so it should be at the price.

Given the guitar's traditional styling, one perhaps might have expected to find a fingerstyle neck, but as we've

TAKAMINE EF340SCO
PRICE: £749 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Japan
TYPE: Cutaway dreadnought electro-acoustic
TOP: Solid spruce
BACK/SIDES: Laminated ovangkol
MAX RIM DEPTH: 125mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 400mm
NECK: Mahogany, one-piece plus heel
SCALE LENGTH: 644mm
TUNERS: Chrome diecast
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, 279mm (11-inch) radius
FRETS: 20, thin
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood with bone saddle/52mm
ELECTRICS: Palathetic under-saddle pickup; CT4BII preamp with volume, low, mid, high, auto chromatic tuner and quick-release battery cover
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.68/5.9
OPTIONS: Natural Series TAN10C (£899) – solid cedar top, solid mahogany back, CTP1 CoolTube preamp
LEFT HANDERS: Not as EF340. Try the Advanced Natural Series TAN10C-LH at £1,019
FINISH: Satin natural
Korg UK
01908 857100
www.takamine.co.uk

The rivals

EF340SCO
 Breedlove Atlas AD25/SM £650
 Cort Parkwood PW630M £699
 Guild GAD40CE £599
Breedlove's Korean-sourced Atlas dreadnought is solid spruce/mahogany and features a pinless bridge, the JLD internal bridge trussing system and a Fishman Classic 4 preamp. The PW630M is one of a new all-solid-wood series from Cort, with a spruce/mahogany body, light-coat open-pore finish and a Fishman Prefix Premium Stereo Onboard Blender. Guild's Chinese-made GAD-40CE is also all-solid spruce/mahogany, and includes wood bindings and a Fishman Matrix active endpin system. All three guitars are cutaways.

too. The all-over satin finish feels especially smooth to the touch, and the multi-ply top binding and soundhole rings are very precisely lined. In fact, the only conceivable (very subjective) reservation is that the adornments are rather staid. But this is designed as a workhorse instrument and not one to be dripping in abalone.

Aside from very minor variations in low-position depth, the 644mm-scale mahogany necks on all three guitars are fashioned to a similar profile. This means Takamine's usual, quite slender span and a tightish string spacing at the bridge, and a pretty-much evenly rounded grip – although this



Top: the EF340SCO

Right: the EF444S-TBS

TAKAMINE EF444S-TBS

As EF340SCO except...

PRICE: £799 (inc case)**TYPE:** NEX-bodied

electro-acoustic

BACK/SIDES: Laminated mahogany**MAX RIM DEPTH:**

110mm

MAX BODY WIDTH:

399mm

BRIDGE/SPACING:

Rosewood with bone saddle/53mm

WEIGHT (kg/lb):

2.23/4.9

OPTIONS: Try the OM-size, cedar/mahogany Advanced Natural TAN70 with solid top and back and CoolTube preamp (£929)**LEFT-HANDERS:** No**FINISH:** Gloss tobacco sunburst body, satin neck**TAKAMINE EF340SCO TEST RESULTS**

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

■ **WE LIKED** Super-tidy build; good general duties sound■ **WE DISLIKED** Slightly grubby-looking top; cosmetics a tad plain

→ already described, the EF444S carries the same slender-in-width affair as the dreadnought. In practice this isn't too much of a drawback because, as with anything else, you get used to what you're presented with, and it's a neck that always feels compact and comfortable. However, wider-neck Takamines are few and far between, and it seems that the company might have taken the opportunity to add one more to the roster, not least because the guitar is aesthetically so well suited.

SOUNDS: If you yearn for an airier-necked picking tool, you certainly shouldn't be disappointed with the EF444S's sound. It's a joy, actually, with a free-breathing, open-voiced suppleness, sweetly bright trebles and a healthy portion of warmth, depth and snap when played harder.

The CT4BII system largely works well with these engaging acoustic traits. Because of the guitar's more mid-

TAKAMINE EF444S-TBS TEST RESULTS

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

■ **WE LIKED** Tip-top construction again; vintage vibe; supple, open tones■ **WE DISLIKED** A chance missed for a wider fingerstyle neck maybe...

scooped sound compared to the dreadnought, the high end can sound a little papery, which may require backline adjustment to provide a slightly mellower starting point for the treble band. Conversely, the instrument understandably needs a bit more bass boost for an equivalent low-end fullness, but the onboard EQ has the scope to deliver this. These are but minor tinkering in a very enjoyable playing experience.

EF508KC

Of our threesome, this all-gloss NEXC electro is the one dressed up for a party. The body is all koa, while the cream-edged purflings front and back are more elaborate, the soundhole rosette sports an abalone inlay, and the

sculpted-profile bridge has the split saddles that Takamine tends to reserve for its more upmarket instruments. At nearly £900, albeit including a good-quality hard case, it may be mildly surprising to learn that the body is laminated, but such is the cost and increasing scarcity of this beautiful, golden-hued Hawaiian timber that even with a solid top, let alone all-solid construction, the guitar would command a rather more exalted asking price. As it stands, it's a darn pretty instrument to behold, with a fair amount of lateral figuring dotted

around the outermost veneers.

It's not just the EF508KC's body that receives the more deluxe treatment. The rosewood fingerboard carries outline-snowflake markers and is bound in body-matching cream plastic, which continues up around the rosewood-

faced headstock where the tuners are gold rather than chrome plated. The style of binding gives a slightly more abrupt edged feel to the (again slender yet deepish) neck, but the standard of fretting and set-up is to the same high standard as on the other two →

The EF340SCO's all-over satin finish feels especially smooth to the touch, and the multi-ply top binding and soundhole rings are precisely lined

**TAKAMINE EF508KC**

As EF444S-TBS except...

PRICE: £899 (inc case)**TYPE:** NEXC-bodied cutaway electro-acoustic**TOP:** Laminated koa**BACK/SIDES:** Laminated koa**TUNERS:** Gold diecast**FINGERBOARD:** Cream-bound rosewood,

279mm radius

BRIDGE/SPACING:

Rosewood with bone split

saddles/52.5mm

WEIGHT (kg/lb):

2.27/5.0

OPTIONS: Solid cedar/

mahogany EF508C-VN in

vintage gloss (£999)

LEFT-HANDERS: Not as

EF508KC. Try the cedar/

mahogany Advanced

Natural Series TAN40C-

LH with solid top and

back and CoolTube

preamp at £1,019

FINISH: Gloss natural

Snowflake inlays and an abalone rosette add a touch of 'bling'

The rivals**EF444S-TBS & EF508KC**

K Yairi FY40SBE

(approx) £975

Washburn Timbercraft

F52SW-CE £599

Yamaha CPX900 £679

K Yairi's folk-inspired non-cutaway FY40SBE

is solid spruce/

mahogany and features

the patented direct-

coupled split bridge

design and a T600MkII

preamp. Another

folk-based design,

Washburn's cutaway

F52SW-CE is all-solid

spruce/mahogany and

carries a B-Band A3.2

system. The solid

spruce/flame-maple

CPX900 from Yamaha

features the innovative

three-way ART system

→ instruments. One minor difference is that where the EF444S-TBS has a boat-bow heel, the EF508KC and the dreadnought's are both rounded, presumably to ease cutaway access.

SOUNDS: Despite its completely different body timbers, the EF508KC actually sounds very similar to the EF444S-TBS, and hence is an equally impressive and likeable acoustic

performer. There's possibly a shade more underlying warmth in the mids and low end, and a sense of slightly stronger projection, but these are very subtle differences and you'd need to be blessed with a keen ear to tell them apart with certainty in a blind test.

Likewise when the CT4BII is fired up. The comparative nuances become even more finely shaded, and it's more than likely that you'd find yourself using

TAKAMINE EF508KC	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
■ WE LIKED Largely as EF444S-TBS plus all-koa body's visual appeal	
■ WE DISLIKED Very oblique view of preamp, but that's the Takamine way	

near-identical backline and onboard EQ settings whichever of the two instruments you were playing. There's consistency for you.

Verdict

As far as perceived value is concerned, the one disadvantage Takamine has with these debuts is that they might seem expensive compared to other electros that offer all-solid construction for less money. In theory it makes two solid-toppers and an all-laminate (admittedly koa) look a tad off the mark.

The reality is that for the important criteria of build, playing enjoyment and sound, all three comfortably justify their respective price points. The EF340SCO is the least exciting (and as a dreadnought has the fiercest competition) but it ably acquits itself as a good-quality workaday all-rounder. The two NEXs are outright delights, and choosing between them should simply be a case of whether you prefer the EF444S-TBS's vintagey aura or the flash-it-up-a-bit demeanour of the cutaway EF508KC, because sound-wise they're pretty much dead-ringers. We'd happily own either – in fact, they're the nicest couple of Takamines we've tried in a long while. **B**

Takamine EF340SCO**Guitarist RATING** ★★★★★**Takamine EF444S-TBS****Guitarist RATING** ★★★★★**Takamine EF508KC****Guitarist RATING** ★★★★★

Expanding tradition

Change has been afoot at Takamine. Guitarist finds out more... Words Dave Burluck

Of the many visits to guitar-making factories around the world that Guitarist undertakes, our visit back in 2002 to Takamine's Japanese base, to celebrate the company's 40th Anniversary, was one of the most memorable. It wasn't just the lengthy travel, nor the hospitality, but the surprise we felt upon finding not a huge mass-production plant but just 90 employees crafting, in quite an old-school fashion, around 400 guitars per week. Based in the small town of Sakashita, under the Takamine mountain that gives the brand its name, the factory was quite low-tech: a series of different workshops, on different levels, and seemingly no obvious production path. The necks were made in another place entirely, likewise the laminated backs and sides. Of course, there was mechanisation, including the default CNC routers, but these sat side-by-side with traditional handcraft.

Fast-forward to today and everything has changed as Takamine opened a brand new, purpose-built facility on 2 September, 2005. According to Andy Schlosser, the international sales director of Kaman (Kaman, home of Ovation, has "significant" shares in Takamine and holds a direct role in product development and international marketing), Takamine made the move, "to have more manufacturing efficiency, to be able to handle increased production and satisfy increasingly strict Japanese environmental controls.

"As you know, the old factory was built in the sixties and it didn't have an efficient production 'flow', it had limited space and would have needed huge investments to satisfy the increasingly stringent environmental restrictions in Japan. The new one was built with all of this in mind, and is one of the most environmentally friendly guitar factories in the world today."

Located around five miles from the original factory the new facility is also pretty modern. "It's actually not that high-tech," says Schlosser, "although the production is certainly more 'linear' now. Takamine did buy new state-of-the-art laser cutting machines to replace the original ones that were among the first used in the musical instrument industry. Those machines are used to produce the precision-cut inlays – like the thunderstorm on the current 2007 LTD model or the elaborate American Indian motif rosettes on the Santa Fe models – and some other parts that Takamine uses, that only a laser machine



Takamine's shiny new facility

Below: bodies in storage



Takamine outsources manufacture of laminate sides, but makes its own on all-solid guitars

can make." Importantly, the fundamental guitar-making process at Takamine hasn't changed: "The guitars are still very much hand-crafted in the same way that they have been for years.

"The necks are still made outside the factory by a wood working factory that has a joint-venture with Takamine and makes necks only for Takamine. And when Takamine needs laminated backs and sides it gets them from an outside source too. But there are not too many laminated back and sides being used by Takamine these days: laminated sides, yes, but few sides and back."

Takamine still employs a similar number of staff (93) with around the same output

as the old facility – around 19,000 per year, near a quarter of what Taylor produces annually – but the new factory has a lot more production capacity. "It is not planning on more downmarket Japanese-made models but, to the contrary, is planning to expand the upper end, taking advantage

of the factory improvements and new laser-cutting machinery."

And with our review reckoning that our trio of Japanese-made Takamines are among the very best we've played it seems the factory move has been positive in terms of the end product – not always the case when brands relocate.

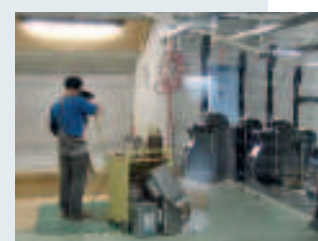
Yet Japan is just one part of the modern Takamine picture: Schlosser states that, "approximately 50 per cent" of all Takamine-brand guitars are now made in China. "Because of the relatively low prices of those guitars, we are selling quite large quantities, but our Japanese production is obviously the cornerstone, and our Korean-

made instruments continue to be important. We will see some future migration of models from Korea to China but we are at the same time developing new models to be made in Korea since the quality and specifications from Korea continue to exceed what we can do in China – it bridges the gap between our less-expensive G-Series guitars from China and the Japanese-made guitars."

One contributing factor to the store prices on Takamine's lower-end guitars is that, "approximately 50 per cent are straight acoustics". That's a very different ratio to the Japanese-made guitars where, "approximately 90 per cent are electro-acoustic", and around half of those are using the new CTP-1 Cool Tube preamp that utilises a 12UA7 preamp valve. "We've made great strides on the acoustic side," reckons Schlosser, "and are making some wonderful straight acoustics, but electros are what Takamine is really known for."

In fact in the past three decades, while Takamine's pickup technology has barely changed, the company has refined its preamps on at least eight occasions: the Cool Tube and Acoustic DSP onboard digital preamp are good examples. "The competition has forced us to keep pushing the envelope," says Mike Markure, Takamine's product manager. "With the Acoustic DSP you get unrivalled versatility and the Cool Tube brings that wonderful warm tube sound to acoustic players. Both are unique in the market."

Does Takamine make these preamps? "No, they are still outsourced to major Japanese electronics manufacturers," says Schlosser, "who are much more adept at manufacturing the preamps than Takamine – we concentrate on guitar building. It's a great combination: the best electronics with the best guitar manufacturing."



Above: inside the spray booth

"We've made great strides on the acoustic side of things, but electros are what Takamine is really known for"