

# Good Vibrations

If you draw sounds and style from the 50s and 60s, chances are you need a vibrato, preferably on a crazy-looking retro axe. No problem, here are two that tick those boxes and won't break the bank

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Neil Godwin







## ITALIA MODENA CHALLENGE AND SUPRO CORONADO II VIBRATO £879 & £899

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### What You Need To Know

#### 1 Vibratos, you say? I thought they were tremolos?

Ha, blame Fender for the confusion – Leo's synchronised 'tremolo' bridge, was a misnomer. Pitch fluctuation is properly termed vibrato

#### 2 Er, now I'm really confused

Tremolo is simply variation in amplitude – from the classic subtle pulsing throb to more modern hard-edged chop. Vibrato pulses but also changes pitch. That why your tremolo bridge is really a vibrato because you're raising or lowering the pitch of your strings.

#### 3 Why retro then?

The Bigsby is the granddaddy and it has nothing to do with histrionic dive-bombing. A clean tone (it can of course be pretty dirty too, just listen to Neil Young), lashings of reverb and a slight shimmer is all you need.

The brainchild of hardware and guitar designer Trev Wilkinson, Italia originated back in 1999, although in recent years the majority of their designs were conceived in the US. Supro, of course, is far from an invented brand and was one of many made by Valco, in Chicago, in the 1950s and 60s.

As we documented back in issue 417, having relaunched the amps, two new ranges of Supro guitars were finally unveiled at the start of 2017 – the solidbody Island Series and the Americana Series, which centre on the classic and most collectable – if originally short-lived – Res-O-Glas-bodied Valco creations that appeared under various names including National and Supro.

Irrelevant of heritage both these new incarnations offer considerable time-travel appeal. With chrome aplenty and high-gloss finishes, thankfully they both avoid the once fashionably bonkers control systems. Our Italia sports a trio of Grestch-y looking mini-humbuckers controlled in Strat-like fashion by a five-way lever pickup selector plus master volume and tone. The Supro follows Gibson protocol with dual humbucker-sized single coils, a three-way toggle pickup selector and volume and tone for each pickup.

And, despite their similar prices, Italia are built in Korea, while Supro's Americanas are made in China (the Island Series are made in Indonesia).

### Italia Modena Challenge

Named, as usual for Italia, after a Ferrari, the Modena Challenge sort of recalls a non-reverse Firebird's top half with an offset waist with Jazzmaster-ish lower bouts. The solid body, made from Korina, apparently, has a pretty regular 40mm depth but adds a concave 'German carve' to the top's edges, so the cream plastic-bound edge sits nearly halfway down the thickness of the body.

The back is uncontoured while the top's German carve, which widens out on the lower bouts, acts as a pretty comfortable forearm cut. In typical Italia style you can always expect a pretty out-there glittery finish – here it's a metallic burst that seems to change in the light from a deep coppery brown to a lighter golden centre. And just in case you forget the name of the guitar, a large chromed-plastic raised logo on the upper bout will remind you.

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The neat trick with most Italia models, however, is the way they reference past pawn-shop prizes in body style, but use a pretty conventional, four screw bolt-on maple neck, topped here with a 22-fret rosewood 'board. The headstock is six-a-side but back angled (and colour matched with the body), truss-rod access is underneath yet another chromed plate and, hey, why apply a transfer logo to the head when you can use another chrome (and black) raised plastic logo?

The roller saddle tune-o-matic sits nearly flush to the body and allows a near-perfect back angle to the string retainer bar of the licensed Bigsby B50. To further aid tuning stability, a friction-reducing nut is used as well as rear-locking tuners, which provide another place for an 'I' logo just like the chromed Gretsch top-half knurled metal knobs. Yup, we get it. This is an Italia.

With their dual rows of slot-head pole pieces and partial covers revealing the black plastic pickup tops, it's obvious where the inspiration comes from for the trio of IPM mini humbuckers mounted – in black-plated metal rings – directly to the body.

There's no ID on the pickup backs and DC resistance of 9.66, 7.11 and 7.11kohms from bridge to neck illustrates a hotter bridge pickup. The long, almost baroque-looking, light-tortoiseshell pickguard holds the five-way pickup switch, a pair of Alpha 500k pots, a .022 microfarad tone cap and a 270 picofarad treble bleed cap.



### Supro Coronado II Vibrato

As one of the four original Supro guitars we looked at back in issue 417, the Coronado II was very nearly a favourite except the vibrato version wasn't yet available. Now it is.

It's the larger of the two body sizes offered by Supro in their American Series – 381mm (15 inches) wide x 483mm (19 inches) long. This is as opposed to the smaller size of the Dual Tone, for example, which is more Les Paul-like at 343mm (13.5in) wide x 457mm (18in) long. It's a two-piece sandwich construction with the back half mahogany routed out to leave an ES-335-like centre section. The top half is moulded 'Acousti-glass' (an ABS high-impact plastic) with added centre block. The two pieces of the

sandwich are screwed together from the back and the edges are joined with a white rubber gasket. As we originally observed, if you want to access the internal electronics there's no control cavity backplate – you literally have to disassemble the body (easy enough although getting the halves back together isn't as swift).

From our previous investigation these new Supros use Imeg pots and vintage-style wiring. Aside from that there are no tricks and the shoulder placed three-way lever pickup switch (aka Tone Switch) sits in a nicely-detailed mounting ring with quaint 1 (neck), 2 (both) and 3 (bridge) positions.

The quirks continue with an old-style archtop-like, two-piece height-adjustable but pre-compensated wooden bridge. Two

1. The Bigsby B50 vibrato is mated with a solidly mounted tune-o-matic bridge with roller saddles

2. At the headstock the strings are held by rear-locking tuners, which with vibrato, roller bridge, and friction-reducing nut, create a well-sorted vibrato system

3. The Modena's three mini humbuckers are controlled by a five-way lever switch and produce a smooth but still jangly voice with a dash of Strat in the mixed positions



4. This modern Vista Sonic might look like a humbucker but it's a singlecoil. Both pickups mount onto the top of the guitar and the outer pole pieces act as height adjustment
5. The Supro's two pickups are controlled – Gibson-style – with volume and tone for each pickup

fixing screws sit under the top half so you can secure it but it's quite a faff to achieve. The humbucker-looking pickups with their Art Deco-style decoration are actually single coils despite high dc readings of 8.17 (neck) and 9.2kohms (bridge), a result of smaller gauge wire. Now called Vista Tones, they replicate Ralph Keller's original Supro design including height adjustment via the outer two polepieces. They also sit on the face of the body, they're not recessed, so the strings themselves really sit some distance from the body face. Likewise, the maple neck, fixed to the body with two cross-head bolts it sits in a shallow rectangular slot in the top's centre block. It's all a bit creaky ship but seems to work. Further original details are the large headstock with its raised plastic Supro logo and those vintage-y three-on-a-strip style tuners with over-large cream plastic 'butterfly' buttons. And instead of the 'stairstep' tailpiece of the non-vibrato model, here we get a large rectangular metal box vibrato bolted to the body with a black-knobbed screw that holds the top in place and a protruding, long,

vibrato arm. There's little doubt it adds to the overall weight (and balance) – our non-vibrato model weighed in at 3.45kg, this one is 3.77kg. Removing the top-plate you can easily see the two tension springs (attached to a Strat-like spring claw). At the front of the unit is the bar into which the strings are anchored. There are no Bigsby-like pins, the strings pass through the bar and over the top and onto the bridge giving, bearing in mind the height of the bridge, very little back angle. We have to say it's not the easiest to re-string as you have to thread the G and D under the spring retainer bar and, of course, remove and refix that top-plate.

**Feel & Sounds**

Neither guitar places ergonomics at the forefront. The lighter weight Italia certainly feels more conventional although, like a Firebird or SG, the neck protrudes further out than a Strat or Tele and feels better strapped on than when played seated – a couch noodler this isn't. Likewise, the Supro might hail from the early 60s, but it feels more akin to a jazz-box from

6. The new-design vibrato here was conceived by Trev Wilkinson and once dialled in is very smooth in action
7. The original, quite large, white edge-bound Supro headstock is accurately replicated here including its raised plastic logo



## THE RIVALS

Eastwood is the home of all things funky and retro and Rivolta – a new venture with Dennis Fano – has produced the Combinata and Mondata, in various pickup and bridge formats from £913. Highly recommended. D'Angelico introduced a trio of solidbodies – the Bedford, Atlantic and Ludlow – at NAMM 2018 (prices TBA) while Harmony announced a re-entry into the electric market with another trio of £TBA solidbodies, the Silhouette, Rebel and Jupiter. Danelectro continues to offer a wide range of funky designs from £499 with the '59M NOS and copperburst Longhorn. Plenty more from Hagstrom, Silvertone too.



the previous decade that's been given a contemporary (as in the 60s) makeover.

The different constructions produce very different primary, unplugged tones. The Italia again is the more conventional with a rather good, balanced, smooth response that's got some resonance going on. The Supro sounds more antiquated – there's a bit of semi-bloom and a little more acoustic volume but with a shorter, plunkier response.

In terms of set-up, the Italia was the most sorted. The Supro needed a truss-rod tweak (there's more relief on the bass side than the treble) and a bit of manual movement to get the intonation, sort of, right. If you're particular about set-up, it's not for you.

Again the Italia feels the most mainstream in terms of its neck shape. A nice C with relaxed shoulder and satin finish and a depth of 21mm at the 1st fret and 23.4mm at the 12th. It doesn't ape an old Fender neck – the fingerboard's edges are pretty sharp, the 'board radius flatter and the frets in the medium jumbo area – 2.7mm wide x 1mm high.

The Supro doesn't do conventional. Its construction and feel might have you putting it back on the store wall. Our advice is to persevere

The shorter-scaled Supro goes for a skinnier depth neck – 20.5mm at the 1st, 22mm at the 12th – although the shape is similarly a relaxed C with slightly narrower and lower frets (2.4mm wide x 0.9mm high) and slightly smoother fingerboard edges, which of course are bound.

As ever with three pickups and a five-way, there's definite Strat-iness to the Italia's voice, except rounder in the highs with a bit more power and stridency. The bridge pickup alone, with nice tapered and graduated controls to clean up the crunch

and up the jangle, means we have a home run straight off the bat. There's a good tonal shift to the slightly throatier middle pickup and a softer less percussive-than-a-Strat voice at neck. The Bigsby feels a little stiff – maybe that's a spring issue – but tuning stability is excellent and, bearing in mind the well-sorted sounds, we'd take this on a gig as is.

The Supro really doesn't do conventional. The combination of its idiosyncratic construction and feel might have you putting it back on the store wall. Our advice is to persevere. There's a throaty bite at bridge, a real older blues voice that snaps and snarls – more Tom Waits than Tom Petty. That said, and as we concluded previously, it does a great late-60s Stones or Kinks. It's little surprise that kicking in a Supro Drive pedal is a perfect match heading us Detroit way. Kick in a fuzz and take a waggle on the smooth-feeling vibrato and sonic chaos ensues. Tuning stability? It needs a little sorting, the bridge rocks and the break points on the rosewood bridge are a little vague. But the slightly 'out'



8. Three-on-a-strip vintage-style tuners include over-sized white plastic 'butterfly' buttons. They might look antique but they perform much better than the originals

intonation almost adds to its authenticity. Not for everyone, but there's a wealth of old-school tones here for the 50s or 60s revivalist or anyone that wants to explore different sonic paths. A grower.

**Verdict**

Whether, it's invented, like Italia, or essentially a reissue, like Supro, the influence of retro designs outside of the few real classics, continue to inspire designers... and long may it last. There are many players who fancy something different both aesthetically and sonically. If that's you, here are a pair of vibrato-loaded blasts from the past that won't break the bank.

Italia's vision might seem a bit out there, but it's a very well-sorted instrument that offers more than usable sounds with a thicker, smoother Strat-like palette and quite contemporary playability. Supro's more convoluted and complex build marries archtop 'jazz age' style with an Art Deco-inspired aesthetic and is harder to pigeonhole. It remains quite a unique characterful drive but one that we suspect will be more polarising. Get to know it, however, and it's a wonderfully unpredictable and creative tool to summon up some older, funkier, tones. **G**



**ITALIA MODENA CHALLENGE**

**PRICE:** £879 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway offset electric, bolt-on  
**BODY:** Korina  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Black friction reducing/42.5mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, small clay dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium  
**HARDWARE:** Bigsby B50 vibrato, roller saddle tune-o-matic-style bridge, Italia rear-lock tuners – aluminium/chrome  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 51mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Three Italia IPM mini humbuckers, five-way lever pickup selector, master volume, master tone  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.56/7.84  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The Modena Sitar (£799) is the only other similar body shape but Italia's range is expansive kicking off at £729 with the Maranello Speedster and Vario  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Metallic Gold Burst (as reviewed), Metallic Turquoise

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**Pros** Clean build, excellent sounds and vibrato performance

**Cons** Little to complain about although the control system could make use of those three pickups more creatively



**SUPRO CORONADO II VIBRATO**

**PRICE:** £899  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**TYPE:** Large single-cutaway semi-hollow electric  
**BODY:** 'Acousti-glass' (ABS high impact plastic) moulded top on semi-hollow mahogany back  
**NECK:** Mahogany, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 629mm (24.75")  
**NUT:** Corian/42.6  
**FINGERBOARD:** Bound rosewood, block pearloid inlays, 305mm (12-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 21 (plus zero fret), medium  
**HARDWARE:** Vibrato tailpiece, rosewood bridge, three-on-a-strip vintage-style tuners with 'Butterfly' buttons  
**ELECTRICS:** Two Supro Visa Tone single coil pickups, three-way lever pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.77/8.3  
**OPTIONS:** With Stairstep tailpiece (£799)  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** Plenty to chose from in this American range (from £649) or the Island Series (£819)  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Jet Black only (as reviewed)

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**Pros:** Competent reissue of classic Res-O-Glas style with new-design vibrato and time reveal sounds to match the vibe

**Cons:** Limited colours, bridge and intonation, no gigbag