

YAMAHA A1M & AC3R £599 & £889
ELECTRO-ACOUSTICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS



Yamaha A1M & AC3R

£599 & £889

Familiar body styles from Yamaha, but a new approach to player comfort and performance expectations. A* or could try harder? We find out... **by Jim Chapman**

Yamaha doesn't often launch an entirely new line of acoustics. Instead, the FG, APX/CPX and L ranges have evolved or been revised over the years. All of which makes the recent introduction of the A Series cutaway electros a significant one. Comprising eight models split between the solid-top 1s and all-solid-wood 3s, guitars are then sub-divided into rosewood- and mahogany-backed versions. The range focuses on just two body styles: dreadnought and concert. The 1s carry a three-band analogue preamp, while the 3s load in an SRT mic-imaging blender system. Both use the new SRT

undersaddle pickup – incorporating six individual piezo elements on a wide ribbon strip – recently seen on the APX/CPX1000 and APX500II.

In pricing terms the As, loosely speaking, slot into the catalogue between the FGs and the L-Series derivatives. Yamaha's aim is to appeal to gigging and recording guitarists looking for a serious performance instrument, as opposed to, say, the FGs which have a more playing-at-home vibe. The A Series' revised neck configuration and string spacings, which we'll look at in a minute, are intended to more overtly attract the electric-

leaning player. It's understood that much of the impetus behind the development of the A Series came from Yamaha in the USA. Given that and the guitars' mid-market pricing between around £600-£900, it's hard not to infer that the company has Taylor's 100 and 200 Series on its hit-list.

This review concentrates on the A1M mahogany-backed dreadnought and the AC3R rosewood concert, but we also had access to their alternative-series counterparts (the A3M and AC1R). Where relevant, we'll be highlighting some differences and similarities.

A1M

Save for its large, pointy tortie scratchplate – borrowed from the company's mid-seventies N1000 acoustic – the A1M is, at quick first glance, standard Yamaha cutaway-dreadnought fare. But a closer inspection reveals various departures. The gloss, solid Sitka spruce/

The Rivals

A1M

Takamine's spruce/sapele **EG530SSC** (£599) has solid top and back and features abalone rosette and three-band TK40 system with EQ bypass and mid-contour. Also with solid top and back,

Tanglewood's spruce/mahogany **TW115AS-CE** (£469) carries maple/herringbone top binding and B-Band's A3T system.

Vintage's similarly timbered, all-solid **VEC1400N** (£529) includes maple-bound abalone front purfling and a Fishman Presys Blend.

laminated mahogany body is bound in mahogany, a first for Yamaha at this price point, even though wood bindings are fairly commonplace on some competitors' instruments. The guitar, like all As, also gets a second, strap button at the heel (good to see), and its ebony bridge is a nice upmarket touch.

The full-scale mahogany neck is a key design aspect, its set-up common throughout the series. Kicking off at 43mm across the nut, it offers a shallower-than-previous, flattish-back 'C' profile of near-constant depth. The edges of the rosewood fingerboard's



The SRT preamp is a familiar proposition, but still lacks a tuner mute facility

The main buying decision might well be ultimately swayed less by your budget, and more by which preamp better suits your needs





binding are comfort chamfered and, joy of joys, string spacing at the bridge is broadened to a respectable 55mm: an arrangement sadly rarely encountered on earlier Yamahas. The result is a snug handful at one end, and decent pickability at the other. Construction-wise, minimising timber wastage is clearly a priority, since the scarf-jointed neck is a three-piece sandwich on both the main length and headstock, with another trio of timber making up the heel. As opposed to Yamaha's usual, smooth satin finishing, the finish is an open-pore – not grain-filled – low gloss. The company spins this positively for its 'woody' touch, though some might say it looks and feels a tad rustic. It remains a slick player, though.

With its batteries housed in a separate compartment on the

shoulder, the guitar's System 66 preamp's layout is familiar territory, with three-band EQ on small rotaries, a wide-range (80Hz-10kHz) mid-sweep slider, and an auto-chromatic tuner. We can't argue with the tuner's accuracy but, unlike the 3s' System 63 SRT unit, it still doesn't mute the system when activated. It's about time it did.

Sounds

Interestingly, although the all-solid A3M has a slightly deeper low-end and a shade more resonance, the A1M otherwise sacrifices little acoustically. It packs a decent dread punch, the highs have that Yamaha trait of sustainful, sweet-edged balance and brightness, and the overall texture is actually a touch warmer than the A3M's.

Powered up, the new pickup makes for a happy marriage. Piezo 'quack' is entirely absent,

the delivery sounds natural, fluid and open, and the EQ and wide-range mid-contour access an impressively broad tonal palette, without ridiculous or harsh extremes. Reasonable gain and spot-on cross-string output balance contribute to a very enjoyable performance.

AC3R

This all-solid Sitka/rosewood model might be called a concert, implying a smallish body, but the rims are actually a few millimetres deeper than the dreadnought's, and allied with a near 15-inch lower-bout span, the soundbox is quite capacious. The main trim aspects, as on all 3s, that differ from the 1s is a mahogany and rosewood-inlaid soundhole rosette rather than the more basic concentric black/white rings, and an ebony bridge and fingerboard, though the latter

remains bound with rosewood. Also, the back carries a wood (mahogany?) centre strip, where the 1s don't. In other respects the cosmetics are similar, including the mahogany body binding, and the neck configuration, finish and string spacing are a dead-ringer for the dreadnought's.

There's plenty happening on the System 63 SRT preamp. Apart from three-band EQ and the pickup/image blend control, there's a selector for the three mic images (Neumann U67 and KM56, and Royer R-122) with a choice of 'focus/wide' (far or close mic'ing) for each; a five-band AFR anti-feedback filter that can be triggered progressively and which proves mightily effective; and a resonance rotary – dedicated to the image signal – which in practice subtly adds lower-end warmth and body. As already

The Rivals

AC3R

Freshman's FA400FCES

(£999) includes maple binding, mahogany rosette and Schertler's Active Soundhole system.

Breedlove's C25/SRe Atlas

Stage (£1,080) fits a Baggs Stage Pro preamp with phase notching and tuner.

Tanglewood's TW45HSR-E

Super Folk (£1,119) features walnut bindings and Fishman's active Sonitone system with soundhole volume and tone. All are spruce/rosewood, the Freshman and Tanglewood all-solid, the Breedlove with solid top and back.



The presence of a second strap button on both guitars is very welcome



The unusual pickguard is borrowed from Yamaha's 1970s N1000 model

mentioned, the tuner usefully mutes the system and can also be recalibrated between 438Hz and 445Hz for accompanying instruments that are slightly off concert pitch. Handy.

Sounds

We experience more of an acoustic variance between the AC3R and its cheaper AC1R stablemate. The latter is certainly no slouch – and both deliver enthusiastically – but the AC3R has a noticeably crisper, more piano-like attack and sustain, with added mid-range clarity and separation, and a very pleasing picker-friendly articulation. If all this sounds rather un-rosewood-like, be assured that the requisite low-end richness is present and correct.

SRT translates these traits admirably and the powered tones, whether pickup, image or blended, have a distinctly hi-fi-like quality without sounding cold or clinical. Which image you might prefer is a matter of personal taste – they sound fairly similar. But the best thing, unlike with some blenders, is that high ratios of image-to-pickup can be used without introducing too much artificiality, making this an engagingly 'musical' system. It's also worth noting that there is more gain on tap than from early SRT systems we tried, which were frankly rather feeble. So that's good news too.

Verdict

Although to a degree there are qualitative acoustic differences between our two models and their counterparts – not to mention the 3's all-solid spec and subtly more upmarket trim

– the main buying decision might well be swayed less by your budget, and more by which preamp better suits your needs. For many of us, the 1's analogue system will do very nicely, offering a high quality, easy-to-use repertoire. However, for players doing a lot of recording, not just live gigs, the imaging system is likely to edge it for its ability to add mic-led textures and its enhanced overall versatility.

One thing's for sure, though: whichever route you take, and whether you go for a dreadnought or a concert, you'll find these new A Series are well-sorted instruments, built to Yamaha's usual high standards, sounding good and playing well. These are both sound investments. **G**

The Bottom Line

Yamaha A1M

We like: Easy-play neck profile; simple, quality preamp system

We dislike: Open-pore neck finish is an acquired taste; non-muting tuner

Guitarist says: Yamaha sure knows how to build a fine and affordable dreadnought electro

Yamaha AC3R

We like: Picking clarity; preamp's imaging versatility; slinky neck

We dislike: Neck finish again
Guitarist says: Grade-A concert picker emphasises all-round high standard of the new range



Yamaha A1M

PRICE: £599

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Cutaway dreadnought electro-acoustic

TOP: Solid Sitka spruce

BACK/SIDES: Laminated mahogany

MAX RIM DEPTH: 117mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 412mm

NECK: Mahogany

SCALE LENGTH: 650mm

TUNERS: Chrome, die-cast

NUT/WIDTH: Urea/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood with 406mm (16-inch) radius

FRETS: 20, thin

BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with urea saddle/55mm

ELECTRICS: SRT undersaddle pickup; System 66 preamp with low, mid, high EQ, mid sweep, tuner/on/off LED, battery status LED, separate quick-release 2 x AA battery holder

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.16/4.75
OPTIONS: Rosewood-back A1R (£699) with System 66; all-solid spruce/mahogany A3M (£789) and rosewood-back A3R (£889), both with System 63 SRT preamp

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Gloss natural body, low-gloss neck

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Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Yamaha AC3R

PRICE: £889

TYPE: Cutaway concert electro-acoustic

ORIGIN: China

TOP: Solid Sitka spruce

BACK/SIDES: Solid rosewood

MAX RIM DEPTH: 120mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 379mm

NECK: Mahogany

SCALE LENGTH: 650mm

TUNERS: Chrome, die-cast

NUT/WIDTH: Urea/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood-bound ebony with 406mm (16-inch) radius

FRETS: 20, thin

BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with urea saddle/55mm

ELECTRICS: SRT undersaddle pickup; System 63 SRT preamp with volume, low, mid, high EQ, image type (1-3), focus/wide select, pickup/mic blend, resonance, five-band AFR anti-feedback reduction, auto-chromatic tuner with LED, separate quick-release 2 x AA battery holder

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.38/5.25

OPTIONS: Mahogany-back AC3M (£789) with System 63; solid spruce/laminated rosewood AC1R (£699) and mahogany-back AC1M (£599), both with System 66 (see A1M)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Gloss natural body, low-gloss neck

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★