



CUTAWAY DREADNOUGHT ROUND-UP **ALL £419**
ELECTRO-ACOUSTICS



Cutaway dreadnought round-up **All £419**

Need an affordable, good quality workhorse dread electro that'll see you through the years? Check out this fanciable foursome... **by Jim Chapman**

Over the last few years smaller-bodied electro-acoustics, notably folk-derived OMs and 000s, have seen an upsurge in popularity, not least for their versatility and relatively compact handling comfort. However, when it comes to performance muscle – both acoustically and powered – it's still the big-bodied dreadnought (and its cutaway variants) that rules the roost. It's tempting to think that electro dreads have been around forever, but in fact they didn't become widespread until the late eighties and early nineties, prompted by MTV's Unplugged series, which kick-started an acoustic revival that shows no sign of flagging.

Ovation of course, as far back as the sixties, was an influential early pioneer of acoustic powering, as applied to its bowl-back designs. But if there's an accolade to be conferred for electro adaptations of

traditional instruments it should go to Japan's Takamine, whose first under-saddle system, the Palathetic pickup, was debuted in 1975 on both steel- and nylon-strung guitars. Come the late eighties, bolstered by the parametric-EQ'd Natural Series, the Takamine name had become, and remains, synonymous with electro-acoustics.

Pick a price, any price, and there's a plentiful choice of cutaway dreadnought electros available from a host of brand names. One of the most significant areas is instruments hovering under £500. It's not only a price break affordable for most of us, but one where there should be an expectation of good, long-term quality, in both construction and sound. This is what our four big-name contenders aim to prove, all priced, coincidentally, at £419, allowing direct comparisons as far as value is concerned.

The foursome are superficially similar – gloss-bodied, square-shouldered, Martin-style dreads with Venetian cutaways and under-saddle strip transducers. At the heart of each, however, lies a different preamp system. Takamine's EG360SC carries a three-band TP-4T; the Baggs-designed LR-T-4T on Crafter's DE-8/N adds a mid scoop and phase reverse to a similar EQ array; a significant feature of the three-band System 55T preamp on Yamaha's FGX720SCA is an ultra-wide-range (80Hz-10kHz) mid sweep; the Vintage VEC1100N,

meanwhile, has one of Fishman's latest systems, the Aero+ with four-band EQ plus phase and notching. All the systems handily incorporate an auto-chromatic tuner; the Vintage, build-wise, theoretically earns extra brownie points for its all-solid-wood specification. The others have solid tops with laminated backs and sides. Will they suffer as a consequence? Let's find out then shall we?

The Rivals

Tanglewood's spruce/mahogany **TW115AS-CE** (£429) has a solid top and back, with maple bindings, herringbone purfling and B-Band A3T system. **Stagg's** solid cedar/rosewood **NA60CBB** (£443) is also maple-bound and carries B-Band's A3.2 system. **Freshman's** solid spruce/mahogany **FA250DCE** (£449) opts for Schertler Bluestick powering and, like the Stagg, is satin finish.

When considering a cutaway dreadnought around the £500 price point, there should still be an expectation of good, long-term quality, in both construction and sound

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS

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Crafter DE-8/N £419

Unlike the others' Sitka or German spruce tops, this Crafter is Engelmann and is predictably whiter in hue, though more wide-grained and with little obvious cross-silking. That, however, doesn't detract from the instrument's overall smartness and the neatly executed trim includes an abalone-inlaid rosette, cream body-matching fingerboard binding and a mosaic centre strip along the mahogany back. Amber-coloured tuner buttons are an attractive touch up top.

In common with its rivals, the DE-8/N's satin-finish mahogany neck is a three-piece scarf-jointed affair. The average width and string spacing are allied to a comfortable, shallowish 'C' profile, the only minor detraction being slightly abrupt fret ends – nothing a little extra dressing wouldn't take care of. As on all our contenders, the low-ish action set-up is very good.

Sounds

The underlying acoustic tone is a mite dry and the highs a tad

splashy in texture, but it's a willing performer with easy dynamics and up-to-par dread-like punch. Though relatively low in gain, the LR-T-4T preamp does an accomplished powered job, respectively warming and cleaning up the unplugged traits for a natural, quality palette of sounds. The dual facility for mid-range tailoring is especially beneficial – the main cut/boost slider centred at 500Hz, while 'scoop' fine-tweaks up to -6dB at 1kHz. The system also scores well for its under-saddle output balance, and the neat way that the tuner's LCD screen changes colour when a string is adjusted to pitch.

The Bottom Line

We like: The very well-voiced preamp system

We dislike: Slightly sharp fret ends

Guitarist says: One of best pickup systems on test is a definite enticement

Takamine EG360SC £419

Despite its plain black rather than tortie pickguard, the Sitka/rosewood EG360SC is the most cosmetically plush of our quartet. The cross-silked Sitka top carries abalone purfling and rosette; the white-bound fingerboard sports diamond markers also made of abalone, the effect being only slightly marred by some filler here and there. It's capped off by white pearloid-buttoned gold tuners and a gloss-laquered finish.

The 'C'-profile neck, slightly shorter in scale than the others, is the deepest on test (24mm towards the heel turn), though this merely provides more of a traditional grip, not a bulky handful. In typical Takamine fashion, string spacing at the nut and at the bridge is on the tight side, though this doesn't inhibit fingerstyle. Our sample's medium-thin fretting is immaculately dressed, making it a fast, slick player.

Sounds

Surprisingly perhaps, given its rosewood back and sides, the

EG has the brightest unplugged timbre, though it's by no means a cold sound. The treble is pleasantly singing and transparent, a controlled yet firm low-end delivers some nice attacking snap when played hard and the overall delivery has an easy sustain and response. The gainful TP-4T system reproduces these characteristics very well, albeit with a few notes of caution. The highs can be searingly over-sparkling unless reined back; similarly the mid-range merits some cut to avoid nasalness. Get that done, though, and the guitar offers a rewarding powered performance, with plenty of warmth on tap from the bass slider.

The Bottom Line

We like: Luxury trim; buoyant, sustainful sounds

We dislike: Mid/treble-happy preamp

Guitarist says: EQ may need a firm hand, but there's much enjoyment to be had here



Vintage VEC1100N £419

As if to mirror the brand name, this rosewood-backed Vintage has a more traditional, Martin-like vibe. The spade peghead is one aspect, so is the clean German spruce top's herringbone purfling, a theme repeated in narrower style as the back's centre strip. The fingerboard's rosewood binding – as opposed to the others' cream or white plastic – also conveys a discreet, retro-style cosmetic approach. Like the Takamine, the VEC's livery is all-gloss.

By a small degree, the neck at the nut is the widest on test, though at 43.5mm it still falls comfortably within the medium-span category. We again find an easy-playing 'C' profile, of moderate depth, and it's partnered by Takamine-like medium-thin fretting, which is once more very well dressed and polished.

Sounds

First strums reveal the VEC lagging behind for acoustic oomph. It feels tight, but as with so many new all-solid-wood acoustics, gradual playing-in is

required to unlock more resonance. Aptly, the guitar's relatively rich tone reflects its rosewood build, with a warm, even slightly dark low-end and a fluid overall balance. The Aero+ proves plain sailing for powered duties and is generally well voiced. All four EQ bands are smoothly graduated, while phase and notching add further versatility. Apart from the need for discretion with treble and brilliance to avoid papery, brittle highs, the only arguable reservation is that the preamp's (black on black) rotary controls, though centre-notched, don't provide the at-a-glance settings reference of a slider-based system.

The Bottom Line

We like: Warm, rosewoody tone; versatile preamp

We dislike: Dynamics need more playing in

Guitarist says: Once its acoustic sound fully opens up, this is a quality guitar

Yamaha FGX720SCA £419

Introduced in 2006, the FGX720SCA is one of a rapidly diminishing number of Yammy electros still loaded with an under-saddle pickup as opposed to an under-bridge ART sensor system.

Construction-wise, the guitar follows the company's familiar FG-dread formula of a solid Sitka top – a close-grained, richly cross-silked example here – with laminated back and sides, in this instance of mahogany-like nato. Like the Crafter, the body is gloss, the neck satin.

With its fingerboard edged in body-matching cream binding, the medium-width neck has an obliging, shallow 'C' profile, a little broader at the octave than the others. String spacing at the bridge, however, is Yamaha's usual slightly tight arrangement – the same as the Takamine's. Again, though, this doesn't feel unduly cramped for picking, and you quickly adapt.

Sounds

The balance of tone and acoustic punch is very

agreeably sorted. Dynamics are supple and sustainful, there's a pleasant smooth clarity to the lows and pervading everything is a fluid, sweet-edged brightness that's typical of Yamaha. One plugged-in criticism is the preamp's low gain – it really is pretty modest – but the system nevertheless does a fine job. Inter-string balance is spot-on, the voicing is generally sympathetic and, thanks to the preamp's broad-range mid sweep, tonally very adaptable. The top end, for instance, can sound papery and a little over-excited but is easily tamed by the relevant slider and/or via the sweep range, which extends well into the treble realm.

The Bottom Line

We like: Quality sounds, acoustically and powered

We dislike: The weedy system gain

Guitarist says: A great all-rounder, but let's up the preamp beef please



The Verdict

In round-ups there's usually one instrument that stands out above the rest, or the judgement has to be qualified to take account of models configured for specialist playing styles. Here, however, there's barely a cigarette paper between the four in terms of build quality, playability or value – all of which are pretty much consistently excellent. What makes this even more of a photo-finish is not just their identical pricing, but the fact that all four are dread electros designed for general duties, with mainstream neck profiles that aren't appreciably different to one another.

Aside from subjective cosmetic preferences, there are, of course, nuances of sound – both acoustic and powered – which will sway you one way or the other. Unplugged, the Takamine and Yamaha share the gold star – the former for its ringing exuberance, the latter for its balanced overall resonance and sweet poise. That said, the Crafter's subtly earthier tone is far from shabby, while the Vintage has a lot of warm, rich-toned promise even if it isn't quite yet there in full.

In a powered context, the Crafter's LR-T-4T preamp puts in a very convincing showing. It smooths out any acoustic shortcomings, the EQ ranges

eschew extremes and it's simply a very enjoyable, musical system to work with. Much the same can be said of the Vintage's Aero+ and Yamaha's System 55T, though like the Crafter unit, the Yamaha's is low on gain, to the extent that you may well be plugging the FGX into your amp's high-gain input to ensure enough out-front level. That irritation certainly doesn't afflict the

Takamine's gutsy TP-4T, though the system suffers from being too gung-ho in the mids and treble, so it needs tailoring to offset that. But let your own ears be the final judge on all this. In the meantime, treat this round-up as a ready-made sub-£500 shortlist and you won't go far wrong, because one thing's for sure: we'd be more than happy to take to the stage with any one of them. **G**



Crafter DE-8/N

PRICE: £419
ORIGIN: Korea
BODY: Solid Engelmann spruce top, laminated mahogany back and sides
NECK: Mahogany, 649mm scale, 42.5mm nut
FINGERBOARD: 20-fret cream-bound rosewood
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/54mm
HARDWARE: Amber-button chrome die-cast tuners, bottom strap button
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs Element under-saddle pickup; LR-T-4T preamp – three-band EQ plus 'scoop', phase and a tuner
OPTIONS: DE8-12E 12-string (£469)
FINISH: Gloss natural body, satin neck
Sutherland Trading
0292 088 7333
www.sutherlandtrading.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Takamine EG360SC

PRICE: £419
ORIGIN: China
BODY: Solid Sitka spruce top, laminated rosewood back and sides
NECK: Mahogany, 644mm scale, 43mm nut
FINGERBOARD: 20-fret white-bound rosewood
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/53mm
HARDWARE: Pearlloid-button gold die-cast tuners, bottom strap button
ELECTRICS: Under-saddle pickup; TP-4T preamp with three-band EQ and a tuner
OPTIONS: Similar EG361SC in gloss black – same price
FINISH: Gloss natural
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.takamine.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Vintage VEC1100N

PRICE: £419
ORIGIN: China
BODY: Solid German spruce, solid rosewood back and sides
NECK: Mahogany, 649mm scale, 43.5mm nut
FINGERBOARD: 20-fret bound rosewood
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/55mm
HARDWARE: Chrome die-cast Grover tuners, bottom strap button
ELECTRICS: Fishman Sonicore under-saddle pickup; Aero+ preamp with four-band EQ, notch, phase and a tuner
OPTIONS: Try the similarly powered VEC900 (£349) with laminated rosewood back/sides
FINISH: Gloss natural
John Hornby Skewes & Co
0113 286 5381
www.jhs.co.uk

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Yamaha FGX720SCA

PRICE: £419
ORIGIN: China
BODY: Solid Sitka spruce top, laminated nato back and sides
NECK: Nato, 650mm scale, 43mm nut
FINGERBOARD: 20-fret cream-bound rosewood
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/53mm
HARDWARE: Chrome die-cast tuners, bottom strap button
ELECTRICS: Under-saddle pickup; System 55T preamp with three-band mid-sweepable EQ and a tuner
OPTIONS: Rosewood-backed FGX730SCA (£489) with ART under-bridge sensor system
FINISH: Gloss natural body, satin neck
Yamaha Music UK
01908 366700
www.yamaha-europe.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★