

GITANE D-500 & DG-300 MODELE JOHN JORGENSON £499 & £850  
ACOUSTICS



PHOTOGRAPHY: JOBY SESSIONS



# Gitane D-500 & DG-300 Modele John Jorgenson £499 & £850

**Return of Django: a pair of affordable yet classy gypsy jazz acoustics from Chinese-built, US-marketed brand Gitane** by Matthew Wig

**G**ypsy jazz... manouche... hot club... whatever you call the scene, its origins lie in the unique playing style of jazz legend Django Reinhardt. We can't help you play as well as Django, but we can help you find a Django-style guitar – an instrument based on the distinctive Selmer/Maccaferri acoustics of the 1930s (see boxout feature). Realistically, a rare vintage Selmer is not an option, so finding an independent luthier that specialises in 'gypsy jazz' models is one solution. However, if you simply haven't got over a grand (minimum) to spend, or you're fairly new to this musical genre, then read on.

Saga Musical Instruments in the US (home of the impressive Blueridge and Regal brands) has been importing Selmer/Maccaferri reproductions from the Far East since the late 1970s. A few years back Saga set up the Chinese-built Gitane brand to specifically market its Django-style range. This line encompasses very authentic copies of various incarnations of the Selmer Modele Jazz, like the D-500 we have here, which is based on the original

Maccaferri-designed 1932-33 version. Though new to us, the D-500 is a few years old now, but provides some vital context and comparison in this review. A more recent Gitane addition is one of two John Jorgenson signature editions, the DG-300 Modele John Jorgenson (the only one available in the UK). With his gypsy jazz hat on, all-round virtuoso Jorgenson was already a Gitane user, and his collaboration has resulted in a guitar based on the later Selmer Modele Jazz. It's slightly customised, but is otherwise equally authentic.

## D-500

Without the real thing to-hand, the detailed photos and structural plans we've seen of original Maccaferri-designed Selmers reveal that this Gitane is pretty spot-on.

Looking inside we begin to unlock the secret of these acoustics' unique tone. While nearly all other flat-top steel-string acoustics use X-bracing for the soundboard, this guitar features parallel ladder bracing for its top as well as its back. Ladder bracing disperses

vibrations differently to X-bracing, delivering a distinct tonal signature, although it is innately weaker. Accordingly, the top's three main lower bout struts are fairly chunky, with the thickest one laid across just beneath the soundhole, while a pair of lighter struts are laid across the lower bout's widest section, spaced a few centimetres apart, to deal with the pressure from the bridge.

It's all fairly tidy in there, and the internal surfaces have also been sealed with a thin gloss finish – another traditional detail.

The Cremona orange-stained top is littered with short thin dark grain streaks, but is otherwise a decent slice of spruce. The large 'D' soundhole is one of the most distinctive Maccaferri features, and its multi-layered/coloured ebony and stained maple rosette looks pretty clean-cut, as does the ebony/maple perimeter purfling.

Both back and side panels also carry neat ebony/maple edge purfling, and the sides' end-joint strip and the body binding are both ebony. Laminate rosewood is true to original spec, which →

## The rivals

D-500	
Aria MM10	£299
Manouche Guitars	
Modele Orchestre	
"D-Hole"	£875
Royal Gypsy Jazz Guitars	
Model 1934	£1,250

**Gitane's niche in this specialist market is fairly unchallenged, but there are a few options. Interestingly, Aria has just launched a couple of true entry-level Selmer/Maccaferri copies with similar spec, except for their rosewood fingerboards, plain brass tailpiece and semi-gloss finish. Manouche Guitars are Korean-built copies, again sticking strictly to original specs. Several independent luthiers in the UK do excellent, carefully researched hand-built copies – Roy Eneas's Royal Gypsy Jazz Guitars is a good example, and, of course, you get much more choice with tonewoods and other custom details**



## ACOUSTICS

**GITANE D-500****PRICE:** £499**ORIGIN:** China**TYPE:** D-hole Selmer/Maccaferri-style acoustic with horizontal cutaway and 12-fret neck**TOP:** Solid spruce**BACK/SIDES:** Rosewood (laminated)**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 103mm**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 400mm**NECK:** Mahogany**SCALE LENGTH:** 640mm**TUNERS:** Vintage-style, three-on-a-plate, brushed gold-plated w/ gear covers and cream plastic buttons**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone (with zero fret)/49mm**FINGERBOARD:** Ebony, unbound, with pearl dot markers**FRETS:** 24, medium**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Ebony/55mm**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 2/4.5**LEFT-HANDERS:** No**FINISHES:** Natural gloss body and neck w/ Cremona orange stain top (as reviewed)**Gremlin****01273 491333****www.gremlinmusic.co.uk**

→ is handy for keeping costs down.

Unsurprisingly, the neck is a three-piece, and is dovetail jointed. A concession to modern neck setting, we find a typical L-shaped neck block to help stabilise alignment. The fingerboard and frets are reassuringly shipshape, as is the nut-cum-spacer. At the soundhole end, the treble side fingerboard overhang is underpinned with its own mini strut. At the other end, the ebony-faced slotted headstock carries a set of fittingly vintage-looking, but not historically accurate, tuners (Selmers had sealed machines). The stiffness of the gearing isn't consistent, but they're all smooth enough.

Very precisely fashioned, the ebony non-saddle bridge has a moveable (floating) arched central section that sits between those two fixed 'moustache' ends. As you'll see, the bridge sits straight across, but it has staggered steps carved in its peaked centre for basic intonation compensation. Again, the stamped brass trapeze tailpiece is an authentic-looking reproduction, but with a black plastic insert.

So, where's the evidence this is a Chinese factory-built instrument? Well, the relatively generous gloss finish, applied after the neck is fitted, gives it away. Actually, it's generally very even, and there's not too much pooling in the usual crevices, but the end of the 'board looks unnecessarily scruffy.

A lot like playing a classical guitar, the D-500's neck is wide, flat-centred and follows a 'shallow U' profile, tapering in depth from 21.5mm (first fret) to 24.5mm (ninth fret). Strangely, the string spacing has both E strings

sitting over 4mm in from the fingerboard edge, but maybe the lower tension strings that are used on these guitars need more of a 'bend zone' at the edges.

No complaints on any tactile level: we find a perfectly silky 'board, buffed up frets with no snaggy ends and glassy gloss neck.

Again, tradition dictates a relatively high action on Gypsy Jazz guitars, to optimise clarity, vibrato and sustain. Neck alignment seems well judged here to ensure decent bridge height (especially crucial on a floating bridge guitar), while achieving a manageable clean-ringing string height.

Fingerboard evenness falters beyond the body joint, but with this action it doesn't matter. The zero fret sorts the nut-end action out.

Silver-plated, copper-wound steel strings in .011 – .046 or .010 – .045 gauges are the norm for these guitars. The D-500 comes strung with La Bella Custom .010 – .045 Silk And Steels, with even more give in them.

The Selmer-style ultra-low square profile heel combines with the cutaway to give us crucial upper fret access for this 12-fret neck acoustic. Intonation is good enough – on the top two strings, at least – to scale that 24th fret, Django-style.

**SOUNDS:** Even as a non-aficionado, you can't help getting a little Django fever when you pick your first notes on this guitar. Gypsy jazz acoustics are best described as the steel-string equivalent of the Spanish flamenco guitar, and you immediately sense that this Gitane has all the prerequisite attributes

GITANE D-500	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<b>■ WE LIKED</b> Clean construction; authentic detail, feel and sound; cost-effective Chinese production	
<b>■ WE DISLIKED</b> Slightly scruffy finish at the end of the fingerboard	

attributes. It's loud and excitingly spicy, yet fruity, with loads of kinetic attack in the treble registers without ever sounding scratchy like a cheap acoustic can. That's the point: it's a slightly lo-fi tone but not a low-quality tone, focused in a range that really cuts through and adds weight and lyrical flavour to your lead lines, as well as 'chop' to your rhythm. Even really high notes have a sweet, almost elastic kind of snap to them, with a palatable crisp presence that ensures exceptional audibility. Strummed you hear a more 'barking' mid-range sound that allows you to achieve that percussive chug we know from Django's stuff.

So, what's the pay off? Well, compared to a good dreadnought there's little oomph in the bass at all, which affects the overall balance of sound if you're attempting to play in other styles. For example, flatpicking and song accompaniment is not the D-500's ideal meal.

**DG-300 Modele John Jorgenson**

While there are several blatant differences here (see Spec Check), we'll point out some less obvious key features of this model.

Peering into the equally tidy interior we find that this soundboard's lower bout ladder bracing uses four fairly equally spaced and equally tall, thin struts. In fact, nearly all this soundbox's struts are taller and thinner than the D-500's. This variance arises



Several features combine to give the DG-300 quite a different feel to its sibling

because the DG-300 emulates Selmer's revised Modele Jazz construction, rather than Maccaferri's original construction (see boxout). Swapping to a 14-fret neck and an extra long scale usually warrants a fair bit of structural redesign. The internal surfaces have a much lighter, non-gloss finish, too.

Outside we find reassuringly consistent and clean workmanship again. It's subtle, but the top's toner is a lighter, more yellow shade here. Special Jorgenson features include the 'Dalmation' pattern tortoiseshell used for the body binding, tailpiece insert and within the rosette. Also, there's the lush-looking Brazilian rosewood laminate back/sides, but the custom oval fingerboard markers would look better if they were exactly vertical. We find different tuners too – more like classical guitar tuners and consistently less stiff than the D-500's.

Several factors combine to give quite a different feel to this model. For starters, the neck's narrower, and its flat-spined 'U'-profile is a fraction shallower. The especially long scale may prove a little disconcerting at first, but the accordingly increased string tension isn't really an issue with these lighter gauges.

Obviously you've got much more workable access to the upper frets on this model, although the floating bridge

## DJANGO'S ROOTS

**A very brief history of Django's Guitar: Selmer, Maccaferri, and all that jazz**

The unique Modele Jazz acoustic guitar, built by Selmer of Paris between 1932 and 1952 (when the company closed down), is immortalised as Django Reinhardt's most trusted six-string workhorse. Mario Maccaferri's name is inextricably linked to this instrument, but in reality his relationship with Selmer ended after designing only the original version. Maccaferri's Modele Jazz wasn't a giant Gibson-style arch-top, but a medium bodied flat-top acoustic with a distinctive horizontal cutaway. It also featured a large D-shape soundhole, designed to accompany Maccaferri's patented internal resonator (which didn't entirely catch on), a wide 12-fret neck, 640mm (25.2-inch) scale, 24-fret

fingerboard, slotted headstock, zero fret, floating flat-bottomed compensated bridge with fixed 'moustache' ends and a distinctive brass tailpiece. Solid French spruce top, laminate rosewood back and sides, and a walnut neck were standard spec. Though retaining the original cutaway body and general style, Selmer considerably redesigned the Modele Jazz after Maccaferri's acrimonious departure in 1933. It now had a small oval soundhole, a narrower 14-fret neck, a longer 670mm (26.4-inch) scale, a 21-fret fingerboard, no resonator and changes to both bracing and arched bridge. Though Django started with an original D-hole Maccaferri model, his most enduring partner was the latter Selmer-modified version. Selmer only produced about a thousand acoustic guitars in total, and vintage Modele Jazz acoustics are now collectors' items.

needed moving upwards a fair bit to improve the 12th fret intonation, and so was no longer perfectly aligned with its fixed 'moustache' ends.

Also, the frets feel rougher for string bends on this one.

**SOUNDS:** Tone-wise, there's not a huge difference here, but the DG-300

does literally sound tighter, especially on the low notes. Where the D-500's bass was pretty soft, this guitar delivers a more energetic and defined bottom end. By the same token its mid-range is not as warm and the treble is harder and spikier; and while the overall sound seems a little more balanced for standard strumming it's not as

## The rivals

**DG-300**  
Aria MM20 £299  
Manouche Guitars  
Modele Jazz £799  
Royal Gypsy Jazz Guitars  
Model 1939 £1,250  
Since the Modele John Jorgenson is a slightly customised version of Selmer's original you'll find most other models stick to original Selmer appointments – black/ebony binding, black/ebony tailpiece insert and pearl dot fingerboard markers. All the 'rivals' stick to the fractionally shorter traditional 670mm scale, although the Royal Gypsy Jazz 1939 can be ordered with a 650mm scale. See DG-500 rivals for other general comments on these three alternative brands

GITANE D-500 & DG-300 MODELE JOHN JORGENSEN £499 & £850

ACOUSTICS



GITANE DG-300  
MODELE JOHN  
JORGENSEN

As D-500 except...

PRICE: £850

TYPE: Small oval-hole  
Selmer-style acoustic  
with horizontal cutaway  
and long scale

BACK/SIDES: Brazilian  
rosewood (laminated)

SCALE LENGTH:

676mm

TUNERS: Three-on-a-  
plate, open-geared,  
brushed gold-plated w/  
grained ivoroid buttons

NUT/WIDTH: Bone (with  
zero fret)/45mm

FINGERBOARD: Ebony,  
unbound, with pearl oval  
markers

FRETS: 21, medium

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.9/4.2

OPTIONS: DG-255

(£499) – as DG-300, but

with laminate plain

rosewood back/sides,

ebony binding, maple/

walnut top and back

purfling, traditional multi-

ply rosette w/ ebony

square inlay, pearl dot

fingerboard markers,

black plastic tailpiece

inlay and D-500 type

tuners. DG-250M (£525)

– as DG-300, but with

laminate birds-eye maple

back/sides, maple neck

w/solid headstock, ebony

binding, maple/walnut

top and back purfling,

traditional multi-ply

rosette w/ ebony square

inlay, pearl dot

fingerboard markers,

black plastic tailpiece

insert and individual

nickel tuners.

FINISHES: Natural gloss

body and neck w/ ageing

toner for top (as

reviewed)

**Tone-wise, there's not a  
huge difference here, but  
the DG-300 does literally  
sound tighter, especially on  
the low notes**

GITANE DG-300 JJ	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
■ <b>WE LIKED</b> Ditto the D-500	
■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> Tasteful but relatively costly collection of custom upgrades; slightly skew-whiff fingerboard inlays	

→ satisfyingly 'chug-a-long' for hot club  
swinging rhythms. However, you can  
hit it quite a lot harder before it  
'bottoms out', and we can see why this  
might be the ideal choice for the  
wannabe Django rather than the Joseph  
Reinhardt of the quintet.

**Verdict**

Aria's entry-level models may now  
undercut Gitane in the lower end of  
this specialist market, but we would  
expect the D-500 and DG-300 guitars  
to be superior instruments on most  
levels. Judging by the guitars  
themselves, they represent impressive  
value for money in terms of quality –

although this comparison would not  
necessarily convince us to part with  
over £300 extra for the Jorgenson  
model's custom features.

Crucially, however, both guitars  
deliver the goods. An ideal brand for  
a would-be gypsy jazzer on a restricted  
budget, it's also worth considering  
Gitane as an affordable way to extend  
your tonal options and expand your  
playing horizons. **A**

**Gitane D-500**

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

**Gitane DG-300 Modele John Jorgenson**

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

The DG-300 includes  
'Dalmation' pattern  
tortoiseshell for  
binding, tailpiece  
insert and rosette

