



£79

LINE 6 VARIAX WORKBENCH

CREATE YOUR DREAM AXE IN A MATTER OF MINUTES. NO CHISEL REQUIRED! WORDS: HENRY YATES

> Doesn't look much like a workbench to me...

It may come as a disappointment to the carpenters among our readership to learn that the Line 6 Variax Workbench has almost nothing in common with an *actual* workbench. If you want vices, spirit levels and a place to keep screwdrivers, may we suggest a trip to your local DIY store instead and leave the rest of us to peruse the latest offering from the heavyweight champion of modelling technology.

If you are familiar with Line 6 – and, unless you've just emerged from a cave, we'll assume you are – then you will have already realised that the Variax Workbench is a *virtual* workbench. It lets you customise the models within your Variax guitar, save the changes you have made and then trade them online with other users. Brian May had to smash up a fireplace to create his trademark

Red Special; EVH's bastardised guitars were the product of many a lonely night spent with a pair of pliers. With the Line 6 Workbench, you can now create an arsenal of customised guitars without ever hitting your thumb with a hammer.

What will I need to make it work?

The Workbench operates in tandem with any Line 6 Variax electric guitar. Admittedly, this does add a fair whack onto the £79 retail price of the Workbench software, but with the recent launch of the Variax 300 at £340 (that's what we tested the Workbench with – see below), it's not as much of a pisser as you might think. Alongside the Variax, you will also need a PC equipped with Windows XP/2000 and a USB port, plus an amplifier. Workbench will run effectively on a Mac too, just check out our information panel for system requirements.

OK, where do I start?

To begin, insert the Workbench CD into your computer. While fairly straightforward, we didn't find the software installation process quite as intuitive as some of the Line 6 products we've tested in the past. By the time we registered our Variax, reconfigured the guitar's memory banks to let us use it with the Workbench, and established that, no, we weren't interested in taking out a subscription to *Rolling Stone*, a good 15 minutes had ticked by. Try and think of it like losing your virginity – painful and confusing, yes, but you only have to do it once.

Fair enough, so what happens next?

With the Workbench icon on your desktop, you connect the Variax to the converter box via the supplied RJ-45 connector and plug that into the USB port of your laptop. Then you take the TRS cable (it comes with your

WHO'S IT FOR?

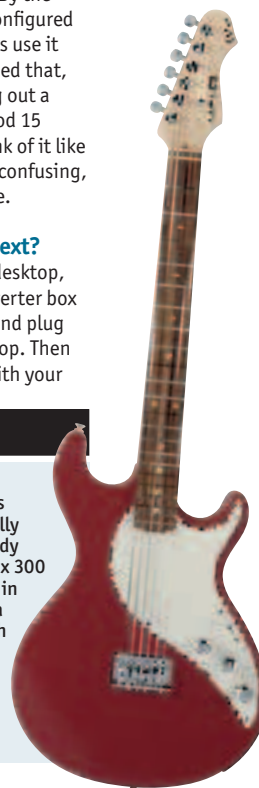
Anyone who's considered dropping a PAF into their Telecaster, but doesn't know which way up to hold a hacksaw

"YES, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE GUITAR?" TG INTRODUCES THE NEW VARIAX 300

It's surely no coincidence that the Line 6 Variax Workbench was launched on the same day as the Variax 300. With production of the Variax 500 having ceased ("There's only about nine left in the country," chirped a very friendly Line 6 lady down the phone), and the Variax 700 weighing in at a mighty £1,049, the market was ripe for a budget version of this famous modelling guitar. And considering that you can't operate the Workbench software without a Variax, it seemed the perfect opportunity to launch the Variax 300 – yours for £340.

If you've never heard of the Variax concept, here's how it works. Like its predecessors, the Variax 300 is a single electric guitar that is able to mimic – or 'model' – the tones and nuances of 28 other electric and acoustic models. Unless you play modern metal, you should find most of the bases covered here, from a convincing reading of the Gibson ES-335 to the hairy chested swagger of the Les Paul Standard. Line 6 can do this kind of thing with its eyes closed, and TG wasn't surprised to learn that the Variax 300 excelled on the authenticity front.

With all the fanfare surrounding the Variax's modelling abilities, it often gets overlooked how well these guitars actually play. With two cutaways, a contoured body and a fast-playing maple neck, the Variax 300 is not an instrument to be hunched over in a darkened bedsit. On the contrary, it's a serious gig weapon that easily dealt with all the genres we threw at it and didn't roll over when it accompanied us on an all-day jam session. Now, if only people would stop asking us what happened to the frigging pickups...





Ever wanted to stick a PAF on a Strat? The Workbench's software lets you choose from 17 different pickups...



Adjusting the position and angle of your chosen pickups is simple, allowing you to subtly customise your tone

Variax) and plug it into the XPS Mini power supply. Then – deep breath – you link the ‘Output jack’ of the XPS to your amp via a normal guitar lead. Your bedroom will look like spaghetti junction once it’s done, but you can dump half the wires before you hit the stage.

What exactly is the software capable of?

The standard Variax 300 has models based on a selection of classic guitars, from the Gibson Les Paul to the Gretsch Silver Jet. The tonal nuances of each guitar are modelled, as closely as possible, from the character of the woods to the wiring of the pickups. That’s fine if you want to emulate a 1958 Les Paul, but how about if you fancy sticking a Strat-style pole-piece singlecoil in the neck? Most custom shops would tell you to sling your hook, but the Workbench turns such hypothetical flights of fancy into reality with a few clicks of the mouse.

TG kicked off by choosing a Les Paul via the model select knob on our Variax. To remind ourselves of the blueprint, we gave it a strum in its original form and were hit with the beefy PAF roar that Line 6 have always nailed so well. Then we got the virtual hacksaw out. The logical first step was to get rid of those humbuckers, so we headed to the ‘Pickup’ section and scrolled down the list of substitutes. As usual, Line 6 have laid the options on with a trowel; offering a choice of 17 different pickups that cover everything from Gretsch-style Filtertrons to the kind of P90s you would find on a Les Paul

INFORMATION

ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Software and USB hardware to customise the Variax electric

RUNNING REQUIREMENTS: Variax 300, 500 or 700. PC with at least a Pentium III 500 MHz [or better] processor, Windows XP/2000, one available USB port and 256RAM. Apple Mac users need OSX 10.3 [or higher] and a G4/G5 running at 400 MHz [or faster]. Internet connection also required

INCLUDES: Workbench software, RJ-45 connector, Variax USB interface

GUITAR BODY TYPES: 28 types, including 1960 Telecaster, 1958 Les Paul, 1959 Strat, 1968 Rickenbacker 360 and 1956 Gretsch Silver Jet

PICKUP TYPES: 17 types, including PAF humbucker, Goldtop P-90 and Gretsch-style Filtertron

CONTACT: Line 6 UK 01327 302700
WEB: www.line6.com

ALTERNATIVELY

Line 6 PodXT Live – £399

Line 6 Vetta II – £1,559

Both are substitutes for Workbench hardware

Goldtop. In the interests of undermining everything the Les Paul stands for, however, TG dropped a Strat-style singlecoil into both the neck and bridge...

Then what?

TG was intrigued by the combination of a mahogany body and singlecoil snap – it works much better than you might think, actually – but continued to tear up the blueprint by adjusting the position of the pickups on the body and rotating them by 20 degrees. We then adjusted the levels to make the bridge cut through more than the neck, put them slightly out of phase and tweaked the resistance of the tone and volume controls. Beyond a certain point, you will probably have to guess how authentic it all sounds (we don’t know anyone who has carried out this customisation in ‘real life’), but there’s no doubting the sheer versatility on offer here.

Any other features?

Once you are completely satisfied with the body and pickups, a separate section allows you to save your new customised tunings. Just turn your amp up so that you’re unable to hear what the unamplified strings are doing, then select a tuning from the Workbench’s comprehensive list. While TG was initially tempted by a Keef-style Open G, we eventually settled on Drop D and watched in awe as the software virtually reconfigured our tuning, dropping our low string (previously tuned to E) to a bowel-quaking D.

Can you save the customised settings?

The Workbench would be kind of pointless if you couldn’t unleash your custom models on a packed venue. Once you have finished tweaking, give your creation a name and save it into the Variax’s memory banks. Here again, we didn’t feel the Workbench was as intuitive as some Line 6 gear – it wouldn’t have hurt to provide an instruction manual, for instance – but after a few aborted attempts we managed to get our heads around the process.

It’s worth the money, then?

If you’ve already got a Variax and feel you’ve almost exhausted its potential, we wouldn’t hesitate to recommend the Workbench. It offers hours of fun, tons of options, and the opportunity to create a tone like no-one else on the planet. If you haven’t got a Variax, we’d think carefully before blowing the £400-plus on the guitar and Workbench. This product isn’t designed for someone who’s satisfied with their Telecaster and Marshall. It’s a playground for guitarists who are continually searching for the ultimate tone and who change their setup more often than their socks. If that sounds like you, then the Line 6 Workbench offers a level of customisation that will blow you away. The benchmark has been set.

FOR: Cheap and as authentic as you’d expect
AGAINST: Not as intuitive as some Line 6 gear

TG RATING: ★★★★★★☆☆