



Dread Reckoning

During this 100th anniversary year of the dreadnought, Martin has released a number of celebratory models, although it might have left the best till last.

But how does it stack up against its biggest rival? Two dreads to judge!

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Joseph Branston





MARTIN DR CENTENNIAL & TAYLOR 410E £1,995 & £1,986

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What You Need To Know

1 How old?!

Yes, it's hard to fathom that the steel-string flat-top we take for granted is due a letter from the Queen. It's surely the most copied guitar ever.

2 You don't usually write about copies in *Guitarist*. Why do you do so with acoustics?

Don't blame us! The steel-string world is made up of a limited number of designs that are shared. Everyone has copied Martin. But because it's a primarily acoustic design, everyone has their own take, their own recipe, on what makes a great dreadnought.

3 Isn't this a random pick, though? Both Taylor and Martin make loads of dreadnoughts...

The rosewood 410e-R is a new model that was released at Summer NAMM 2016; the standard spec for the 400 series is solid ovankol back and sides, which "shares rosewood's full-spectrum tonal range, with a slightly fuller midrange and a bright, focused top-end," says Taylor. The DR Centennial was released in late August and is a "time-limited edition," says Martin, "that will cap-off the celebration of '100 Years Of The Dreadnought' and can be ordered up until 30 December 2016".

The tussle for dominance in the steel-string world between Martin and Taylor is often reflected in players' preferences. Many prefer the 'old-world' classic steel-string feel and sound of their cherished Martins, while others live by the more modernistic, ultra-playable Taylor blend. The truth is, over the past decade the instruments made by these two steel-string titans have got closer, with Taylor seeming to imbue a more classic style and sound to many of its new models, while Martin embraces new technologies, materials and electro systems. It's really not a case of 'which is best', but which you prefer.

Typically, each maker who interprets the dreadnought shape will add its own twist and, here, Taylor's dread is slightly bigger, the shoulders a little squarer and with more meat on the lower bouts as they flare out from the waist to the base, which is slightly squarer than the Martin's. The Martin, however, is deeper at the rim and is slightly lighter in weight, too, although our Taylor does have onboard electrics fitted.

Of course, both share a 14-fret neck join and a scale length that's virtually identical. Martin quotes a 44.45mm (1.75-inch) nut width, although it measures slightly less; Taylor quotes 42.86mm (1.69 inches), which is a true measurement. There's just a 1.5mm difference in the string spread at the nut – the important bit – while at the bridge, there's a minimal half mill' difference.

Martin's neck (and, indeed, the whole instrument) has a very light sprayed lacquer matt finish giving a slightly textured, open-pore feel with a depth of 20.8mm at the 1st fret and 23.2mm at the 10th. While Taylor's

neck feels much smoother, it's satin (the rest of the guitar is thinly glossed) and measures 21.3mm at the 1st fret and 22.2mm at the 10th. Our Martin has a very classic oval 'C' profile; the Taylor is subtly 'V'd, certainly in the lower positions. Taylor has a lot to shout about with its NT neck joint, a bolt-on design that can be accurately set via ultra-thin shims in the joint and easily re-set if ever necessary. Martin uses a more classic 'simple dovetail' joint.

The spruce tops are different, too. Taylor's is Sitka and typically finely grained and flecked; the striping on the whiter looking Adirondack spruce of the Martin is bolder and the centre section, under the strings and below the bridge, is noticeably darker, almost as if it's a three-piece top. It's harder to comment on the bracing style. Martin quotes 'Forward Shifted Scalloped X-Brace', with Sitka braces; Taylor quotes 'Forward Shifted Pattern with Relief Rout', but not the precise spruce used.

Both are, however, impeccably crafted and clean both inside and out. The Taylor has a little more decoration around the soundhole and striped inner purflings on the top edge inside the bright white binding. The Martin is only bound on its top edge, and the more vintage-y cream coloured material is left sharper-edged. Speaking of which, while the Martin's teardrop pickguard is a darker tortie hue than the Taylor, it's also got noticeably sharp edges.

The Taylor looks – and in some places, feels – a little more refined and that's enhanced by the ebony 'board (which is bound) and bridge as opposed to the quite light-coloured rosewood of the Martin.



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1. Classic old-school luthiery from Martin with its dovetailed neck joint. The stripped-down vibe of the Centennial means we don't get back edge binding

2. The Centennial's Adirondack spruce top receives Martin's VTS treatment and a very light 'sprayed lacquer' finish

3. Both the nut and compensated saddle are bone on the Martin. The bridge and fingerboard are made from rosewood



2

New 'Old' Wood

The ongoing trend for acoustic guitar makers to 'age' the sound of their guitars veers closely on the side of being (yet) another liberal application of snake oil. Or is it? Well, Martin, Taylor, Gibson, Yamaha, Bourgeois, Takamine, Atkins and many more makers don't think so: torrefaction or thermo-curing looks set to stay.

Martin's Vintage Tone System (VTS) was announced at the start of 2015 and is the result of considerable research into the age-old torrefaction process (from Latin *torrefacere*, meaning 'dry by heat'). The process itself is believed by some to date back to the Vikings, where wood or, indeed, grain and animal feed is super-heated in a low-oxygen environment (to prevent it bursting into flames) to remove moisture. A more recent discovery is that the torrefaction process actually changes the cellular structure of the treated wood, and some believe it becomes similar to timber that is tens or hundreds of years old. Now, that might help someone who's beavering away forging 'old master' violins, for example, how does it help us guitar players?

Initially used in Martin's Authentic series, it's now more widespread, not least on our DR Centennial. The VTS process enables Martin to 'dial in' on a certain vintage, so the guitar not only looks the part, but, the company believes, sounds it, too: a 'vintage' Martin for those impatient players who can't wait around for decades. Taylor has employed a similar process on its revamped 600 Series to obtain a more 'mature' sound and a darker, older appearance – a 'by-product' of the process and possibly the reason for the darker section of our DR Centennial's top. Some makers also believe torrefied spruce is more stable but can be more difficult to work with than 'new' untreated wood, becoming more brittle as a result of the process.



3



Even the nuts and saddles differ: Martin quotes bone for both; Taylor uses a Tusq nut and Micarta saddle.

Sounds

This is the important bit: our engagement with the guitars. If you're drawn to a more utilitarian vibe, then it might be the Martin you'd pick up first and, although that neck feel, and perhaps overall appearance, might make you think it's the cheaper date of the two, the slight weight advantage gets you thinking it's an older-style piece. That's certainly the intention of the Vintage Tone System (VTS) treatment of the top – the lowest priced dreadnought Martin has used this 'ageing' system on (see the 'New 'Old' Wood' box on p101). Taylor has also used a similar technology, notably on its 600 Series, but here relies on its 'thicknessing' and bracing, plus that unique relief route (a small channel cut inside the top around the outer edge) to produce the goods.

Differences aside, and whatever your budget, if you're looking for a new dread we'd suggest you play these two first. They aptly illustrate what a good-quality production guitar should sound like. We had been playing the Taylor for a few days before the Martin arrived and had rather fallen for its charms – a big but balanced sound that packs plenty of lows, quite an open mid-range but with plenty of kick when hit hard with a pick. But for fingerstyle, too, especially behind a voice, it's like your own mini-orchestra. But the slightly rougher shod Martin isn't going to take that lying down, and from the first strum it announces its presence with a bigger, though slightly less refined voice. It has an extraordinary dynamic range: as you dig in you get the feeling there's still another gear to go. There's a slightly crisper, textured edge to the highs, too, and a little more power for any higher-fret solo duties. The downside is that it takes perhaps a more experienced right hand to get a really even rhythm bed and to control the beast.



Back on the 410e-R and it seems a perfect recording partner with its subtle restraint and a slightly more controlled voice. It may sound clichéd, but for your rougher bar-room Americana, the Martin suits to a T; the Taylor pushes you to more sophisticated chord voicings, more colours or modern textural effects and playing styles. While not a part of this review, the Taylor also includes the ES-2 pickup system that we've used extensively. It's not to everyone's taste, but is a very clean-sounding efficient system nonetheless.

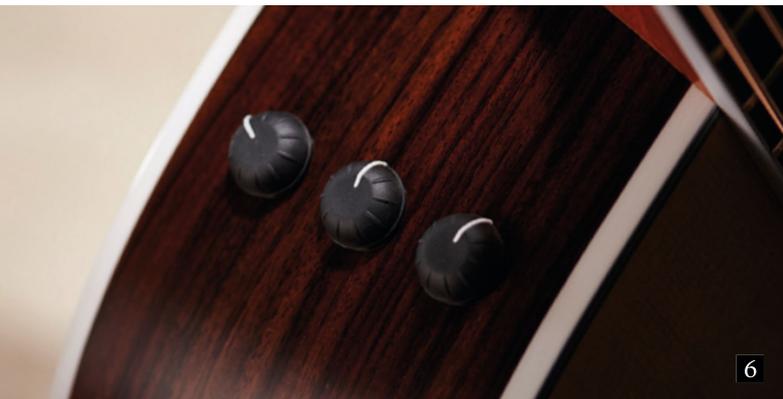
Verdict

We all have our preconceptions about brands and sounds, and even acoustic body sizes, woods, bracing... the list goes on. This pairing has reminded us, however, that not only is a dread a much more useful piece than its 'big strummer' pigeonholing, but its specs and the company descriptions of its

The Martin has an extraordinary dynamic range: as you dig in you get the feeling there's still another gear to go



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4. Taylor uses ebony for both its fingerboard and bridge. Its compensated saddle is Micarta; the nut is Graph Tech's Tusq
5. Taylor's NT neck system allows precise adjustment and a re-set, if necessary, is relatively simple. As usual, we get a second strap button already fitted for strapped on stage use
6. Although the 410e-R shown here is an electro using Taylor's well-regarded ES-2, our Martin is purely acoustic, although a pickup system can be ordered and factory fitted (see spec, right)

wares are, to a certain extent, meaningless: judge the actual guitar, not the perception.

In which case, we have a serious job on our hands. With £2k in our pocket – a sizeable amount, for sure – which one would we choose? Taylor's 410e-R feels and sounds like a more expensive guitar, which isn't going to please those who perceive the brand as a little over-priced. Rich sounding, full of dread character but with a more modern 'sheen', it's a glorious guitar. On the other hand, the more utilitarian appearance of the Martin might not be to everyone's taste, especially at this price, but from a player's perspective, that pales into insignificance when you play it: it's an earthy, old-school sounding dread that's powerful if you need to be or hugely characterful for those more relaxed, intimate moments. Both are serious dreads illustrating how hard these two top-tier brands are working for your business. **G**



MARTIN DR CENTENNIAL

PRICE: £1,995 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Dreadnought-sized steel-string acoustic
TOP: Solid Adirondack spruce w/ VTS
BACK/SIDES: Solid East Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 124mm (tapering to 99mm)
MAX BODY WIDTH: 397mm
NECK: Select hardwood, Modified Low Oval profile with High Performance Taper (20.8/23.2)
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm (25.4")
TUNERS: Individual Nickel-plated Grover Open Gear
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.13mm
FINGERBOARD: East Indian rosewood, m-o-p (Style 18) dot inlays, 406mm (16") radius
FRETS: 20, medium/small
BRIDGE/SPACING: East Indian rosewood with compensated bone saddle/55mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.97/4.3
OPTIONS: DRE Centennial (£2,190) w/ factory-fitted Fishman Thinline Gold system
RANGE OPTIONS: USA spruce-topped dreads start with the D-16GT (£1,529); D-18 (£2,199)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISHES: Natural satin (as reviewed)



9/10

PROS Stripped-down vibe; VTS top; big, dynamic sound

CONS Too rough shod for some? Get over it!



TAYLOR 410E-R

PRICE: £1,986 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Dreadnought-sized steel-string electro acoustic
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce, Forward Shifted Pattern with Relief Rout
BACK/SIDES: Solid East Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 113mm (tapering to 95.6mm)
MAX BODY WIDTH: 404mm
NECK: Tropical Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Taylor logo'd die-cast nickel-plated
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech Tusq/42.9mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony, 4mm Italian acrylic dot inlays, 381mm (15") radius
FRETS: 20, medium/small
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with compensated Micarta saddle/55.5mm
ELECTRICS: Taylor ES-2 with shoulder mounted volume, treble and bass controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.2/4.84
OPTIONS: The acoustic 410-R, £1,708
RANGE OPTIONS: Taylor's USA dreads start with the sapele/spruce 310 at £1,569, with a 631mm/24.9" scale
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISHES: Natural gloss with satin neck (as reviewed)



9/10

PROS Superb Taylor build; hugely refined multi-use sound

CONS Very little to dislike – it's a class act!