





New Growth

The two biggest names in acoustic guitar have championed non-traditional, sustainable tonewoods for this fine pair of mid-priced cutaway models

Words Rob Laing Photography Neil Godwin & Joseph Branston



TAYLOR 214CE-CF DLX AND MARTIN DCRSG

£1,439 & £1,450

What You Need To Know

1 A Martin dreadnought and a Taylor Grand Auditorium... what's new?

These two familiar shapes are usually associated with rosewood and mahogany back and sides teamed with a Sitka spruce top. Not here – both use non-traditional African tonewoods in different ways.

2 How so?

Taylor has employed copafera here (also known by the name etimoe) as the outer layer for the back and sides on the 214ce-CF DLX. Martin uses solid mutenye for the back and sides of the DCRSG. Both have solid Sitka spruce tops.

3 Why introduce these alternatives to rosewood now? If it ain't broke...

The recent CITES restrictions have had a big impact on the import and export of rosewoods. Many guitar companies are looking to offer alternative options in their ranges. But this diversification can potentially bring new cosmetic and tonal flavours.

This has been the year when guitarists were forced to come to terms with the increasing scarcity of traditional tonewoods. New CITES regulations placed stringent controls on the export of guitars with rosewood 'boards and bodies and even major names like Fender were forced to look for alternative woods for fingerboards. While the initial hue and cry may have died down a bit, it's clear that a watershed point in guitar making has been reached. It means, among other things, that we can expect to see even more alternative woods being used as the industry tries to adapt.

But sustainability isn't the only reason for using non-traditional tonewoods, especially in the acoustic market. In a packed marketplace, where many brands and models vie for our attention, unusual tonewoods can open the door to striking new visual and tonal possibilities. And that's not lost on the two biggest names in the market, who have both championed the use of sustainable woods for some time now.

That said, as such things go, the construction of these two guitars is relatively conservative: the dreadnought Martin DCRSG features mutenye back and sides, while the Grand Auditorium Taylor 214ce-CF DLX uses layered copafera. Both come with solid Sitka spruce tops, a more traditional choice, and when Taylor describes the combination as producing a

“clear, dynamic response”, it is a description that could fit any number of its guitars, which should reassure traditionalists.

The DCRSG is part of a Road Series that boasts certified sustainable wood parts. Martin describes mutenye as an African tonewood similar to rosewood and ovankol, lending the DCRSG what it calls a “beautiful even tone with good bass response and clear mids and trebles”. Again, a typical dreadnought all-rounder. So it'll be interesting to find out how close to established tonal norms the DCRSG comes.

Taylor, meanwhile, has used a natural process to enhance the layered copafera's mix of mocha, auburn and cinnamon hues. The effect is reminiscent of rosewood, but subtly overlaid with horizontal shadows. The DCRSG's mutenye has a grain and hue that does indeed recall ovankol, with a lightly rippled flame at the sides and higher contrast grain at the back. And while the Martin's hand-rubbed neck has a worn-in

The use of unusual tonewoods can open the door to striking new visual and tonal possibilities



1

1. The DCRSG's bridge continues the sustainability theme with Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Certified Richlite. The saddle is compensated Tusq

texture, Taylor opts for a smoother satin feel. Both builds exhibit the quality we'd expect from mid-priced models from these brands, so we're really looking forward to discovering their tonal qualities.

Feel & Sounds

Interestingly, there's a softness to the Martin's mids, especially with single notes. And though its highs may not offer the bright attack some players used to rosewood want from a dreadnought – the action here is low enough to contribute to that – they do offer something else. The highs instead lend an airy feel to chord work while the bottom end adds plenty of depth for that harmonious hi-fi spectrum players expect from a Martin. It's a mellower take on higher-end shimmer. Rhythm work is where the Martin really shines, though the resonant lows from the body also lend welcome authority to bass notes in fingerstyle. The DCRSG proves especially



2

2. The Martin's Fishman Sonitone volume and tone (treble roll-off) controls are unobtrusively located on the inside edge of the soundhole



3

3. The solid mutenye of the Martin represents a new direction for the company and its hue and pattern bring to mind ovankol, a closely related tonewood, as well as bubinga

responsive to low volume playing with fingers or pick, and that in turn brings out a more sensitive playing approach – as well as being ideal for sneaking away for some late night practice.

There's immediately more projection from the Taylor aided by the higher, medium action of our test model. The classic bright Taylor balance soon reveals itself; a confident, clear voice for picking single notes with the lows more rounded and punchier than the Martin. The character here could easily be from layered rosewood, and we found the wider string spacing makes fingerstyle a little more comfortable than with the DCRSG.

Our previous experiences with both the Fishman Sonitone and Taylor Expression System 2 hint at how these guitars will sound plugged in – and the reality conforms pretty much with that hunch. The Sonitone has proved a very popular third party system for a number of brands, especially



4. The Taylor 214ce-CF DLX features the company's Expression System 2 with bass, treble and volume controls

5. The layered copafera is reminiscent of rosewood both visually and tonally



around the £500-£600 mark. It's a solid performing piezo system and here feels more resonant and warm than it does on some other guitars we've played, but there's still a compressed quality that means the DCRSG's softer natural subtleties aren't well represented in the higher end. But in some ways that's a benefit for the band player who needs more presence in the mix – the trebles sound punchier through our acoustic combo and rolling off the system's treble will ease you back to a rounder sound.

Piezo pickups often best suit the prominent mid-range of smaller-bodied models, but the Sonitone system still works well enough in this context. Though that can also be said of more reasonably-priced Martins – both the Dreadnought Junior and 00LX1AE feature the Sonitone and retail for under half the price of the DCRSG.

The Taylor's transition between acoustic and electric personas is much smoother. Plugged in, using comparable settings, it's not as loud as the Martin, but the Expression System 2 captures that Taylor character in a nutshell. It's a warmer and more rounded take on amplifying the guitar's natural voice but, on the other hand, it's perhaps not as punchy as someone in a band situation might want. However, it does offer a more organic experience overall, and as your ears adjust to the subtleties, we feel confident that you'll be able to dial in the settings to taste.

The Martin is a softer, mellower vision of a dreadnought than we've come to expect



6

Verdict

So how much difference do non-traditional tonewoods make here? In the case of the Taylor, the effect of the copafera employed in the construction of its back and sides is a bit harder to pin down, perhaps because it is used in layered rather than solid form here. But the core promise of a “clear, dynamic” character proves accurate; another reminder that Taylor’s Grand Auditorium is one of the best all-rounders out there. However, its confident, polished performance does come at a relatively high price, we feel, for the spec on offer.

The solid-wood Martin feels different; it’s a softer and mellower vision of what a dreadnought can be than we expected – the solid mutenye making its presence felt primarily in the attractive and subtle detail of the higher end overtones. It’s a shame that Martin have gone with the Sonitone pickup – it’s a decent system but it doesn’t deliver the detail we’d hope for here, especially at the price point. Niggles aside, though, both guitars make a very compelling case for branching out into new areas of timber and tone. **G**

6. The Taylor may feature non-traditional tonewoods but the Grand Auditorium platform is a proven performer



TAYLOR 214CE-CF DLX

PRICE: £1,439 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Grand Auditorium cutaway electro acoustic
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Layered copafera
MAX RIM DEPTH: 114mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 405mm
NECK: Tropical mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 647.7mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Chrome 100/200 enclosed
NUT/WIDTH: Nubone/43mm
FINGERBOARD: West African ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Micarta/55mm
ELECTRICS: Taylor Expression System 2
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.65/3.63
RANGE OPTIONS: The 214ce features Sitka spruce top, layered koa back and sides (£1,139); the 224ce-K DLX features layered koa back and sides with a solid koa top (£1,775)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes (no extra charge)
FINISHES: Natural (as reviewed)

Taylor Guitars
 +31 20 667 6030
www.taylorguitars.com

7/10

Pros: An all-rounder with good projection and balance, great playability and build, the Expression System 2 does this guitar justice

Cons: Expensive for an acoustic of this type; the layered copafera does little sonically



MARTIN DCRSG

PRICE: £1,450 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Dreadnought cutaway electro acoustic
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid mutenye
MAX RIM DEPTH: 123mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 398mm
NECK: Select hardwood
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm (25.4")
TUNERS: Chrome
NUT/WIDTH: Corian/44.45mm
FINGERBOARD: Richlite
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Richlite/54.7mm
ELECTRICS: Fishman Sonitone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.90/4.18
RANGE OPTIONS: Non cutaway DCRSG with Siris back and sides (£1,250), the Grand Performance-shape cutaway GPCRSR offers the same spec as the DCRSG elsewhere (£1,450) and the GPCRSR in another Grand Performance electro, this time with sapele back and sides (£1,099)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes (no extra charge)
FINISHES: Natural (as reviewed)

Westside Distribution
 0844 326 2000
www.westsidedistribution.com

7/10

Pros: An attractively mellower and airier take on Martin warmth, great playability and build quality

Cons: The Fishman Sonitone offers solid performance but doesn’t do justice to the DCRSG’s higher end detail for a Martin model of this price