

Guitar Player

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SAGA BLUERIDGE HISTORIC BR-160 AND BR-183

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Martin's D and 000 series guitars are probably the most pridefully blushing flat-tops on the planet. Myriad clones of these classic designs are available—which isn't surprising, considering that Martin's high-end models are simply out of reach for many players. If you can swing the dough, there's definitely no substitute for a Nazareth, Pennsylvania-made D- or 000-style guitar. However, if you're trying to figure out how to pay the rent *and* buy a nice vintage-style flat-top, then you may want to investigate the Blueridge series guitars from Saga Musical Instruments. These affordable, Chinese-made flat-tops are well made, and they play and sound quite amazing for the money. And as Saga has three categories to choose from—the Contemporary Series, Historic Series, and Pre-War Series (see "All in the Family" sidebar)—it's easy to find a guitar that will suit your budget. I recently received two models from the Historic Series, which, while inspired by vintage Martins, incorporate touches all their own.

BR-160

Patterned on the classic Martin D-28, the BR-160 offers solid rosewood back and sides, a solid spruce top, and a 20-fret mahogany neck that attaches to the body via a glued-in dovetail joint. Finished entirely in high-gloss lacquer, the BR-160 features a vintage-toned top with a herringbone perimeter inlay, white binding, a multi-ply soundhole rosette, and a striking,

"Dalmatian"-pattern celluloid pickguard. The back is also encircled with perfectly installed white binding, and it has a lovely wood marquetry center strip that extends up through the endpin area. Cleanly set abalone snowflake inlays grace the fretboard, and the peghead flaunts a gorgeous, vine-style abalone inlay and a matching scroll banner on which "Blueridge" is inscribed.

The polished frets are evenly set, and they sport smooth, consistent crowns and nicely trimmed ends. The corners of the carefully worked nut are also rounded to prevent jabs. A peek inside the BR-160 reveals hand-carved braces, which are tight fitting and neatly installed. With no excess glue or sawdust to mess up the scene, the BR-160's interior gets high marks.

Hands on. The BR-160 plays like a dream, courtesy of its low-action setup and light-gauge strings. It also sounds sweet and tuneful when playing chords in various positions. With its large body and rosewood back and sides, the BR-160 projects well, and it has a snappy attack and plenty of round, tight bass. The warmth and clarity of this guitar are quite impressive, and with its punch and presence, the BR-160 ensures you'll be heard when you step out for a solo. Though an early '90s Martin D-28 used for reference sounded a little fuller on the bottom and more complex and vocal-like in the mids, the BR-160 stood up well to this costlier guitar, offering similar resistance to compression and a room-filling presence that are essential elements of the dreadnought experience.

INSTANT GRATIFICATION

SAGA BLUERIDGE
BR-160

WHO'S IT FOR?

Budget-minded players seeking a vintage-style solid-wood dreadnought.

KUDOS

Big and bold sounding. Excellent playability and construction.

CONCERNS

None.

PRICE

\$795 retail
\$525 street

CONTACT

Saga Musical Instruments,
(800) 289-7242;
sagamusic.com

BR-160

- 1 $\frac{11}{16}$ " nut width
- 25.5"-scale rosewood-on-mahogany neck
- Kluson-style "butterbean" tuners
- Solid spruce top
- Hand-carved parabolic braces in classic forward-X pattern
- Herringbone top inlay
- Solid Indian rosewood back and sides
- Bone nut and saddle
- Rosewood bridge
- Rosewood peghead overlay

BR-183

- 1 $\frac{11}{16}$ " nut width
- 25.5"-scale ebony-on-mahogany neck
- Kluson-style gold-plated "butterbean" tuners
- Solid Sitka spruce top
- Hand-carved parabolic braces in classic forward-X pattern
- Abalone border and soundhole rosette
- Solid premium East Indian rosewood back and sides
- Bone nut and saddle
- Rosewood bridge
- Rosewood peghead overlay



ZOOM

Dig the BR-183's abalone perimeter and multi-color herringbone back strip.



ZOOM

The BR-160 and BR-183 both sport this beautiful, original-design shell inlay on their pegheads.



BR-183

As the most expensive model in the Historic Series, the BR-183 is a dazzling, 000-style instrument that features beautiful abalone borders on the top, back, and heel, an abalone soundhole rosette, a multi-color herringbone back strip, and traditional-style snowflake position markers. The rosewood headstock facing also features the same elaborate abalone/pearl inlay found on the BR-160. I did notice a bit of black epoxy around some of the fretboard inlays, but the balance of the cosmetic work on this guitar is excellent. The neck joins the body at the 14th fret (same with the BR-160), and the neck-to-peghead transition is strengthened via a Martin-style diamond volute. The polished frets are carefully worked, and despite a slight rise in the fretboard where it courses across the top, string buzz is almost nonexistent. As with the BR-160, the 183's smooth, hand-carved braces fit snugly against the top, back, and the upper and lower kerfing strips. Again, everything on the inside looks extremely clean, with no glue seepage and only a few specks of wood debris.

Tones and touch. The BR-183 is a robust sounding guitar that plays beautifully and intonates in a consistently musical manner. A light and

compact instrument, the BR-183 is so accommodating to your hands that it's difficult to put it down once you start playing. The string spacing works well for fingerstyle or flatpicking, and the low action makes for effortless chording and string bending. The BR-183 doesn't pack the wallop of a dreadnought, and it also compresses a bit more under hard strumming, but its rich, encompassing response is most inspiring. The BR-183 would be ideal for studio work, and it could also double for stage duty with the addition of a contact or soundhole pickup. If you dig the soulful tones that Eric Clapton gets from his 1939 000-42 Martin, then you'll appreciate where the very seductive BR-183 is coming from. 🎸

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Saga's Blueridge line is split into three categories of guitars: the Contemporary Series BR-40 (\$395 retail/\$295 street), BR-60 (\$450 retail/\$325 street), BR-70 (\$595 retail/\$395 street), and BR-73 (\$595 retail/\$395 street); the Historic Series BR-140 (\$650 retail/\$425 street), BR-143 (\$650 retail/\$425 street), and BR-180 (\$1,295 retail/\$799 street); and the Pre-War Series BR-240 (\$995 retail/\$699 street), BR-260 (\$2,495 retail/\$1,749 street), and BR-280 (\$2,995 retail/\$1,997 street).

INSTANT GRATIFICATION SAGA BLUERIDGE BR-183

WHO'S IT FOR?
Players looking for an affordable 000-sized instrument with top-shelf appointments.

KUDOS
Warm, vibey tones. Excellent playability and construction. Beautiful inlays.

CONCERNS
Epoxy visible around fretboard inlays.

PRICE
\$1,295 retail
\$799 street

CONTACT
Saga Musical
Instruments,
(800) 289-7242;
sagamusic.com

Blueridge

The Winner is...Blueridge!



From the Lonesome Pine Fiddlers to the Stanley Bros. and on to Windy Mountain, Rebel recording artist Melvin Goins is a First Generation Bluegrass Legend.

The most talked about guitar in Bluegrass is Blueridge, and these guitars speak for themselves. The booming Blueridge bass puts that old thunder back in Lester's G run and the dry, woody tone even smells vintage...

The Blueridge BR-160:

- Aged, fine, solid Sitka spruce top
- Traditional herringbone purfling
- Select, solid rosewood back and sides
- Handcarved scalloped bracing in the traditional forward-X-pattern
- Dovetail neck joint
- Bone nut & saddle

\$795

Sugg. retail

(Other fine Blueridge guitars from \$395-\$2,995)



SAGA,
the source.

Phone: (650) 588-5558
Dealer inquiries invited!
Visit us at www.sagamusic.com