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Gitane D-500 and DG-250

JURY BOX

Gitane D-500

Pros Satisfying recreation of a 1932 "big mouth" Selmer Maccaferri. Huge warm sound and excellent playability.

Cons Selmer-style guitars require special strings for optimum tone.

Contact Info

Gitane, manufactured by Saga Musical Instruments, (850) 588-5558; sagamusic.com.

By Andy Ellis

The *manouche* guitar—the Selmer-style acoustic so central to Gypsy jazz—will be forever associated with the immortal Django Reinhardt. With his snappy arpeggios, quivering vibrato, and nimble melodies, Reinhardt set the standard for "Hot Club" fretwork. To recreate his distinctive sound, you need a specialized instrument designed to produce barky twang and cutting midrange. Acquiring a Gypsy-jazz 6-string can be expensive: Only 1,000 or so Selmers

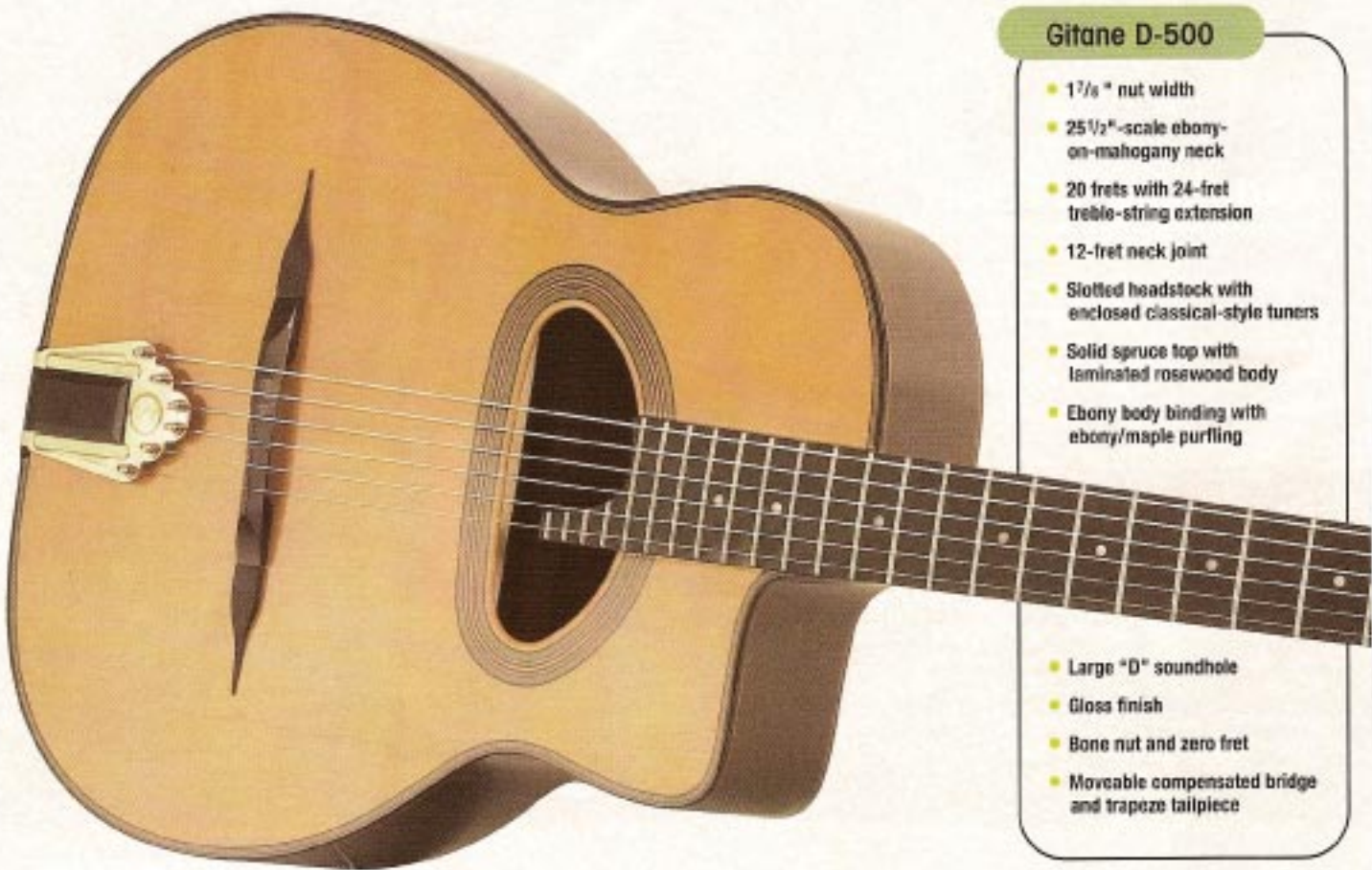
were made between 1932 and 1952, so a vintage original can run \$20,000 or more. Handmade Selmer repros are readily available, but expect to pay at least \$2,500 for a boutique *manouche* instrument. While that's not an unreasonable investment for a gigging pro or serious devotee of Hot Club swing, the price can be a hurdle for newcomers.

Good news: If you've been hankering to explore Django's licks, you'll be delighted with the Gitane DG-250 (\$699 street) and D-500

(\$699 street), a pair of major bang-for-buck Selmer-style guitars that are made in China by Saga Musical Instruments. These well built, toneful 6-strings will let you pay homage to Reinhardt without breaking the bank. To appreciate what the two models offer—and how they differ from standard arch-top, flat-top, or classical guitars—we need some crucial context.

Selmer Synopsis

In 1932, luthier and classical guitarist Mario Maccaferri



Gitane D-500

- 1 7/8" nut width
- 25 1/2"-scale ebony-on-mahogany neck
- 20 frets with 24-fret treble-string extension
- 12-fret neck joint
- Slotted headstock with enclosed classical-style tuners
- Solid spruce top with laminated rosewood body
- Ebony body binding with ebony/maple purfling
- Large "D" soundhole
- Gloss finish
- Bone nut and zero fret
- Moveable compensated bridge and trapeze tailpiece

opened a workshop near Paris under the auspices of Selmer, the French instrument manufacturer. There, Maccaferri designed a radical, hybrid 6-string that combined the scale length, cutaway, floating bridge, and trapeze tailpiece of an archtop with a classical's slotted headstock, wide fretboard, 12-fret neck joint, planed soundboard, and soundhole. The

JURY BOX

Gitane DG-250

Pros Well-built tribute to a 1934 post-Maccaferri "small mouth" Selmer. Expanded string scale delivers punchy leads.

Cons Selmer-style guitars require special strings for optimum tone.

Contact info:

Gitane, manufactured by Saga Musical Instruments, (850) 588-5558; sagamusic.com.

Gitane DG-250

- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ " nut width
- 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ "-scale ebony-on-mahogany neck
- 21 frets
- 14-fret neck joint
- Solid spruce top with laminated rosewood body
- Ebony body binding with rosewood/maple purfling
- Small oval soundhole
- Gloss finish
- Bone nut and zero fret
- Moveable compensated bridge and trapeze tailpiece



latter was an enormous, D-shaped affair, which earned the guitar the nickname of *grande bouche* or "big mouth." Maccaferri's design also included an internal wooden resonator that complicated production and sometimes caused rattling problems.

When Maccaferri left Selmer in 1934, the company modified his design. The scale length was extended from about 25.5" (648 mm) to 26.4" (670 mm), the neck joint was moved to the 14th fret, the pesky resonator was eliminated, and the soundhole was shrunk to a small, vertical oval. Officially called the *Modèle Jazz*, this guitar became known as the *petite bouche* or "small mouth" Selmer. Though Reinhardt had been playing a D-hole guitar, he welcomed the oval-hole's 14-fret neck and twangier scale length, and he played the new model until his death in 1953.

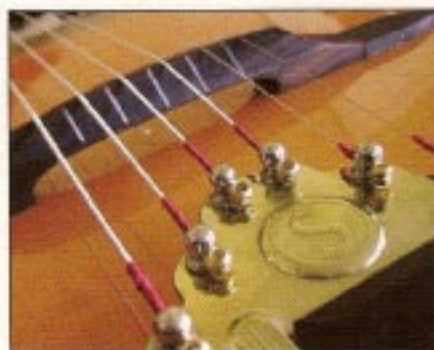
Much of a Selmer-style guitar's snappy, percussive tone comes from its light-gauge strings, which feature silver-plated copper wire wrapped around a thin steel core. Made in France by Savarez, the traditional favorites are called Argentine New Concept strings. These come in two sets, gauged .010-.045 and .011-.046. Recently, several American companies (including John Pearse and Delf' Arte) have joined the party with

similar copper-wound sets. Though easily ordered, manouche strings aren't usually stocked in guitar stores.

D-500

The Gitane D-500 is a modern take on the original Selmer Maccaferri, but without the resonator. Like its forebear, the lightweight D-500 has a solid spruce top, laminated rosewood body, slotted headstock, 12-fret neck joint, horizontal cutaway, and D-soundhole. Its stamped brass trapeze tailpiece accepts both ball-end and old-school loop-end strings, and its moveable, compensated ebony bridge is flanked by two "moustache" end pieces that are glued to the top. Boasting a wide ebony fretboard, the D-500 feels much like a classical guitar, though its 25½" scale and 16" radius belong to the steel-string universe. The 14:1 enclosed tuners turn smoothly and feel reasonably solid, and the trussrod is easy to reach through the oversized soundhole.

Unlike a floating archtop bridge, a Selmer-style bridge doesn't offer thumb wheels for height adjustment. Instead, manouche players shim the bridge to raise the action or deepen its slots to lower the strings. Fortunately, this wasn't necessary with the D-500, which played perfectly right out of the box. Our test instrument's slinky action facilitated fast riffs, yet I could comp vigorously without triggering



Gitane trapeze tailpieces accept both loop- and ball-end strings.

objectionable string rattle. The D-500's zero fret rules: It makes first-position barre chords easy to finger and helps open-position chords intonate sweetly. Harmonic-to-12th-fret intonation is spot-on, and the 24-fret extension lets you pick high tremolo glissandos along the first string for Django-approved flash.

Overall, the Gitane's workmanship is commendable: The lightly polished frets have smooth ends and uniform crowns. Inside, the braces are cleanly cut and fitted, and even with an inspection mirror, I didn't spot splinters or glue heads. The wood binding and purfling are tidy, and the gloss finish is applied evenly, though it is rather thick. My only quibble is that in bright sunlight, the finish on the D-500's back

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and sides shows a subtle cloudiness.

Our D-500 arrived from Saga with medium-gauge bronze strings, which I replaced with proper Argentine .011s. Even with these lighter strings, the guitar sounded huge and warm. The D-500's ladder bracing, 12-fret neck joint—which puts the bridge in the center of the soundboard—and super-sized soundhole work together to produce a powerful tone that's flattering to chords and single lines. With its barksy mids and ripe lows, this Gitane works equally well for Django runs, country fills, and blues licks.

DG-250

The Gitane DG-250 pays homage to the 1934 post-Maccaferri Modèle Jazz. Like the D-500, the DG-250 has a solid spruce top, laminated rosewood body, ebony fretboard with a zero fret, ebony moustache bridge, brass tailpiece, and gloss finish. But there are some key differences between the two instruments: The DG-250 has a whopping 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ " scale length, the neck joins the body at the 14th fret, the fretboard is noticeably narrower, the headstock is solid, the 14:1 nickel-plated tuners are exposed, and the soundhole is a tiny oval.

While the DG-250 shares the good materials and build quality, slick fretwork, and

expert setup of its big-mouth sister, it has a more nasal tone and offers less bass and low-mid warmth. But what the DG-250 lacks in booty, it makes up for in twangful projection. The guitar's unusually long scale length gives light strings more tension, which allows you to play them harder. Our test DG-250 arrived sporting an .011-.046 set of manouche strings, and as you'd expect, the guitar had a slightly stiffer feel than the D-500 equipped with identical gauges. While that extra tension might be unwelcome with medium or heavy strings, it's a real plus with lights. The DG-250's bass notes have a wonderful snap and clarity—another function of the stretched scale. Even with the increased tension, bends feel buttery on the first and second strings, and it's easy to work extended arpeggios along the 16"-radius fretboard. With its inviting neck, 17-fret cut-away, and light, yet taut strings, the DG-250 is an acoustic shred machine. As an extra bonus, the extended scale gives drop tunings a cool sparkle and clarity. Though the original Modèle Jazz Selmers were designed for fast, dynamic flatpicking, the DG-250 sounds terrific gently fingerpicked in open *D* and open *G*.

I have only two small niggles: First, like original Selmers and many French classicals, the DG-250 has a position marker at the 10th fret, rather than the standard 9th. Second, it's tricky to access the trussrod through the mini sound-



The D-500 and DG-250 have a zero fret and bone nut.

hole. Adjustments require a long-neck hex wrench, which is not supplied.

Manouche Mania

Both guitars are a delight to play, and either will serve as an excellent springboard into Hot Club swing. With its huge, warm voice, the D-500 sounds more compelling, but some guitarists won't dig its classical-width fretboard and 12-fret neck joint. To those used to flat-tops with 14-fret necks, the DG-250 will feel more familiar. In particular, electric guitarists will appreciate how the DG-250's extended scale lets them burn on an acoustic strung with .010s or .011s. These Gitanes provide affordable, toneful passports to the world of Gypsy jazz guitar. ■

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