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ISSUE 275

www.guitarist.co.uk | \$5.25 | April 2006

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Blueridge BR143CE & BR163CE £599 & £699

A strong vintage flavour now with added power – that's the promise of Blueridge's latest folk pickers by Jim Chapman

Blueridge guitars, in particular the all-solid wood Historic and Prewar series, have attracted much praise over the last couple of years. This hasn't been just for sound quality and the instruments' vintage-Americana aesthetics, but also because their high-grade specifications are offered at sensibly affordable prices courtesy of Chinese manufacture. Hallmark cosmetics like amber-tint tops, 'dalmatian' pickguards and elaborate

pearl-inlaid pegheads also help make the Histories and Prewars distinctive parts of the Blueridge catalogue.

Until recently Blueridge's line-up – based almost entirely on dreadnought and 000 designs – was a wholly acoustic one. Now, however, a few selected models are being added as electro-acoustics, including these two Historic series cutaway 000s. Parent-company Saga Music's international website specifies a Fishman Prefix Plus system



but both our samples carry the cheaper Classic 4 preamp. Nothing wrong with that – it's a straightforward, dependable system.

BR143CE

Apart from installing the electrics, Blueridge has essentially taken its regular BR143 folk and fashioned in a Venetian cutaway for full access to the 20-fret fingerboard. The back and sides of this 15-inch wide instrument are solid mahogany and are stained, along with the mahogany neck, to a deepish brown prior to lacquering. The solid Sitka spruce top – an excellent-looking example with close graining and richly cross-silked – carries a vivid amber tint, or 'aged toner' as the company likes to call it. One or two Blueridge tops we've seen have frankly been too permatanned in colouring, but this one stops short of that while still endowing a rich vintage-like aura. Buffing of the gloss finish is immaculate.

Part of the Historic theme lies hidden, the top being strutted with prewar-style, forward-shifted X bracing. This might be a nod towards traditional authenticity, but it's also a mite ironic since Martin, for example, moved its further back in 1940 to compensate for the stress of the heavier-gauge strings then starting to be favoured by players. Never mind: it's all neatly done, and scalloped by hand, apparently.

The most obvious blast from the past is the pearl and abalone-swathed headstock, reminiscent of the kind of inlay finery you'd increasingly have seen on guitars during the early part of the last century. The complex floral/urn motif is stunning, and it must be thanks to laser-cutting technology that such decoration can be included on a guitar of this price. It sits beautifully on the compact peghead – and so do the open-g geared Grover 'Sta-tite' machineheads – but there is a design

BLUERIDGE BR143CE	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** Pretty much everything
- **WE DISLIKED** String path is a visual muddle on narrow headstock, but no ill effects on performance

drawback hereabouts. Because of the headstock's petite narrowness, the string path is constricted, to the extent that the B and A strings are actually touching the posts of the top and bottom E tuners as they pass. Happily, this situation doesn't cause any tuning problems, but it does look muddled.

On a retro-inspired acoustic you might expect a quite chunky, broad neck, but Blueridge bows to modern mainstream sensibilities with one that's not only of regular width but also has a distinctly shallow profile starting at under 20mm deep. Coupled with well-dressed fretting it's a delightfully slick player as a result, especially for those of us with smaller hands, and the only potential buyers who might demur from that opinion are those specifically looking for something with a more substantial, overtly vintage grip. Some fingerstylists might wish for slightly wider string spacing at the bridge than the 53.5mm has on offer, but in truth the guitar is a perfectly obliging picker, in the Yamaha/Takamine mould.

Linked to a Fishman Acoustic Matrix under-saddle pickup, the Classic 4 preamp is conveniently mounted forward of the waist and provides a simple, all-slider array embracing four-band EQ and volume. The control panel can be unlatched for a quick battery change.

SOUNDS: Though it doesn't have a large or especially deep body, the BR143CE delivers an amazingly responsive sound. In sheer acoustic



volume it's louder than most folk size guitars you'll come across – certainly at this price – and it's coupled with a springy yet crisply-defined voicing and a degree of warmth and depth from the low end that is surprisingly, and rewardingly, robust. Some originally non-cutaway designs suffer from acquiring a cutaway, but not this one. In auditorium terms it's a little belter. →

BLUERIDGE BR143CE

PRICE: £599
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Cutaway folk electro-acoustic
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 103mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 384mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 650mm
TUNERS: Individual open-g geared Grovers, nickel-plated
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Unbound rosewood with pearl dot markers
FRETS: 20, slim
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood with bone saddle/53.5mm
ELECTRICS: Fishman Acoustic Matrix under-saddle pickup; Fishman Classic 4 preamp with volume, bass, middle, treble, brilliance, battery status LED, integral battery holder
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.05/4.5
OPTIONS: See BR163CE. Also try non-cutaway acoustic BR143 (£429)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Gloss natural with amber-tint top
Gremlin Musical Instruments
01273 491333
www.gremlinmusic.co.uk

**BLUERIDGE BR163CE**

As BR143CE except...

PRICE: £699**BACK/SIDES:** Solid rosewood**FINGERBOARD:**

Unbound rosewood with decorative abalone position markers

WEIGHT (kg/lb):

2.07/4.55

OPTIONS: See

BR143CE. Also try non-cutaway acoustic BR163 (£499). Other Blueridge electros are the all-solid spruce/mahogany BR140E (£549) and spruce/rosewood BR160E (£629) non-cutaway dreadnoughts

LEFT-HANDERS: No

BLUERIDGE BR163CE	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** See BR143CE■ **WE DISLIKED** See BR143CE

→ No worries when plugged in, either. The Classic 4 takes to its task effortlessly, providing a versatile tonal palette, plenty of gain (and a well-balanced piezo output), and all the while retaining the guitar's acoustic zest and clarity. A modicum of care needs to be taken with treble and brilliance not to let the top end assume a brittle edge but, having allowed for that, the quality of powered performance is right on the money.

The rivals**BR143CE/BR163CE**

Turner 82CE £479

Ayers ACSM-E £699

Guild GAD-30RE £649

Turner's top-of-the-range grand concert cutaway is all-solid spruce/rosewood and features snowflake position markers and a B-Band A3.2 system with four-band EQ. The Ayers ACSM-E, powered by a Fishman Prefix, is a 000-style cutaway with solid spruce top, solid mahogany back/sides and a wood-inlaid soundhole rosette. Guild's GAD-30RE is a non-cutaway folk-inspired alternative, in all-solid spruce and rosewood, with vintage-style tuners and a Fishman Acoustic Matrix active endpin system. The Turner and Guild are made in China, the Ayers in Vietnam

BR163CE

In general construction, design, finish and electro system the BR163CE is the same as the 143CE, including the forward-shifted bracing and the elaborately inlaid, Grover-toting headstock. However, you'd expect a bit more for your extra 100 quid, and that's what you get. The back and sides become solid rosewood, while adornments are notched up a gear. Taking the cue from Martin-like trim,

the top carries 28-style herringbone purfling with white rather than black binding, and the white-bound bookmatched back bears a wood-mosaic centre strip whereas it's omitted on the other guitar. Up on the rosewood fingerboard, the 143's simple pearl dot markers are replaced by decorative abalone ones, starting at the first fret and reminiscent of Martin's early 45-Style. Cosmetically you could say that the BR163CE is the deluxe to the

The Classic 4 takes to its task effortlessly, providing a versatile tonal palette and plenty of gain, all the while retaining the guitar's acoustic zest and clarity

143CE's standard. Save for a smidge more depth further up and a slightly higher action, the 163's neck is identical to the 143's, so earlier comments regarding handling and so on apply 100 per cent here.

SOUNDS: That pertains pretty much to performance too. Again the BR163CE greatly impresses with its acoustic muscle and dynamics, and powered up the Fishman does an

equally laudable job. The difference relates to tonal shading. The rosewood contributes a slightly denser mid-range, so although there's a little less of the 143's appealing 'scooped' buoyancy, it does add some extra meat and kick to the projection – not that

the 143 is lacking in this respect. It really must be stressed that these are subtle divergences, and it will simply be down to which tonal character you personally prefer.



The BR163CE's back and sides are solid rosewood

Verdict

At this price level – towards the cusp of where amateur meets pro – it may be surprising to learn that the choice of traditionally-based cutaway folk electros isn't especially plentiful. It's been, therefore, a niche waiting to be more generously filled, something these two Blueridge Historics do with resounding success.

What's more, their asking prices, beyond ensuring the highest accolade for value, are almost an irrelevance because the instruments are in a class of their own. They each have the quality – whether of construction, finishing, handling, sound or vintage-evoking elegance – to compete at any level. All of which might prompt the age-old question in your mind: will I do much better by paying a lot more? Fairly unlikely, we'd say. Try one and be convinced. ☑

Blueridge BR143CE

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

Blueridge BR163CE

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★