

## One Loud Blond

### Saga's Gitane DG-250M

**SAGA** Instruments has established itself as a keeper of the vintage flame: the company, with its Chinese manufacturing plants, has evolved a series of historically-based instruments that are highly affordable, very modern, yet redolent of vintage vibe.

The Gitane DG-250M, based on a limited-edition Selmer from the 1940s, is another in this line of vintage inspirations from Saga, which includes other Gypsy jazz guitars in the Gitane line, resophonic from Regal, and well-received fingerpicker and flatpicker favorites from Blueridge.

The review DG-250M came out of the case in perfect tune with itself, although over a half-tone flat for shipping. I knocked out a couple of choruses of "Oh, Lady Be Good" without touching the tuners, then grudgingly took the time to tune up to pitch.

Until then, I didn't know I preferred '40s-style blonds!

This little blond has some interesting vital statistics. First, the 26<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"-scale neck is made of figured, flatsawn maple. The neck is a generous 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" wide at the nut, carved very slim and comfortably rounded with shoulders. Unlike most Selmer-

style guitars, this neck is topped by an unslotted headstock with a birdseye maple overlay and nickel-plated, open-gear tuners, but traditional Selmer details reappear with the zero fret, undersized nut, ebony fingerboard, and pearl dot inlays. The occasional players' confusion raised by the presence of a 10th-fret inlay (in the European style) is counterbalanced by the faithfulness to the original details of '40s Selmers. You'll get used to it. A side dot at the 12th fret, though, would be helpful for up-the-neck runs.

The most unusual detail on the body of the Gitane DG-250M is the three-ply back and sides. During World War II, Selmer made a run of about 20 guitars with birdseye maple back and sides. Our review guitar, made to imitate these rare instruments, is generously covered with birdseyes, which wink up at you as you move the instrument to admire the undulating woodgrain as it refracts light. The plywood is not a cost-cutter; most original Selmer bodies featured plywood construction, except for the top (ironically, '40s Selmer birdseye guitars were solid wood throughout, according to Francois Charle in *The Story Of Maccaferri Selmer Guitars*). Having

owned a boutique Gypsy jazz guitar with solid wood back and sides, I think the triple-ply strategy works better. The extra resonance of solid-wood back and sides does not really serve the sprightly tone and aggressive cutting power of the Selmer-style instrument. Maple, hard as it is, provides an excellent body wood for the demands of Gypsy Jazz. Add the influence of the hard maple neck, and you have a lap-held weapon with the penetrating power of a laser.

As attractive as the maple body is, I was particularly impressed by the quality of the slightly arched spruce top. The straight, even grain and the "silk" effect that indicates perfect quartersawn stock are all indicative of the sophistication and power of Saga's wood buyers. I have seen many Saga products, and have consistently noticed the tops are of a very high grade.


The guitar's body made up of all this delicious-looking tonewood is 18<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" long, 16" wide at the lower bout and 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" wide at the upper bout. The tapered body is 4" deep at the tailblock. The classic compensated ebony mustache bridge features a two-footed center saddle that is moveable between the glued-on mustache ends. The "petite bouche" oval soundhole (2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"x1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" ) is surrounded by an attractive wooden rosette, and the bindings and purflings are also made of a complimentary wood. The thin lacquer finish is clean and glossy, with a little evidence of sanding on the tapered heel.

A gold-plated Gypsy-approved tailpiece will accommodate both loop- and ball-end strings. Only the shiny plastic insert (Selmer used plastic, ebonite and rosewood) on the tailpiece detracts from the visual appeal of the guitar body from the front. If this guitar were mine to keep, I'd use a piece of 0000 steel wool to dull the gloss of the insert. This little effort makes it look like ebony from a few feet away.

When compared to a Gitane D hole DG-500, the DG-250M was considerably more aggressive in the high end. I also had an opportunity to play the guitar with New Orleans' leading Gypsy Jazzer, Tony Green, alongside a 1990s Dupont "petite bouche," an '80s Saga "petite bouche," and a pre-war Francesco Oliveri "grande bouche." The new Gitane more than held its own volume-wise, with a head-register voice that nicely complimented the deeper chest-register sound of the solid wood Dupont. The restored Oliveri and the older Saga never had a chance.

Workmanship on this DG-250M is solid in most areas, though there's a little wood-filler nestled into a few spots around the neck joint. The frets are highly polished, and play cleanly with a manouche-appropriate action of a strong <sup>3</sup>/<sub>32</sub>" at the 12th fret on the high E string.

Although a nice-quality Golden Gate CP 1510 case is supplied with the DG-250M, the guitar moved around a bit too much in it. Saga's marketing department told me that a reissue Golden Gate Gypsy Jazz Guitar case has been approved for production.

The DG-250M was modeled from an original '40s Selmer. At the Winter NAMM show, Djangophile John Jorgenson told us, "The Saga sounds remarkably better than the original." Jorgenson liked the DG-250M so much, he asked Saga to build a signature model. I like this guitar enough to wish they'd name it after me. Unfortunately, it plays Gypsy jazz a lot better than I do! — **Chip Wilson** 



#### SAGA GITANE DG-250M

Features	Open-gear 14:1-ratio tuners, solid spruce top with "petite bouche" oval soundhole, birdseye maple back and sides, ebony fingerboard, maple neck, zero fret, bone nut, mustache bridge, Selmer-style tailpiece, wood binding.
Price	\$949.
Contact	Saga Musical Instruments, 137 Utah Avenue, South San Francisco, CA 94080; phone: (650) 588-5558; sagamusic.com.