

HAMMER OF THE GODS

SCANDINAVIAN ECO-FRIENDLY TONE TOOL ANYONE? **PAUL SALTER** HEADS NORSE

GB INFO



FLAXWOOD VASARA
PRICE: £1,289
BUILT IN: Finland
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT WIDTH: 42mm (1.65 inches)
STRING SPACING AT NUT: 34mm (1.34 inches)
BODY: Injection-moulded Flaxwood
NECK: Injection-moulded Flaxwood, glued-in
FINGERBOARD: Flaxwood
FRETS: 22 Jumbo
PICKUPS: EMG active humbuckers; 1 x EMG-81, 1 x EMG-85
CONTROLS: 1 x volume, 2 x tone, 3-way selector
BRIDGE: Gotoh Tune-O-Matic-style bridge & stop tailpiece, black chrome
STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 51mm (2 inches)
MACHINEHEADS: Gotoh SG360 locking tuners, black chrome
WEIGHT: 3.2kg (7lb)
FINISHES: Syris black (shown)
CASE: Hard case included
LEFT-HANDERS: No
CONTACT: Blackhawk Music
PHONE: 07990 828779
Web: www.flaxwood.com

Throughout the history and development of the guitar, luthiers and manufacturers have turned their hands to almost any material in order to build their instruments. Besides a wide variety of timbers, not to mention plywood, chipboard and wood composites, ingenious guitar builders have incorporated aluminium, steel, carbon-graphite, Bakelite and other plastics, vinyl and fibreglass into their designs.

While traditional tonewoods like mahogany and rosewood might still be the first choice for many, in these ecologically precarious times, it's perhaps worth reassessing some of the alternatives. Not only can we save a few forests by embracing this stuff, there may even be a few practical and total benefits to be had too.

Finnish manufacturer Flaxwood has been treading this path for years. The company is not only motivated by a concern for the environment – this is

also a group of people who really love their guitar tones. We're looking at the Flaxwood Vasara, a semi-solid that resides near the lower end of the Flaxwood range. Vasara means 'hammer' in Finnish, although calling it after the crudest of all tools seems at odds with our first impressions of this rather sophisticated instrument.

BODY & NECK

While the eco credentials of companies like Cole Clark, whose acoustic guitars are reviewed this month on page 54, revolve around the use of alternative, sustainable woods, Flaxwood takes an entirely more high-tech approach. Flaxwood isn't just the name of the company. It's also the name of the material the guitars are made from. So what's it all about?

Well, these clever Finns have developed the material by "breaking down the grain structure of the wood", mixing it with a binding agent and then injection-moulding it into shape. Can't you just hear the Frankenstein-like cackles? The result

looks and feels like a cross between carbon fibre and a really dense plastic, although the body section has taken the gloss finish better than either of those materials – in fact, it has taken this moody black paint job in much the same manner as wood.

As you may have gathered, we're not just talking about a single part of the construction using Flaxwood. The entire body and neck are moulded from it. From a design point of view this obviously opens up whole new avenues of shape, styling and even texture, but for the most part Flaxwood sticks reasonably close to traditional aesthetics. The small body shape could easily have come from the pages of an Ibanez catalogue, and there's even a touch of PRS in there. Turn the guitar over, however, and we're not in Kansas (or should that be Maryland?) any more.

Much of the rear is covered by a proprietary resonating back plate. This strange-looking element disguises just how hollow the body section is, and has been designed to enhance its



THE X FACTOR

IMPRESSIVE INTONATION FROM FLAXWOOD

■ Stable tuning and correct intonation were obviously high on the list of priorities when the Vasara was being conceived.

As well as the rigid neck and body combination, there's a set of locking Gotoh tuners that does away with risky multiple wraps around the post. The design also includes a headstock shape that allows for almost perfectly straight string-pull across the all important nut. This normally unsung fixture goes by the name of the Flaxwood Tune-X System, a similar concept to the Buzz Feiten nut. By shaping the nut to reduce or extend the effective scale length of each string, the end result is a more accurately intonated guitar.



■ The Vasara features the unusual configuration of one volume and two tone controls



tonal qualities too. Pretty much the whole of the back is hollow, which would have made for a very light instrument if a more traditional material had been used. As it is, the Vasara isn't too far off the weight of the average solid-bodied guitar – which speaks volumes about how dense this Flaxwood can be made.

The neck has been moulded as a separate piece, and in most respects feels very conventional. Apart from the specially designed nut, fretwire, tuners and trussrod, this has also been moulded in one piece. Because the surface and texture is so different from the body, we did expect to find that it had been bolted to the body from the inside, but it's actually a very tight-fitting, glued-in joint that leaves a heel area reminiscent of a through-neck guitar. It plays very well indeed.

The dimensions are familiar, with a Fender-like 25.5-inch scale length and a Gibson-like 12-inch radius to the fingerboard, which is loaded with 22 jumbo frets. There's nothing scary here at all. Even the texture and surface of the neck feels warm and silky smooth rather than the plastic experience you might suppose you were in for. It all feels reassuringly rigid, too. As well as being more durable than wood, Flaxwood is a far stiffer material that makes for a more stable guitar – usually good news in terms of resonance and sustain. It also suffers less from temperature changes. The change in conditions from a very cold storeroom to a warm venue shouldn't even budge the tuning too much.

HARDWARE & PARTS

The choice of hardware is friendly too, starting with a dependable and smooth-in-use set of Gotoh tuners. These are the locking type with a simple and subtle screw-down top on the capstan that only needs a screwdriver or small coin to operate it. This means you should have stable tuning when you



factor in the well-cut, self-lubricating 'Tune-X' nut, while changing strings is a much quicker and more pleasant experience. The bridge and tailpiece arrangement is a fairly standard Tune-O-Matic and stopbar affair, also made by Gotoh and well up to the standard of the rest of the fittings.

While Flaxwood extols the tonal virtues of its proprietary material, this particular guitar has not been fitted with the kind of handmade, low-output pickups that might normally be chosen to enhance a great tonewood. That's because the Vasara is Flaxwood's metal machine, equipped with active EMG humbuckers – an EMG-81 at the bridge and an EMG-85 at the neck, a configuration favoured by heavy rockers like Zakk Wylde, Kerry King and Kirk Hammett. These pickups are powered by a 9V battery in a compartment at the rear and are wired to a three-way switch and, unusually, a master volume and individual tone controls.



DETAILS

RADICAL MATERIALS AND ACTIVE PICKUPS MAKE FOR A POWERFUL YET VERSATILE GUITAR



■ This pearloid inlay, which features the Flaxwood 'F' logo, appears at both the fifth and 12th frets



■ The black chrome finish on the tuners and bridge hardware fits the Vasara's metal image



■ It might feel like a tough-neck, but in fact the Vasara uses a unique style of glued-in neck joint



GBVERDICT

FLAXWOOD VASARA

GOLD STARS

- ★ Innovative design
- ★ Good playability
- ★ Polished tones...

BLACK MARKS

- ...though some might prefer less slickness and a bit more character

IDEAL FOR...

Powerful, controlled metal tones and much more besides

GBRATING



SOUNDS

We know what we were expecting when we plugged in the Flaxwood Vasara for the first time, and it's probably not far from what you're thinking right now. Synthetic material and active pickups? This has got to sound thin and artificial, right? In fact, this assumption couldn't be further from the truth.

The sound from these humbuckers is surprisingly conventional in many respects, with all of the usual options on offer. There's a raunchy, big yet cutting tone from the bridge unit that covers everything from a light,

tones is that they're all so much more 'there' than what you'd get from many conventional guitars. It's a rather special kind of definition, where everything seems that much better behaved and right for the job. Low notes ring out without harmonics flapping about, while the mid-range is full but not over-focused and the top is clear, without a hint of sharpness.

It is almost as though Flaxwood has designed out the less desirable tonal qualities of wood. Of course, this sort of controlled, polished performance won't suit everybody, particularly those who look for a more quirky, characterful performance in a guitar. However, it will suit modern metal styles and much more besides.

We would like to hear what an all-solid version sounded like, though you don't get much of a semi-acoustic quality coming through in the amplified tone anyway, at least not in the conventional way. It does open up the tone somewhat, but it doesn't really affect the attack and resonance in the same way that makes a Gibson ES-335 unsuitable for metal tones, for instance.

"IT GROWS ON YOU VERY QUICKLY"

classic-rock crunch right up to a massive metal thud. The neck unit is pretty and warm when played quietly and cleanly, yet toughens up with overdrive in that flutey manner that always suggests Hendrix-style chords and bass runs.

However, what is special about these

GBCONCLUSION

DIFFERENT, BUT THAT'S NOT A BAD THING...

■ Coming from a conventional angle, the Flaxwood Vasara might seem like a leap too far. The guitar's highly unusual materials and construction are quite unlike anything else out there.

It's different, and there's no getting away from it – particularly if you're stuck on the whole vintage aesthetic with strong opinions on things like classic tonewoods, aged nitro-cellulose finishes and vintage pickups. The whole mojo that goes with an old, classic guitar is a million miles from this injection-moulded instrument. However, the Vasara really works all the same.

If the electric guitar didn't exist and you were designing it from scratch in 2009, you might well decide that injection-moulded Flaxwood was a superior way of going about it than all that messy and unpredictable business with wood. The Vasara's great playability and polished, versatile sound mean that it grows on you very quickly. The fact that it's less than conventional becomes irrelevant after a while. The bottom line, however, is that the Vasara looks good, plays good and sounds great. We like it. **GB**