





Braced For Impact

Art and innovation combine with Martin's newest acoustic guitar, created with sustainable woods, 'skeletonised bracing' and tone channels cut into the top and back. Intrigued? So were we...

Words David Mead Photography Olly Curtis



MARTIN INCEPTION MAPLE £4,150

CONTACT: Westside Distribution PHONE: 0141 212 0087 WEB: www.martinguitar.com

What You Need To Know

1 This doesn't sound like Martin's traditional fare...

That's because it was never intended to be. With ecological concerns to the fore and a fearless attitude towards bucking convention, Martin has poured a great deal of R&D into delivering what it considers to be a next evolutionary step in acoustic design.

2 So, what the heck is a 'skeletonised brace'?

This is where Martin has added strength to the guitar's top with what is essentially taller bracing, but reduced mass by carving hexagonal shapes into the braces so the 'skeletal' part supports the top.

3 'Sonic channels' sounds gimmicky. What's the deal?

The theory is channels – or grooves – at key points under the guitar's spruce soundboard and in the maple/walnut back, allow more flexibility and enhance vibration, with better tone at targeted frequencies and superior resonance from the guitar.

If you go back to our interview in issue 509's *Blueprint* with Fred Greene, Martin's vice president of product development, you'll read that the design of the new Inception guitar was born out of the desire to encourage guitarists away from traditional (and, in many cases, endangered) timbers, while also proving that maple is a contender for superior tone.

Traditionalists will always swerve to avoid this kind of thinking, of course, and cling to the idea that tropical mahogany and various species of rosewood are the only timbers that can deliver the cherished sounds we've all heard for years on established recordings.

But the fact is we have to call time on this kind of thinking and find alternative means to achieve a great sound without unnecessary risk to the planet's resources.

So, is Martin's new initiative a way to make maple-bodied instruments impersonate rosewood or mahogany? Well, maybe a little. But it's more about proving that alternative woods have their own characteristic soundprints, too; and many will deliver the goods, even if internet forums still wail to the contrary. After all, Gibson has successfully proved that maple is a contender on its J-200 and so why not?



A black walnut bridge with a compensated Tusq saddle and bone pins sits on a Sitka spruce top



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Fred also told us that Martin's R&D team took on the idea that if you're going to change the recipe, you may have to mess with the other ingredients, too. It's not a simple job of making a maple-bodied guitar in the image of an established staple like a D-28. So choosing a body design that doesn't have an established tonal identity of its own was an essential first step. Enter the Grand Performance body shape we see with the Inception.

Naturally there are other design changes along the way – a three-piece back, some latticework in the braces and sound channels in the guitar's top and back to aid

players to navigate the dusty end and the satin-finished and slightly faded sunburst wouldn't look out of place in a smokey juke-joint leaning up against a whiskey barrel. There's an aged vibe here, which might be a bit of clever psychology on Martin's part. It looks worn in, ancient and somehow established, like it's been around for decades. You want to pick it up and not bother about the details of its construction.

The top is European spruce, which is straight down the established path of traditional building. The sides are maple, the grain of which is all but hidden under the finish on the sides. But the back is a

1. A set of gold-coloured open-back Grover tuners keep things tuneful at the Inception's sharp end

2. The controls for the LR Baggs Anthem undersaddle pickup and mic combo sit inside the guitar's soundhole

The satin-finished and slightly faded sunburst wouldn't look out of place in a smokey juke-joint

flexibility. But we'll come to those a little later on. For now, we'll consider exactly the sum of the parts and work our way to the question everyone is asking: has Martin's bold new experiment worked?

Let's start with the Grand Performance body shape. At a maximum width of 400mm and depth of 113mm it's a fairly chunky beast. At first glance you'd think it's displaying a bit more heft than an OM, but certainly less than a dreadnought, for instance. The graceful cutaway invites



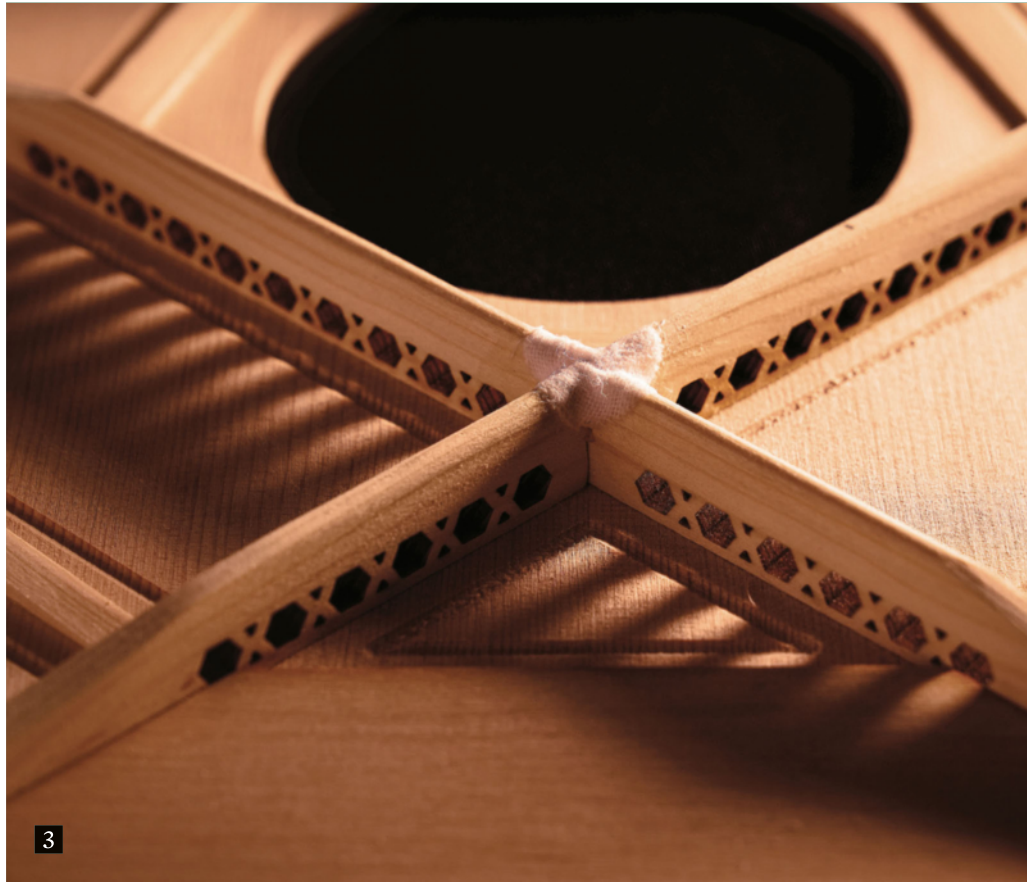
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THE RIVALS

If ecological concerns are a high priority when shopping for a new acoustic, there are a few builders out there who are moving away from the more traditional rosewood/mahogany path. Turnstone Guitars, for instance, has been making guitars from all manner of timbers, including fruit tree woods and so on, for many years (as well as using carved-out bracing).

Naturally, bespoke builds are going to infer a heftier price tag and so if off-the-peg is more your thing, then Taylor's K24ce (£5,999), made with responsibly harvested koa, may fit the bill – as would its 'urban woods' range, which uses timber from trees you may recognise for providing shade on the streets of California... The Taylor GTe Urban Ash/ Urban Sienna at £1,529 is a good place to start.

Other than that, you can be sure that other manufacturers are conscious of the green ticket and are putting sustainability high on their priorities – a glance at Gibson, Furch, Faith and so on will provide worthwhile results.



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3. The Inception's 'skeletonised bracing' comprises European spruce with a hexagonal lattice pattern to increase stability but keep mass to a minimum. Notice also the 'sonic grooves' for tonal enhancement

4. Maple position markers are inset into the black walnut fingerboard

5. The three-piece back is a combo of figured maple and black walnut

D-35 style three-piece medley of maple and black walnut. In fact, the appearance of the flame on the maple here would also befit a '59 Les Paul – something else that makes you feel instantly at home. According to Fred Greene, the walnut's presence on the back is more than merely decorative. At least part of its brief is to act as a tone control: "You'll see that the actual widest point of the wedge in the back is directly underneath the bridge," he told us. "We were trying to capture some of the sonic tone that comes off the bridge; we know that a lot of the tone that comes from the guitar is right there behind the bridge on the top." Interesting.

Black walnut is a bit of an ongoing theme with the Inception, as this is the timber you'll find on the bridge as well as the neck and fingerboard. Martin's spec has seemingly always read as being 'selected hardwood' for its necks, which we are led to believe means 'probably mahogany' and so walnut's presence here is a bit of a surprise. But again, why not? As a tonewood, black walnut falls between rosewood and mahogany, and has the dark-ish appearance of a rosewood. Most importantly, however, it is in plentiful and non-endangered supply. It also is said to have the density of koa. So, no complaints; let's listen with our ears and not with our eyes on the spec sheet.

Maple inlays along the fretboard add an artistic flair, and the Inception's body furniture is rounded off by a bone nut, Tusq saddle and open-back Grover tuners. There is also an LR Baggs Anthem pickup with the controls mounted on the inside edge of the guitar's soundhole.

A word about the 'skeletonised bracing'. Hidden away under the hood (and only really visible if you look through the soundhole), the bracing has a hexagonal lattice pattern carved into it. This means the top is still sturdily supported, but the mass – and, hence, weight of the guitar – is reduced. Even less obvious are the 'sonic channels' in the back and underside of the top. These present themselves as grooves in the wood at tonally significant points, in order to encourage greater flexibility, allowing the woods to vibrate musically and enrich the natural tone of both maple and spruce. All well and good as a theory, but let's put it to the test and hear what the Inception has to say for itself.

Feel & Sounds

The feel of the neck in the hand is really outstanding, a combination of Martin's 'modified low oval' profile – a kind of very comfortable full C-shape – and the high-performance taper that sees the neck gently increase in width from 45mm at the nut to 54mm at the 12th fret.



4



MARTIN INCEPTION MAPLE

PRICE: £4,150 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Grand Performance electro-acoustic

TOP: European spruce

BACK/SIDES: Maple with black walnut

MAX RIM DEPTH: 113mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 400mm

NECK: Black walnut

SCALE LENGTH: 645mm (25.4-inch)

TUNERS: Grover open gear

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/45mm

FINGERBOARD: Black walnut

FRETS: 20

BRIDGE/SPACING: Black walnut/58mm

ELECTRICS: LR Baggs Anthem

WEIGHT (LB/KG): 3.74/1.69

OPTIONS: none

RANGE OPTIONS: The Inception stands pretty much alone as a 'skeletonised brace' acoustic.

Other Grand Performance models in the range include the GPC-16E (£2,150), GPC-11E (£1,175) and the GPC-13E (£1,549).

See website for more info

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes

FINISH: Satin

8/10

PROS: Great feel, good tone and a great amplified voice all combine together in one pioneering instrument

CONS: Traditionalists may be put off by the absence of established tonewoods



5

It stands up as an example of sustainability, while providing extremely workable tone

The guitar came to us fitted with a set of Martin's Luxe Kovar strings, the wound strings here being a nickel/cobalt alloy, which look more like electric guitar strings rather than acoustic. Initial investigative strums revealed a relatively rich and well-rounded sound with a good balance between the three essential frequency ranges – bass, mids and treble. We would probably be tempted to exchange the string set for phosphor bronze to bring things back onto more familiar territory, but everything is fine here as it is.

Experimenting a bit further, the Inception certainly fits the bill with fingerstyle, bluesy picking and single notes up the neck. Does it have the Martin soundprint? Yes and no. It's very difficult to say what effects the bracing has had over the guitar's sound. It certainly shows some of the characteristics of a maple-bodied instrument as the sound has maple's bright and lively edge, but the exact role the bracing is playing is difficult to determine. Having said that, we were

happy to sit with the guitar and play a few tunes for longer than was necessary for this review and that must be saying something.

When we introduced the LR Baggs Anthem into the mix via our AER Compact 60 the Inception really came alive with an amplified sound that would be perfect for anything from an open mic night right up to a performance in a concert hall. All the personality we experienced acoustically was given a far broader soundscape in the electronic arena, indicating that this instrument really does hit the all-rounder mark well.

Verdict

As the quote from the movie *Wayne's World* goes, "We fear change..." and so any modifications made to an established acoustic-building formula are always going to be viewed with a certain amount of reluctance and suspicion. But an open-minded overview of the Inception is that it represents a job very well done.

It's a successful attempt to produce an instrument that stands up as an example of sustainability in terms of natural resources, while providing extremely workable tone and performance. We would encourage anyone in the market for an electro-acoustic to park any prejudices they might have regarding the shock of the new and audition one. You might be in for a surprise. **G**