



# Blueridge BR-183 & BR-240

£799 & £625

Combining popular classic American designs with the economy of Chinese manufacturing, Blueridge acoustic guitars get the balance just right by Matthew Wig

USA company Saga Musical Instruments, home of the Blueridge and Regal brands, is one of the largest importers and distributors of stringed/fretted musical instruments in the world. As a result Saga has its corporate finger in many established instrument building territories, including its own production plants in China. Chinese facilities are increasingly favoured these days for economical production, since China has a cheap, skilled workforce and the country uses world-class manufacturing practices.

Originally, Blueridge was established to market affordable bluegrass instruments, but a few years back Saga expanded its acoustic guitar line, offering Martin-style models with faithfully authentic modern and vintage specifications under this brand. These competitively priced Chinese-built Blueridge guitars have wowed players and reviewers alike in the States, and now UK distributor Gremlin has made them available here.

There are currently 24 Blueridge models (including lefty and electro versions) in the Gremlin catalogue. These are organised into three series: Contemporary, Historic and Pre-war – incorporating three style levels equivalent to Martin Styles 18, 28 and 45. There are also two body sizes – dreadnought and 000/auditorium. With 11 models between £250 and £500, nine between £550 and £800 and four Brazilian rosewood specials covering the £1,600-£1,900 high-end, you can sense that this is a collection with broad appeal. In addition to the two basic body styles, cutaway 000 electro versions are also an option.

These two review guitars are a representative taster of the Blueridge vibe, and crucially, they cover a 'grey area' price-point in the acoustic guitar market that's tricky to judge successfully.

## BR-183

We should begin by deciphering Blueridge's fairly logical numerical

coding, so know that the '1' refers to the Historic Series, the '8' denotes the fanciest style (Style 45) and the '3' indicates that it's a 000 model.

Looking at what this guitar is trying to achieve for the price, compromises would seem inevitable, but the quality of workmanship here is impressively high. Aside of the struts' rough finish, we find clean, neat joinery inside, with an evenly laid, uniformly kerfed mahogany lining strip, flat rosewood side braces (to avoid elongated impact cracks developing) and very Martin-esque scalloped X-bracing for the soundboard. The bracing is confusingly defined as 'forward shifted', but the X's upper legs don't actually straddle the soundhole especially closely.

Given an appropriately orange-yellow 'aged effect' toner, the top is a quality slice of Sitka spruce with straight, tight grain and a feathery visual texture that catches the light. Most incredible, however, is the decoration – not only does the black and white purfling in the rosette and around the perimeter cut exceptionally clean lines with the spruce, but the hundreds of abalone shell pieces are near-flawlessly inlaid within its flanks. Only the bottom corner of the fingerboard shows any distortion in this richly coloured border. Blueridge's distinctive scratchplate pattern is referred to as 'Dalmatian'.

As Martin's Style 45 designates, and Blueridge faithfully follows, the top's black/white purfling abalone edging is also featured around the sides – extending along the heel base as well as flanking the tapered white end-joint strip – and the back's perimeter. Accordingly, the back's centre strip is multi-coloured marquetry. Having looked closely at every inch of this trim, the very occasional flaws are impressively difficult to spot.

Again, the one-piece dovetail jointed neck with its carved dart (aka diamond volute) at the back of the headstock is strictly traditional. Inside, however, the neck block is L-shaped to stabilise neck alignment. The fingerboard inlays follow the vintage (pre-1939) Style 45 pattern, and though they're not the cleanest we've seen, this fingerboard has been generally conscientiously prepared, with a crudely shaped yet squarely seated nut sitting at the top. →

## BLUERIDGE BR-183

PRICE: £799

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: 000/OM/

auditorium body acoustic

TOP: Solid Sitka spruce

BACK/SIDES: Solid East

Indian rosewood

MAX RIM DEPTH:

103mm

MAX BODY WIDTH:

391mm

NECK: Mahogany

SCALE LENGTH:

648mm

TUNERS: Individual

enclosed gold-plated

Kluson-style

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/

43mm

FINGERBOARD: Ebony,

white-bound with

abalone diamonds/

snowflakes inlays

FRETS: 20, medium

BRIDGE/SPACING:

Ebony with bone saddle/

54mm

WEIGHT (KG/LB):

2.2/4.8

RANGE OPTIONS: BR-

143 (£429) with

mahogany back/sides,

rosewood fingerboard/

bridge, black and white

rosette/purfling, black

binding, pearl dot

fingerboard markers and

nickel tuners; BR-163

(£499) with herringbone

top purfling, black/white

rosette, 'zigzag' back

strip, rosewood

fingerboard/bridge, white

binding (body only) and

nickel tuners.

LEFT-HANDERS: Not

this model

FINISHES: Natural, gloss

body and neck with

ageing toner for top (as

reviewed)

Gremlin Musical

Instrument Company

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www.gremlinmusic.co.uk



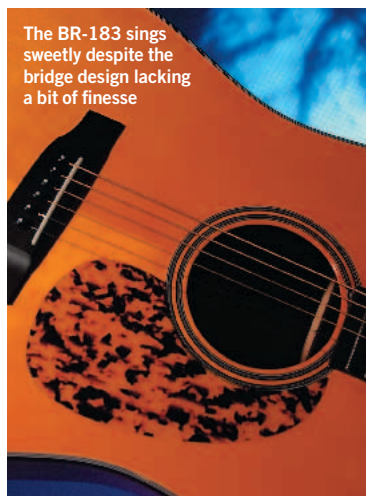
The BR-183's headstock is heavily inlaid with mother-of-pearl and abalone



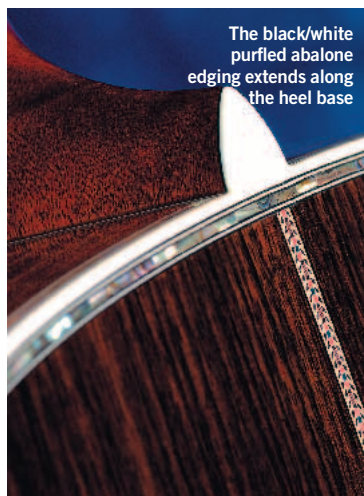
★★★★★  
**Guitarist CHOICE**

**The BR-183 delivers simply astounding value, with nothing coming close for that money (or for quite a lot more, in reality)**

BLUERIDGE BR-183	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ <b>WE LIKED</b> 'Triple-0' sound and really clean construction for so little dosh</p> <p>■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> Headstock too narrow and neck alignment a bit off on this model</p>	



The BR-183 sings sweetly despite the bridge design lacking a bit of finesse



The black/white purfling abalone edging extends along the heel base

**BLUERIDGE BR-240**  
**PRICE:** £625  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**TYPE:** Dreadnought body acoustic  
**TOP:** Solid Sitka spruce  
**BACK/SIDES:** Solid mahogany  
**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 122mm  
**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 398mm  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm  
**TUNERS:** Individual enclosed nickel-plated Kluson-style  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/43mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Ebony, unbound with large pearloid dot markers  
**FRETS:** 20, medium  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Ebony with bone saddle/53mm  
**WEIGHT (KG/LB):** 2.1/4.6  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** BR-260 (£1,599) with Brazilian rosewood back/sides, ebony fingerboard/bridge, one-piece neck with carved dart, grained ivoroid body binding, extended abalone 'snowflake' fingerboard inlay and 'zigzag' back strip. BR-280 (£1,899) with Brazilian rosewood back/sides, ebony fingerboard/bridge, one-piece neck with carved dart, abalone purfling/rosette, abalone 'snowflake' fingerboard inlay, ivoroid body/neck/headstock binding, multi-coloured marquetry. BR-140 (£429) with rosewood fingerboard/bridge, black and white rosette/purfling, black binding and Historic Series headstock pattern  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** Not this model  
**FINISHES:** Natural, gloss body and neck with ageing toner for top (as reviewed)

→ Blueridge's banjo credentials surely influenced the fancy pearl/abalone headstock decoration. Its tuners are smooth, rock-solid performers, but the headstock's very narrow base not only looks aesthetically unbalanced but causes the top and bottom strings to make too great a sideways angle between nut and tuner. This can result in the strings sticking in the nut slots and lead to tuning problems.

This finely finished bridge is certainly as smart as a real Martin, but its shoddy wooden pegs and slightly baggy saddle slot let it down unnecessarily.

The gloss finish is applied after neck fitting, causing slight pooling along the base of the heel and fingerboard extension, but it's particularly neat, flat and even. It actually looks a bit too flat on the soundboard, suggesting it might be a bit thick and over-protective.

Despite the traditional vibe here, slim, modern profile necks come as standard with Blueridge. What we find on the BR-183 is a shallow 'C'-profile, tapering from 20mm (first fret) to 22mm (10th fret). String spacing could be a fraction more generous for this neck width, but it's not so cramped that it adversely affects playing.

On a tactile level the non-traditional gloss finish, typically, feels a lot more slippery than fresh nitro-cellulose ever does. The fingerboard and frets are as smooth to move around on as they look.

One of the few, but unfortunately key, discrepancies on this review guitar is its fractionally forward-pitched neck, requiring an already very low saddle

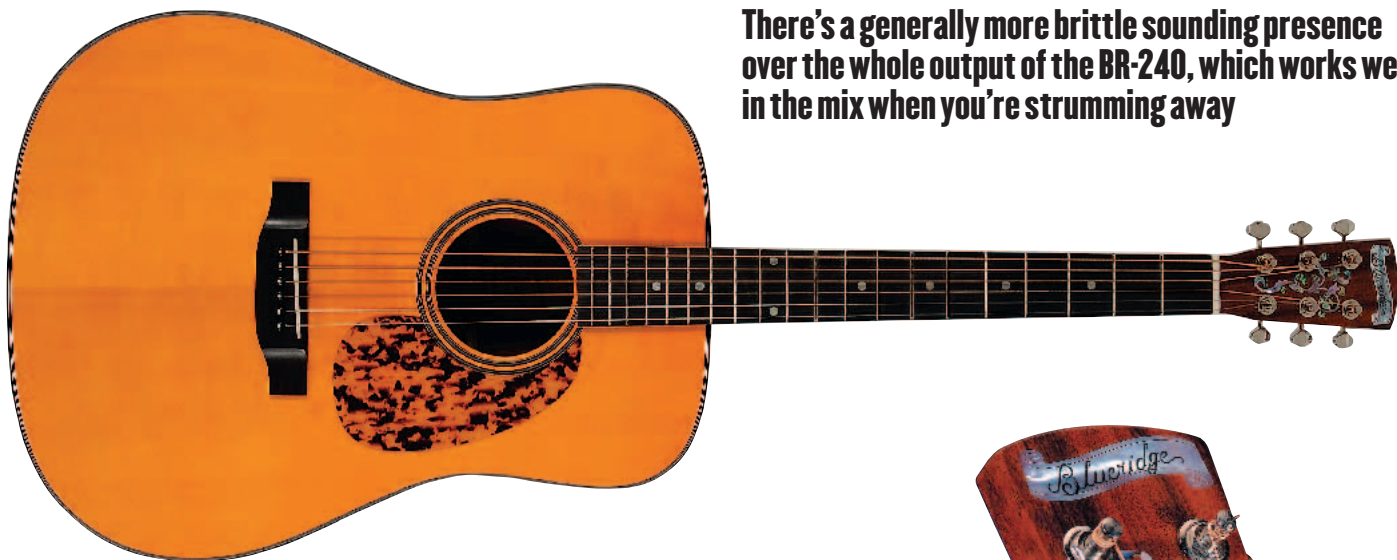
and minimal neck relief to achieve the, albeit decent, action found here. If the neck pulls any further forward in the future, there's not enough saddle left to compensate. Like most dovetail joint necks the fingerboard is not perfectly even end-to-end and there is evidence of minor fret height fluctuation, but this is more noticeable by eye than when you're playing – notes fret cleanly enough. Considering the non-compensated saddle, intonation at the 12th produces surprisingly sweet sounding high fretted chords.

**SOUNDS:** Any suspicion that the BR-183's tone won't live up to its looks is dispelled with your first strum. Eyes closed, you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd got a bona fide, high-end US beauty in your clutches, not something from a big Chinese factory. Many small-shop brands or solo makers follow vintage Martin spec down to the nth degree to try to achieve this kind of sound, while Saga has obviously implemented the necessary quality control to manage similar, utterly credible results from its Blueridge production line.

So, the BR-183 is loud, responsive, full, rich, sweet and sparkling, with a typically shelved yet solid bass and a meaty, humming mid-range that delivers a thick strummed or flat-picked sound while acting like a warm well of tone when you're fingerpicking. For full band recording it's true that a more mid-scooped output often sits better in a mix, but for sparser ensembles or solo work these attributes really fill the airwaves. Strong upper-mids and treble also make sure the unwound strings produce full-bodied notes right up the neck. Glistening over the whole sound is a particularly sweet high harmonic sheen, bringing everything into focus without inspiring too much 'zing' in the wound strings or over-gilding the fundamental-toned distinction of this guitar's voicing. It's the consummate all-rounder most of us desire from a triple-0, performing confidently in any style and delivering all the subtleties and aggressive peaks of your playing equally well.

**BR-240**

What does a 240 mean? Well, '2' indicates Blueridge's Pre-war Series, →



**There's a generally more brittle sounding presence over the whole output of the BR-240, which works well in the mix when you're strumming away**

## The rivals

### BR-183

Freshman FA400FBF £499.99  
Takamine NV460S £1,399

Martin OM-42 £3,499

**Freshman's all-solid small-bodied acoustic lacks abalone body purfling and vintage spec, but has an AAA grade Engelmann spruce top, rosewood fingerboard/bridge, maple binding, similar abalone fingerboard inlays and a hard-shell case. Takamine's slightly bigger Nashville NEX is similarly abalone encrusted with 'bear claw' spruce top and abalone snowflake fingerboard inlays. The Martin OM-42 has snowflake bridge-wing inlays, grained ivoroid binding and a darker tortoise scratchplate**

### BR-240

Freshman FA300D £325  
Stanford D5 £799  
Martin D-18V £1,929

**Freshman's all-solid A-grade Sitka spruce and mahogany dreadnought follows modern specs, with rosewood fingerboard/bridge, white body binding, black scratchplate and enclosed die-cast tuners. Czech-built Stanford offers a similarly styled dreadnought in all but its rosewood fingerboard and bridge. Martin's D-18V differs in its '1-9-1' grouped rosette, modified V-profile matt-finish neck, smaller abalone dot fingerboard markers, 'drop in, long saddle' bridge, open-gear nickel Gotoh tuners, dark tortoise scratchplate and vintage case**

BR-240	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** Impressively conscientious construction and loud, dynamic sound  
■ **WE DISLIKED** Too scooped and edgy sounding for some tastes and applications

→ '4' denotes Style 18 appointments and '0' just means it's a dreadnought. On a quality and technical level, much of this dreadnought's construction dittoes the 000, both inside and out, but we'll point out variations that aren't obvious from the spec.

This top's grain is not as uniformly tight and the ageing toner is just a tad too orange for comfort here, but all the purfling is as clean as a whistle. The dark lines in the rosette and perimeter purfling are not actually black but faux tortoiseshell to match the body binding, which adds a subtle depth to this otherwise basic decoration.

Neck construction is three-piece for models at this slightly lower level, and there's no carved dart. Benign variations include a more neatly shaped nut, a more snugly slotted saddle and tidier bridge pins (even if they are plastic). You'll also notice a less fussy pearl/abalone headstock design.

Strangely, the gloss finish on this model's body seems thinner, with grain texture showing through all over.

With the BR-240 neck we get a chunkier, deeper 'C'-profile, tapering from just under 21mm (first fret) to just over 23mm (10th fret). String spacing is even tighter here, which is a bit of shame, especially if you occasionally fret a bass note with your thumb.

The fingerboard and its frets are once again finished to high-end standards, so your fingertips will pass on those positive subliminal messages to keep playing.

The neck alignment is better (though not entirely 'textbook') on this model, so the potential for future problems is reduced, but the similar set-up here – low saddle, and therefore minimal neck relief – actually results in, arguably, too low a string height for typical dreadnought usage. It could certainly fret more cleanly than it does now without unduly compromising playability.

Intonation at the 12th is a bit flat, so high voice chords are jarring. This is a shame because, due to the way the neck is constructed, the heel has a much lower profile, which improves your access up there.

**SOUNDS:** That triple-0 is a hard act to follow, and this dreadnought is not as impressive, although it has its strengths. We would expect plenty of bass and it's here all right, rumbling forth like it has been summoned from the very depths of this soundbox, while the mid-range has that typically penetrating, nasal toned contour, common to many dreadnoughts. The one failing that sets the BR-240 apart from a truly first-rate dreadnought is the tone of the unwound strings, which sound too thin and pingy and could use some of the 000's thick, sweet treble. There's a generally more brittle sounding presence over the whole output actually, which works well in the mix when you're strumming away, countering the booming bass and highlighting percussive rhythm strokes, but individually picked high notes have metallic edge rather than woody character. It cuts through well, but ultimately it's a bit wearing to listen to.

Like the BR-183, this guitar is lively and loud, offering plenty of headroom for hard playing, but it's also responsive and articulate for softer styles. However, its useful dynamic range doesn't alter the fact that it's more of



The design is less fussy here but beware the tighter string spacing

a brash, scooped sounding bruiser than the BR-183.

## Verdict

Judging purely by construction and tone you'd place both these guitars firmly in the high-end bracket; and were they not built in China this surely would be the case. All things considered, the BR-183 delivers simply astounding value, with nothing coming close for that money (or for quite a lot more, in reality), while the less silk-tongued BR-240 is still a bargain within its own price bracket.

At the entry level, new brands like Freshman offer similarly sourced value, but Blueridge's direct Martin referencing and uncommon classiness in the tricky upper mid-price bracket should clinch this brand some well deserved credibility. **G**

### Blueridge BR-183

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### Blueridge BR-240

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★