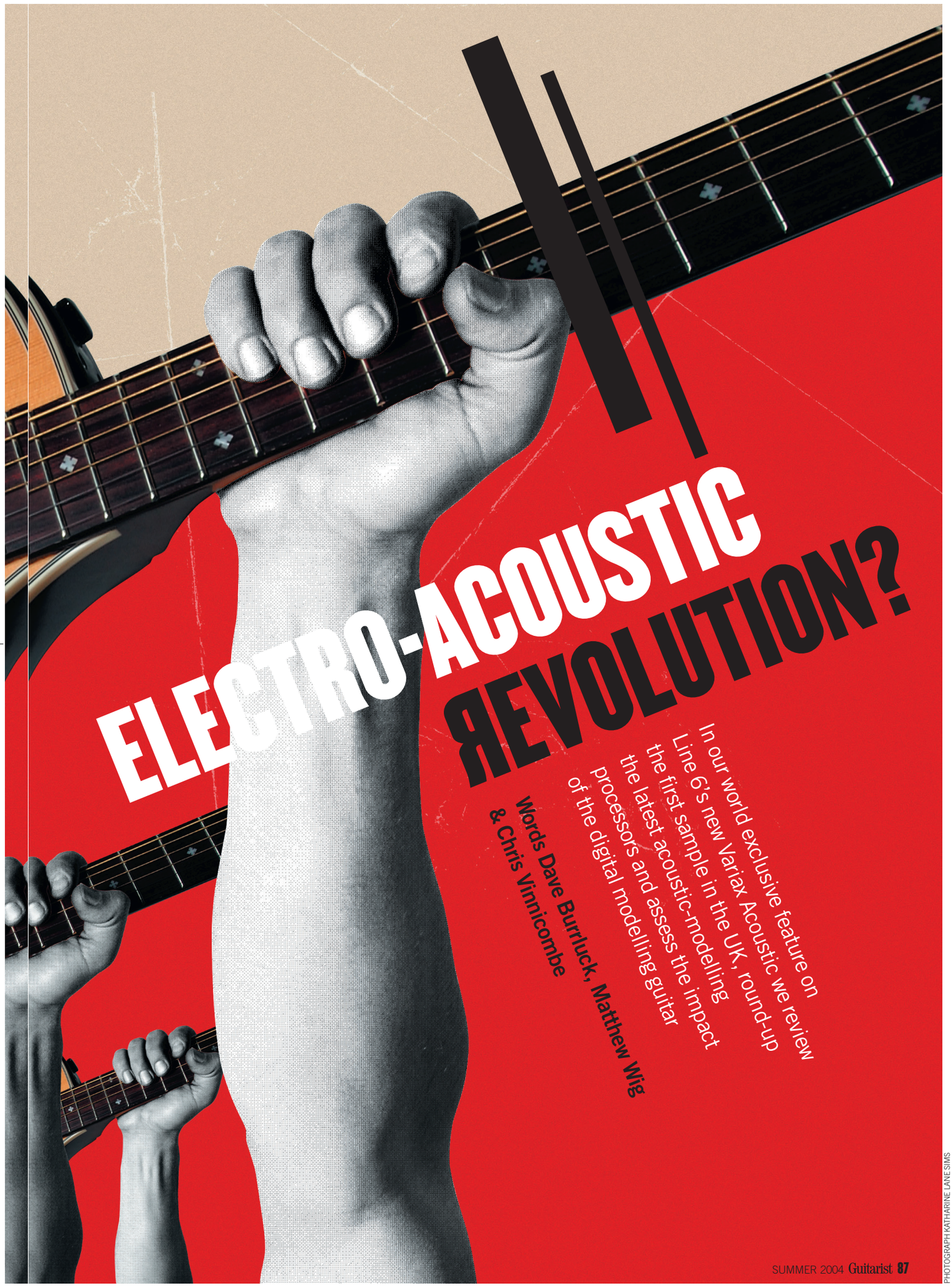
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ELECTRO-ACOUSTIC REVOLUTION?

In our world exclusive feature on Line 6's new Variax Acoustic we review the first sample in the UK, round-up the latest acoustic-modelling processors and assess the impact of the digital modelling guitar

Words Dave Burrluck, Matthew Wig & Chris Vinnicombe

PHOTOGRAPH KATHARINE LANE SIMS

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ELECTRO-ACOUSTIC REVOLUTION?

FLIGHT OF FANCY?

The 'electric' version of Variax was launched last year and now, in 2004, we have the 'acoustic' version. Could this be the future? by Dave Burrluck

Line 6 launched Variax at the end of 2002. We'd already had a range of amps and effects processors that used digital modelling to capture the sounds of classic amps and effects and present them in a single unit; doing the same with guitars – electric and acoustic – was obvious but, as with amp modelling, it has proved highly controversial in the ultra-conservative guitar market.

To begin with, its uninspiring chassis – its neck and body – meant the original Variax (now called Variax 500) did little to persuade the world that DM guitars were really the future. An upgraded vibrato-equipped version, Variax 700, followed and certainly added a better chassis. But the key thing about Variax is that it does more than any other electric guitar by offering over 20 different models of classic electric and acoustic guitars all onboard a single instrument with no outboard processing necessary – you just plug in a play.

The Players

After reviewing Variax 700 last year we dropped it off with Guitarist contributor, studio owner/producer Mike Westergaard who splits his studio time between recording artists and writing music for TV. He used Variax to record the title music of an upcoming E4 show, Four Go Dating, and on new songs during demo sessions with Sky from Morcheeba. "People really liked it, it's a very useful tool," he assessed. "It's the versatility that I found so useful: you can quickly dial in a sound that suits the music you're working on. I didn't pre-select, I just turned the model selector and the five-way switch to find a sound that worked."

Session player Nick Robinson who's recently been working with Nelly Furtado and Kim Marsh is equally 'real world' about his Variax 700: "We all fantasise about playing on stage with loads of different amps and guitars but in reality, if you're a working player playing in smaller venues, the audience doesn't notice what gear you've got.



Former Smith Johnny Marr has found the Variax to be a useful tool

And if you're doing covers you're trying to replicate recorded parts."

You'd think that a seasoned string-mangling pro like Jerry Donahue wouldn't necessarily see the Variax picture, but at the recent Frankfurt Musikmesse Donahue chose to play Variax instead of his own signature Fender, not for a Line 6 demo but on the German-company Nobels stand. "I think the Variax is the best offering we've seen since Leo Fender introduced the Telecaster in 1950," enthused Donahue. "This instrument's ability to successfully replicate the tones I've insisted on through the years, in addition to so many other popular sounds/stringed instruments, puts it in a league all of its own."

Laurie Wisefield is another seasoned pro who has been using Variax 500 from the beginning; along with performing in We Will Rock You, he's currently touring Europe with Night Of The Proms. "I still take my mainstay workhorse guitars but this tour is with a full orchestra and an electric rock band, we play a lot of different kinds of music and sometimes within one song I need both acoustic and electric," he says. "I find the acoustic sounds on Variax 500 really good, especially through a big PA. The body and neck aren't the best but the sounds, the ES-335, the Teles, the Strat and Les Paul, all sound good. But it's the feel of those old guitars that you can't replicate – you can't change the feel."

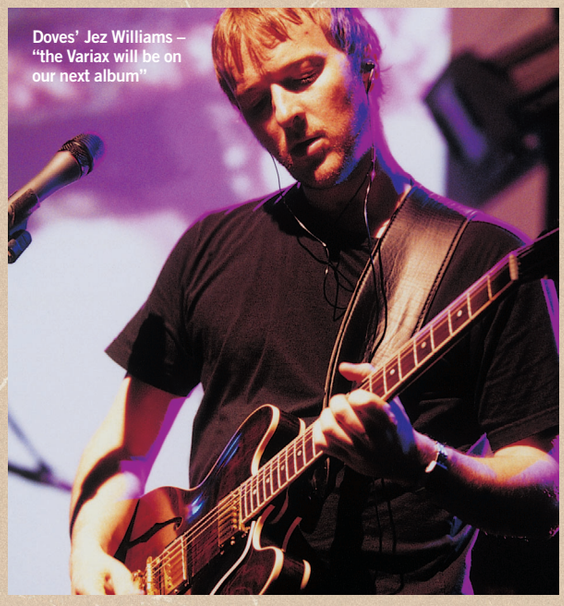
Wisefield highlights two common complaints: firstly you might be hearing a pretty accurate Les Paul-style or ES-175 tone but there's no way Variax can feel like either. Also the neck and body of Variax 500 are well made for a budget model but a bit average for a player who has other quality guitars. Top London guitar-repairer Bill Puplett agrees and was asked by some of his customers if Variax was available as a retro-fit so they could fit the technology into a favourite guitar. British designer of brands like Fret-King and Italia, Trev Wilkinson, had the same thought: "The first time I saw Variax my first thought was wouldn't it be great to put that technology in a 'real' guitar so you could have the best of both worlds."

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Pete Townshend can have any guitar he likes, but is a confirmed Variax fan

"This guitar is a great tool for the student, recording studio or just for someone wanting an idea of how all those great guitars were supposed to sound" Pete Townshend



Doves' Jez Williams – "the Variax will be on our next album"

Well things are moving on that front too: Warmoth (see Digital DIY) now makes high-quality replacement necks and bodies for Variax 500 so you can create your own 'Variax'.

Sales

Paul Hughes is the Sales Manager at the Soho Soundhouse in London. "We've done very well with Variax," he confirms. "Once it was announced we took back orders immediately. However, you need to explain the concept to the customer. The only limitation is the physical guitar itself – most people have their own favourite guitar, with its own feel. Variax doesn't feel like a Gretsch or a Les Paul but the tones are close – it's great for duplicating sounds from records."

So just who's buying Variax? "We've sold mostly to session players and touring musicians," says Hughes. "Lots of bedroom and semi-pro players too, but I'd say the majority has been to top-end players. I don't think Variax has taken anyone's market share: the people who buy one already have a Strat and/or a Les Paul."

Paul Malcom from Sound Control's Glasgow store is equally enthusiastic and also states a lot have been sold to "function band" musicians and also to studio-based players. "Variax has been fantastic for us. The 500 created an amazing buzz – we pre-sold loads – and it's still the best-selling model." However, Paul reckons Variax 500 especially has stolen market share – primarily from mid-priced hybrid electrics, sales of which in his store have "practically ceased."

Not for everyone

Will DM guitars change our industry like digital technology has changed audio recording and photography?

"No," says Paul Reed Smith. "If the modelling was as good as the digital photography is, I would say yes. But, when I see our brochures and it looks like these were pictures taken with film, and in fact they were taken digitally and no-one can really tell the difference, I'd say that changes the industry. But the digitally modelled guitars still don't sound as good as the originals, and almost anybody can hear the difference. I think what we're looking at is the beginning of a changed art form, not the end. As it gets better, I think the chances of it changing the industry will get higher. By the way, I think it will get better."

Guitar author Tom Wheeler has written and studied the history of the guitar and written numerous books on the subject. He sees the potential for studio musicians as "promising" but feels for many players that, "tradition continues to play a big role in how we perceive our guitars. You refer to the way digital cameras have revolutionised photography, but that was a mechanical and chemical-based technology in need of revolutionising. For most of us, photography's romance is in the photos, not the camera. Are guitar players really looking for something other than a rich sounding acoustic guitar, or a great feeling, great looking, great sounding electric guitar plugged into a great sounding amp? I'd much rather have a Martin, Fender, Gretsch, Gibson, or what have you than a single digital instrument, even if it were convenient, cheaper, and could

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ELECTRO-ACOUSTIC REVOLUTION?

replicate the sounds of those other instruments. Why? In a word, romance. I think the simplicity, portability, beauty, feel and vibe of traditional guitars will continue to make them the instruments of choice for most players for decades to come."

Author, journalist and Guitarist contributor Charles Shaar Murray has already been swayed by the versatility of Vox's Valvetronix digital amps but says: "To extend this into the guitar universe, we'd need a modelling guitar which had as groovy a feel and vibe as our favourite Strat/Tele/Les Paul/ES-335 or whatever. Sound isn't everything. I'd love to be able to turn my open-tuned solidbody slide guitar into a 1930s National resonator (or my 1996 JD Tele into a vintage Rickie 12) at the twist of a knob, but that doesn't mean I want to play a mediocre-feeling alien guitar in order to have those sounds at my disposal." As Charles subsequently commented: "I love the 'Vari' but not the 'ax'."

Ned Steinberger is one of the few designers that could lay claim to producing really radical revolutionary designs with his headless and virtually body-less carbon fibre instruments. "The power of electronics is wonderful, but there is a price to pay. With the acoustic guitar, the relationship between player and instrument is intimate, with the sound coming directly from the body. An electric guitar is one step removed, as the sound comes from a separate speaker. The beauty of the electric guitar is that even though it is amplified, the origin of the sound, which is the string itself, is still vibrating under your fingers, and thus responsive to all nuance of technique. The Variax uses the string more like a trigger and as such is two steps removed. I'm sure modelling has an important place in the world of guitar, but I don't think it will ever dominate the market."

Avalon's MD Steve McIlwrath has similar thoughts, especially in regard to the new Variax Acoustic: "It's a well made, well designed instrument, but like all digitally modelled systems its focus is on what the electronics can do, not the natural acoustic sound of the instrument. In electro-acoustic guitars I see it as developing into an important niche rather than becoming the mainstream. It will have an impact, but won't dominate in the same way digital technology has affected the world of photography and audio recording."

"As it gets better, I think the chances of the Variax changing the industry will get higher. And I think it will get better"
Paul Reed Smith

The future?

So are we guitarists all technophobic, conservative romantics? "Well, I think the evolvement of the electric guitar is actually held back by the majority of guitarists' hesitation to accept new concepts and/or new materials and methods of construction," offers Trev Wilkinson. "It seems strange to me that Variax is possibly the one guitar that people actually listen to to judge it – most other guitars are judged visually on appearance and specs such as materials or place of manufacture and, of course, age."

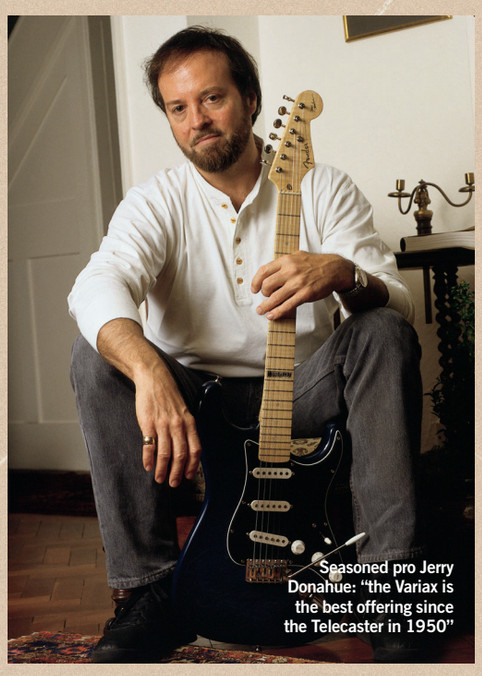
The launch of Variax Acoustic (reviewed on page 92 of this issue) will no doubt heighten the debate. With its on-board 'pitch modelling' we not only have the versatility of the numerous onboard sounds but also the ability to immediately change tuning without touching our machineheads. "Pitch modelling is very exciting," reckons Bill Puplett, who's fitted and repaired all types of multi-tuning devices like Hipshot's Trilogy bridge and the TransPerformance system beloved by Jimmy Page. "Any systems that physically retune the strings all have problems of compromise with differing string tensions and the fact that the neck moves under these different tensions. But to achieve it from a fixed string tension is a major breakthrough. It's a very musical way to go I think."

But many guitar players probably haven't yet tried this 'new fangled' axe. The Doves' Jez Williams is happy he did: "Variax is proving to be a very handy tool. We've already used it on various demos, and it will definitely end up on the next album. It's so easy to change the whole mood of a song by simply changing a Strat into a semi instantaneously."

Johnny Marr was likewise impressed: "I've found so far the Variax has an 'intrinsic sound' of its own which is very pleasing and useful, and is particularly good when used with the POD. I've found that I used it as a very, very diverse electric guitar and I stopped checking the sound it was modelling (almost, curiosity got me). I just got a good sound and played."

Pete Townshend has access to any guitar he likes but he's still found time to evaluate Variax. "This guitar is a great tool for the student, recording studio or just for someone wanting an idea of how all those great guitars throughout history were supposed to sound," he says. "In a lot of cases the Variax version sounds better than the original."

Digital technology may have its detractors but it has changed the way we live, work, and create music. Is the digital modelling guitar (which you must remember is just in its infant stage) the future or simply a flight of fantasy? What do you think? G



Seasoned pro Jerry Donahue: "the Variax is the best offering since the Telecaster in 1950"

DIGITAL DIY

Don't like the neck or body of your Variax 500? Change 'em!



Warmoth is probably the premier quality supplier of replacement necks and bodies with a wide online choice of options. Recently the USA company announced replacement necks and bodies for Variax 500 so you can simply load up Variax's parts on to a new chassis. Currently both Strat and Tele style bodies are available (unfinished from $265, solid colours add $165) while a maple/rosewood Strat-style neck will cost $157 (plus $15 upcharge to alter the screw positions). If you want a higher quality version of the back-angled Variax neck with the Line 6 headstock, Warmoth makes those too. You can order on-line (or via phone or fax) and shipping charge to the UK for the above body and neck would be $53 (approx, plus import taxes, VAT and in some cases a handling charge).
www.warmoth.com

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Line 6 Variax Acoustic 700 £899

Modelling mania hits acoustic players head-on as Line 6 packs an impressive selection of classic acoustics into just one guitar by Matthew Wig

The rivals

Fishman Aura	£499
Fender Acoustasonic Stratocaster	£799.99
Godin xtSA	£939

Godin's latest, reasonably priced multi-voice guitar offers electric and electro-acoustic tones plus, via its 13-pin standard synth output, the potential to access an unlimited variety of other sounds including the Roland VG-88's acoustic models. Fishman's Aura pedal uses Acoustic Sound Images, not modelling, to transform your electro-acoustic tone into an exceptionally lifelike acoustic tone – it's got a chromatic tuner, notch, phase, compression and three-band EQ. The Fender is a more straightforward stage-only electro-acoustic, with graphite topped alder body, maple neck, three-way Fishman pickup into three-channel preamp, active tone and sexy colours

Both Line 6's Variax 500 and 700 (Jan 2004 issue) modelling guitars already offer a small selection of acoustic guitar/instrument types among their arsenal of onboard guitar models. However, it became clear to Line 6 that while these provide a compelling 'jack-of-all-trades' solution for instrument-burdened gigging guitarists, acoustic players have very particular needs that were not being met. A dedicated acoustic modelling guitar was required; not only loaded with acoustic-specific features and functionality, but with a more congruous playability and design. Enter the Variax Acoustic 700, armed with appropriately potent modelling fire-power: 12 classic acoustic models, four more exotic acoustic instrument models, preset and custom alternate tunings at the touch of a button, compression, modelled microphone placement and the ability to save preferred parameter settings. These models have all been created for this guitar, and do not correlate to those found on its predecessors. As a result, more time and effort has been spent tweaking the algorithms that instruct the complex digital transformations, aiming to enhance the acoustic realism of the models.

VARIAX ACOUSTIC 700	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★½
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★½
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** Ease of use, excellent alternate tuning feature, included accessories and the best acoustic sounds you'll hear from a plugged-in guitar on its own

■ **WE DISLIKED** Some scruffy construction details, and what about an onboard tuner?

Variax Acoustic 700

As we mentioned in our preview (March 2004 issue) this guitar is styled a bit like the Gibson Chet Atkins SST. Its body is solid mahogany, although three separate slabs make up its width, with considerable wood mass removed for the electronics compartments and oval 'soundhole' chamber. For fittingly acoustic styling the flat top (there is a slight widthways convexity) is a handsomely uniform-grained slice of solid cedar; and you'll notice the traditional black and white purfling. The rosette is a bit furry around its edges, but the perimeter purfling is cleanly laid. The black lacquered inner surface of the 'soundhole' chamber is left surprisingly rough.

Where the 'electric' Variaxes have bolt-on necks, this three-piece mahogany example is mortise-jointed, Les Paul style. Its fingerboard is cleanly finished, with sharp outlined inlays, but it's not the neatest fret manicure we've ever seen. The nut is squarely seated and this rosewood-faced headstock carries a set of smooth and positively geared tuners. Down at the authentic acoustic bridge we find an unusually dry, bare-wood surface, albeit tidily finished with no sharp corners. The front-end of the Variax's complex signal chain is a fairly familiar piezo-type transducer with separate sensors for each string. This unit is a neat looking, if chunky, integrated saddle unit with logically staggered, slotted metal saddle pieces for accurate intonation. At each end there's a handy height adjustment screw.

A generous finish applied to neck and body simultaneously results in some pooling around the heel/body joint line and fingerboard extension sides. However, this isn't a tone issue here, purely a cosmetic concern.

At the rear, a large square cover plate unscrews to reveal the modelling 'nerve centre' circuit board, which appears deceptively modest considering its capabilities. Only the twin looms of fine wires going to the controls and the output, respectively, hint at the wealth of stealthy technology at work here. Both the pickup and main PCBs are securely screwed to the body wood. The battery compartment is latched shut with a 'coin slot' screw, and inside you find a 6 x AA battery cradle, which rattles around loose when it's empty and is removable to leave a 9V PP3 connector. 9V cells are for emergencies only as they are swiftly drained.

The simple control panel is purposely lacking in defined markings since the three sliders control a number of functions. Unusually, these sliders have bare ends, but they're sufficiently smooth and damped. The main selector knob is a chunky, positively clicking and significantly damped device with sufficient resistance to any accidental twisting or depressing.

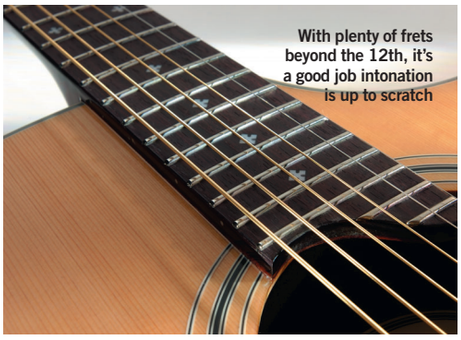
While there is a digital in/out, you'll need Line 6's Vetta combo to use it. The standard mono jack output can receive phantom power from the very handy XPS footswitch via a stereo lead; and Line 6 includes both. The XPS is a mains powered (adaptor included) DI box that allows A/B switching between ➔

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PHOTOGRAPHY LOUISE BROOM

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With plenty of frets beyond the 12th, it's a good job intonation is up to scratch



The controls are simple to use and sturdy enough to last

an instrument level mono jack output and a standard line level XLR output, so you can toggle between acoustic amp or direct PA routing if necessary.

The Variax Acoustic is designed to feel like a regular acoustic, so its reasonably buxom 'C'-profile neck, about 21mm (first fret) to 23.5mm (10th fret) deep, is par for the course. Combined with a manageable width, this delivers a non-specialised familiarity that's reminiscent of Avalon's Silver Series (Oct 2003/ Sept 2004) neck dimensions.

The fingerboard is given a lightly sealed, dry silk finish that offers 'talcum powder' lubrication, but as we mentioned earlier the fret ends are not as snag-free as they could be.

Solidbody construction makes it simpler to achieve ideal neck alignment and a uniform fingerboard, so we have no problems here. Fret height looks very even, too, end to end. The result is a consistent, positive and effortless action, that makes these standard-issue light-gauge bronze strings seem unusually easy-going. Also, you can adjust the 12th fret string height via the saddle screws, which means you can do a complete action set-up yourself.

Intonation is, unsurprisingly, as near as damn-it to perfect at the 12th, which is a relief with all these frets, an open cutaway and the electric style low-profile heel to tempt you 'up there'.

Acoustic players may balk at the weight of this guitar, but once you've stood up and pranced around with it for a bit, the slim body advantages make a persuasive argument.

Special Features

The main rotary selector is illuminated with a green LED in basic play mode (see boxout for model listing). In this mode the three sliders govern compression, volume and mic position. Compression is a tricky concept, but the Variax simplifies it to a single 'more or less' decision. Sophisticated microphone modelling allows you to adjust (in the digital domain) microphone placement relative to the modelled instrument's soundhole. This is your only control over tone.

The simple control panel is purposely lacking in defined markings since the three sliders control a number of functions

A quick press of the selector knob and the red LED lets you know you've engaged alternate tuning mode. If Line 6's tuning choice is inappropriate you enter alternate tuning set-up mode (a quick double press leading to a flashing red-green-red-green LED) where you can pick from the library of preset tunings (see boxout). It is assumed you will tune the Variax Acoustic to standard tuning to begin with, or else presets go a little pear-shaped. In this mode the compressor and mic position sliders function differently. When farthest from the knob the compressor slider selects preset tunings mode, in which case the mic position slider acts as preset tuning selector. Moving the compressor slider towards the knob engages custom tuning mode and selects each separate string in turn until the final position when the 'capo' setting selects all strings simultaneously. The Variax's pitch modelling allows you to drop each string down an octave (12 semitones/ half-steps) or raise it by a fifth (seven semitones/half-steps). Pitch control is served by the mic position slider here.

For the two 12-string guitars, the mandola, the sitar and the Japanese shamisen you cannot use alternate tunings, but you do get logical manipulation of these models. For example, with the 12-strings you can vary the relative pitch of the string pairs to get some chorusy phasing or choose for only the high octave strings to sound (like Nashville tuning).



Variax Acoustic has both a regular jack socket and a digital I/O for Vetta II connection

Alternate tunings, compressor levels and mic positions can all be saved to the particular model you selected to edit, and you can even save alternate tuning mode as the default for that model.

You'll note the lack of any EQ, which Line 6 considers unnecessary. Personally, this reviewer thinks an onboard tuner would be the next generation's most useful addition.

LINE 6 VARIAX ACOUSTIC 700
PRICE: £899 (inc gig bag and accessories)
ORIGIN: Korea
TYPE: Single cutaway, flat-top, acoustically chambered solidbody featuring 16 digital acoustic guitar/instrument models, instant alternate tunings and onboard compression
TOP: Solid cedar
BODY: Mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 48.5mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 350mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm
TUNERS: Individual die-cast chrome
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, unbound with pearl snowflake markers, 432mm (17-inch) radius
FRETS: 24, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/54mm
ELECTRICS: Piezo-type hexaphonic saddle pickup into patented onboard Variax DSP modelling 'nerve centre'/preamp. Controls include multi-function 16-way rotary model selector/push-button knob, volume, compressor, modelled mic position, instant alternate tuning switch, preset alternate tunings select, individual string or 'capo' pitch (custom tunings) and custom settings 'save' function. Power via 6 x AA batteries (10-12 hours approx), 1 x PP3 (1-2 hours – emergency power) or phantom supply from XPS A/B footswitch/DI box (included) through TRS/stereo lead (included). Guitar outputs – regular 6.4mm jack and digital I/O for Vetta II amp connection. XPS A/B footswitch/DI box (external power supply included) toggles between unbalanced 6.4mm jack and balanced XLR outputs
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3/6.6
LEFT-HANDERS: Not yet
OPTIONS: Spruce top versions planned for later in year
FINISHES: Natural gloss body and neck (as reviewed) or black
Line 6 UK
01788 821600
www.line6.com

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The slimline mahogany body feels quite agreeable once you're used to it



The Line 6 XPS footswitch is included with the guitar

The Variax Acoustic catwalk

■ Here's the Variax Acoustic 700's list of models, along with the drool-some source instruments Line 6 referenced to create them…

'PARLOR'	1941 Martin 5-17
'TRIPLE 0'	1946 Martin 000-28
'DREAD'	1960 Martin D-21
'JUMBO'	1954 Gibson J-45
'C & W'	1951 Gibson SJ-200
'GYPSY'	1933 Selmer Maccaferri
'JAZZ'	1951 D'Angelico New Yorker
'NYLON'	958 Manuel Velazquez
'FOLK 12'	1973 Guild F412
'BLUES 12'	1935 Stella Auditorium
'RND NECK'	1939 National Reso-Phonic Style "O"
'SQUARE NECK'	1937 Dobro Model 27
'BANJO'	Gibson Mastertone
'MANDOLA'	Mandola
'SHAMISEN'	Japanese Shamisen
'SITAR'	Indian Sitar

■ And here are the preset alternate tunings you have at your fingertips…

E & A OCTAVE DOWN	
DROP D	DADGBE
DADGAD	
HIGH G	GBDGBD
LOW G	DGDGBD
OPEN D	DADF#AD
OPEN A	EAEAC#E
OPEN E	EBEG#BE

➛ **SOUNDS:** To this reviewer's ears the 'Triple 0' is the most convincing of the six-string models, with a core tone that's superbly workable and considerably more satisfying than any existing acoustic pickup system alone could hope to provide. The mic position control allows a welcome and useful variety of warmth, tonal colour and percussive elements. For a more biting, meaty sound the 'Dread' comes in a characterful second best, but it has to be said that some of the other six-strings sound a bit like variations on the 'Triple 0', just with different EQ.



With a built-in alternate tunings library, you may not need these as much as you think

The sounds are just there and usable straightaway, the basic controls are simple, the alternate tunings feature is intuitive and mastered in minutes

Hence, when you move on to 'Gypsy', 'Jazz', 'Banjo', 'Sitar' (excellent fun), or even 'Shamisen', you appreciate the complete personality change, even if you don't know what to do with them… yet! Both the atmospherically lo-fi Selmer Maccaferri-based 'Gypsy' and Gibson Mastertone-based 'Banjo' are particularly impressive, capturing the real spirit of the source instrument, although actual users of these instruments may be more critical.

The resonator models capture the essence of the instruments in question, but the idiosyncrasies are missing, while 'Nylon' is a bit unconvincing. Both the 12-strings and 'Mandola' highlight the technical difficulties that arise when modelling instruments with string-pairs, and the results are still a little synthetic.

Inevitably, some of the characterful if occasionally perplexing quirks associated with such acoustic instruments are somewhat ironed-out and homogenised during the digital, algorithmic re-assembly processing. So, while each model tone is commendably balanced, positive and consistent over its entire response range, delivering a predictable performance, even at very high volumes, there's a slightly unrealistic dynamic smoothness.

When you're using an alternate tuning you really want to be drowning out any acoustic sound coming from the Variax or the dissonance will do your head in. Also, you'll find that note tracking is fractionally slower on a digitally de-tuned string, and the lower you tune the more the model character gets blurred.

Verdict

One of the Variax's huge pluses is its immediate plug in and play ease of use – the sounds are just there and usable straightaway, the basic controls are simple, the alternate tunings feature is intuitive and mastered in minutes. On one level Fishman's nifty new Aura pedal does offer your existing electro an edge with its more lifelike acoustic ambience, but that is a relatively tricky set-up concentrating purely on the sound quality issue; plus, at gigging volumes, the solidbody Variax Acoustic is bound to behave better. Inevitably, it's the Variax's choice and features that give it the edge, and not only is it unique as a one-stop cure for many acoustic players' woes, but it offers by far the best value way of achieving this specific solution. G

Line 6 Variax Acoustic 700
Guitarist RATING ★★★★½

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More acoustic modelling

Although Variax remains the only acoustic modelling guitar, we're seeing more and more products that use some kind of acoustic modelling, or similar technology, to 'improve' your basic piezo or magnetic electro-acoustic tone. Here's a brief overview by Chris Vinnicombe



Roland VG-88

PRICE: £899
TYPE: Virtual guitar and amp modeller plus synth and digital effects

Back in September 2000, we reviewed the Roland VG-88 Virtual Guitar System. Rather than being a specific acoustic instrument modelling system, the VG-88 incorporates Roland's COSM technology to model a whole library of guitars, effects and amplifiers to great effect – including both steel and nylon-strung acoustic models and the option to change the size and type of the synthesised acoustic body. Although this is easily the most expensive option here, don't forget that acoustic modelling is just a small part of an incredible array of sonic options that the VG-88 offers, with the added advantage that there is no need for onstage guitar-swapping.

WE LIKED Everything! No tracking delay and the majority of sounds retain playing dynamics and expression
WE DISLIKED Requires the GK2A pickup to get the most out of the unit; minor glitching on some real-time parameter changes

Roland UK 01792 702701
www.roland.co.uk



Fishman Aura

PRICE: £399
TYPE: Digital acoustic instrument processor pedal – 'Acoustic Imaging Blender'

As reviewed in issue 251, Fishman's new Aura processor provides a slightly different take on modelling technology, focussing instead upon taking the sound of your acoustic's piezo or magnetic pickup and employing sophisticated digital processing in order to simulate the effects of a carefully positioned studio-quality microphone. The main advantage to this approach is that you can get close to the mic'd acoustic tone of your own instrument, in whatever environment that you decide to play. We said at the time: "that buzzy, 'close-up' piezo pickup character is eradicated, replaced with a natural airy sparkle and a three-dimensional sense of size and space."

WE LIKED Extremely lifelike mic'd-up acoustic sounds, upgradeability and solid construction
WE DISLIKED No MIDI adaptor cable, lack of knobs for more intuitive editing

FCN 01892 603730
www.fishmanaura.com



Yamaha AG Stomp

PRICE: £399
TYPE: Acoustic guitar preamp pedal with stereo digital effects and mic modelling

Reviewed in issue 219, Yamaha's AG Stomp takes the successful formula of their modelling pedals and applies it to the particular needs of acoustic guitarists. The AG Stomp features microphone modelling technology and although microphone models are more generic than the Acoustic Sound Images used on Fishman's Aura, we were again impressed by the way that the AG Stomp managed to breathe life and natural ambience into a basic piezo tone: "Twisting the blend control between direct and full microphone simulation, you can hear claustrophobic piezo buzz give way to a truly three-dimensional sense of space."

WE LIKED Emphasis on the essential acoustic requirements and totally credible, effective mic simulations
WE DISLIKED Lack of input gain control

Yamaha 01908 366700
www.yamaha-music.co.uk



Korg AX10A

PRICE: £99
TYPE: Multi-effects processor for the acoustic guitar

Korg's brand new AX10A follows on from their cost-effective electric guitar and bass modelling pedals which we reviewed back in issue 250. The AX10A uses Korg's highly-regarded REMS modelling technology to approximate the tones of a variety of classic acoustic guitars and features mic modelling as well, although this is limited in comparison to the Fishman and Yamaha units.
However, if you are looking for a low-cost way to liven up an acoustic signal for live or studio use then this could be an ideal first port of call. It would particularly be a good place to start for less-experienced players.

WE LIKED Easy to use and ideal for multi-effects virgins
WE DISLIKED Slightly unsophisticated sonic options

Korg UK 01908 857100
www.korg.co.uk

ALSO CHECK...
We've not reviewed BOSS's AD-8 Acoustic Guitar Processor (£279) but our tech team has heard an excellent demo. The AD-8 uses COSM Acoustic Modelling to, "transform piezo-equipped guitars into six high-end acoustics." Body and String Enhance help to create what BOSS believes are, "warm, mic'd acoustic sounds." Other features include four-band EQ and reverb, onboard tuner with mute function, anti-feedback control, four preset memory locations and balanced XLR outputs to allow direct connection to a PA.
Roland UK 01792 702701
www.roland.co.uk