

THE BOTTOM LINE[®]

PERFORMANCE TESTING BY TOM MULHERN & ASSOCIATES, CAMPBELL, CA (408) 374-1353

AT A GLANCE: Taylor Guitars is celebrating a major milestone—its 20th anniversary—by making two limited-edition Grand Auditorium acoustics. Both feature intricate inlay, stunning craftsmanship, and such distinctive tonal characteristics that guitarists will find it difficult to split up such a perfectly matched set by choosing only one.

By Tom Mulhern

It isn't every day that a company—especially a *guitar* company—celebrates its 20th anniversary. Taylor has just reached that auspicious milestone and is celebrating in style with its 20th Anniversary Series guitars. A pair of 20th Anniversary Limited Edition Grand Auditorium instruments—one with a rosewood body/spruce top combination (the XX-RS model) and another with a mahogany body/cedar top (the XX-MC)—is Taylor's way of taking a bow for its achievements. Both guitars are the same size and share dimensions, inlay, hardware, and basic structure. However, their tonal personalities are decidedly different, and both sound and feel so good that it's hard to imagine any guitarist not being bowled over by them.

Contributing a great deal to these two guitars' distinctive voices is their size. Smaller than a dreadnought yet larger than a grand concert, the body has a soft, rounded shape. The look and feel are exquisite, with supple curves and a close-up kind of intimacy that larger-bodied instruments don't often provide. Inside, the bracing structure is also different from other Taylors, since there's more to creating a sound than mere size and shape. In a nutshell, the tone is less boomy, with greater emphasis on the treble end of the spectrum.

Before playing the Anniversary Series guitars, let's look at their visual characteristics. The word "elegant" only begins to describe the overall look of these rich, beautiful instruments. Except for the metal hardware, mother-of-pearl, abalone, and gold inlay, and synthetic nut and saddle, everything on these guitars is wood. Dense, solid ebony fingerboards assure crisp sound, strong, straight necks, and a fantastically black backdrop for the intricate inlay between the 13th and 18th fret. This inlay is a glorious pattern that harkens back to designs gracing fancy guitars and banjos at the turn of the 20th Century. Inlaid at the 17th fret are the Roman numerals "XX" in solid 18-karat gold, commemorating Taylor Guitars' 20th anniversary. The rosewood-bodied/spruce-topped XX-RS has a very traditional look, with the deep brown-red sides and back contrasting with the light-colored, straight-grained spruce top. The XX-MC, on the other hand, utilizes mahogany for its back and sides and a cedar top, providing a unified lighter-brown coloring scheme.

The multiple-ply top binding is extremely cool, with a rich-looking thick rosewood binding surrounding wood and ebonized wood fiber purflings of white/dark blue/light blue/dark blue/white/black/white/black. White/dark blue/light blue/white purfling flanks the rosewood on the sides, and runs around the back's perimeter between the rosewood binding and the mahogany back. Down the center is a black/white/dark blue/light blue/dark blue/white/back center stripe. Similar multi-hued

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Taylor Guitars' 20th Anniversary Grand Auditorium Acoustic Guitars



Taylor Guitars' XX-RS (left) features a spruce top and rosewood body, while the XX-MC has a cedar top and mahogany body.

purfling flanks the mother-of-pearl inlay that circles about 1/2" away from the soundhole. Rosewood trim around the soundhole's edge dresses up the look even further. A lot of detail? You bet—but it's light-years away from being gaudy. In fact, it's downright inviting. And the closer you get to the guitars, the better they look; the colors of the purfling become more distinct, and the intricacy of the fingerboard inlay becomes more apparent. You could easily lose yourself in merely *looking* at these guitars, if you weren't so caught up in playing them.

Workmanship is exceptional, especially in such critical places as nut slotting and fret dressing. The action height is right on the money, and every fret is smooth and perfectly contoured. As a result, there's no buzz, no rattle, and no imprecise intonation anywhere along the neck. Chords ring true, and single notes sustain beautifully. Even vigorous vibrato sounds great, without grinding or "fretting out." Inside and out, each part is flawlessly fit to the next, an important

Taylor's 20th Anniversary Acoustic Guitars

consideration when you're looking for a guitar to get you through many years of playing. The transitions where the headstock overlay meets the headstock, the fingerboard meets the neck, the neck meets its heel cap, and binding meets the top, sides, or back are silky smooth, feeling as if they were actually single entities rather than individual components that had been joined together. Interior bracing and kerfing is a model of cleanliness, without a chip, nick, or out-of-place glue squeeze.

Whereas many guitars are voiced to sound best primarily when belted, the Anniversary Limited Editions are obviously designed for musicality at all levels. I especially like the way they respond to a light touch—such as when you play a soft intro, or when you slide chords from position to position. Even the most subtle hammer-ons and carresses don't lose support, nor do these guitars become excessively "dark"-sounding when you strum lightly. Simply put, Taylor's Anniversary guitars have mouth-watering dynamic response.

In addition to all the extras that Taylor Guitars has included on these Anniversary models, there's one you won't see but will definitely appreciate: a certificate of authenticity featuring Bob Taylor's signature, a serial number and a secondary number (a number between 1 and 250). There's also a one-time warranty transfer, so if you eventually decide to sell your guitar, the next owner will be covered by the warranty. This, plus the extremely limited number of guitars included in the series, will certainly appeal to collectors as well as hardcore players.

Since the two guitars are so similar, what distinguishes them? Actually, their woods are your first clue. The rosewood sides and back and Sitka spruce top of the XX-RS give it a snappy, bright sound that's more akin to what has become known as the "classic" dreadnought or concert guitar sound. Rhythm players—especially those who use a medium or hard pick—will delight in the XX-RS' commanding tone and controllability. Fingerpickers, particularly

those with a country or bluegrass inclination, will be more than pleased by the full, well-focused sound that doesn't get muddy when you're simultaneously laying down bass, chords, and melody.

For guitarists who want a different, remarkably distinctive sound that you might not expect from a steel-string, the XX-MC, with its mahogany sides and back and stunning Western cedar top, is one of those guitars that's bound to make you ask, "Where has this been all my life?" Its overtones are evenly distributed, rather than centered around the highs and lows, imparting a lush, orchestrated timbre to fingerpicking and a marvelous mellowness if you strum "straight-eights" rhythm for shuffles or jazz. Don't misconstrue this description to mean that the XX-MC sounds muffled or thuddy—far from it. It's a difficult tone to describe ("warm" is a good start), but once you've experienced it, you'll love it.

How do you choose between these two Anniversary Series models? Playing both of them could actually make your decision *harder*, since they sound so fine. The mahogany-bodied/cedar-topped XX-MC has a smooth-as-silk tone that coaxes your best fingerstyle playing, yielding a full-bodied yet extremely well-mannered tone. And even though the XX-RS's brighter, more versatile sound is designed for a wider variety of playing styles, it's tough to decide which guitar is the one to take home. All I can say is, test-drive both—and look deep into your personal playing style. Of course, because they complement each other so well, and since they were created essentially as a set, you may find that the best choice is to get both of them. Whether you decide to get one or both, though, you'll have to make your decision sometime soon, because these are truly limited editions (only 250 of each). Regardless of your choice, you can be assured of this: The Taylor 20th Anniversary models are sure to inspire you, perhaps even bringing out more guitarist than you ever knew was inside of you.



Exquisite inlay work on the fingerboard includes the solid 18-karat gold "XX," which indicates the 20th Anniversary model's rarity.

INSIDE TAYLOR'S XX-RS & XX-MC GRAND AUDITORIUM MODELS

Note: The XX-RS and XX-MC share many specifications in common; therefore, only one set of specifications is listed here. All differences are indicated for any features that are not shared.

Type of guitars: 6-string Grand Auditorium acoustics

Hardshell case: Included

Back material: XX-RS, Indian rosewood; XX-MC, mahogany

Sides: XX-RS, Indian rosewood; XX-MC, mahogany

Top: XX-RS, Sitka spruce; XX-MC, Western cedar

Neck: Mahogany

Fingerboard: Ebony

Headstock overlay: Rosewood

Binding: Rosewood, ebonized wood fiber, and abalone, with blue purfling

Number of frets: 20

Bridge: Ebony

Nut and saddle: Tusq (synthetic "bone"/"ivory")

Fingerboard inlays: Mother-of-pearl and 18-karat gold 20th Anniversary emblem

Soundhole rosette: Abalone/rosewood/ebonized wood fiber

Tuning machines: Gold-plated Grovers

Scale length: 25½"

Truss rod: Single, adjustable

Neck width at nut: 1¾"

Body width: 16"

Body length: 20"

Body depth: 4½"

Overall length: 41"

Weight: 5 lbs.

Finish: Polyurethane lacquer

Manufacturer's address: Taylor Guitars, 1940 Gillespie Way, El Cajon, CA 92020