



BARANIK MERIDIAN

American luthier Richard Baranik likes his guitars to be as versatile as possible, suiting any player's needs. Does the Meridian succeed?



Based in California, Mike Baranik has worked as an independent luthier since 1995, producing around 20 guitars a year. He revamped his model range a few years ago, the Meridian being a new addition to the range. Mike sums up his approach to guitar making in the following words: 'I really strive to make my guitars versatile. I would like to think that almost any player with different playing styles could pick up one of my guitars and think it was a fine instrument.' That's an ambitious objective to set oneself. The question is, is it realistic?

from some of the more common wood or plastic bindings. The back and sides are made from dark, even-grained wenge – a dense, hard, dark-coloured African wood which some luthiers see as being tonally similar to Brazilian rosewood. Coincidentally, I was recently talking to Stefan Sobell, who mentioned that he has recently started using wenge for necks on some of his guitars.

The Meridian's neck is a nice piece of mahogany, which joins the headstock in an interesting variation on the diamond volute found on traditional

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Martin Guitar designs. Both the unadorned fingerboard and the bridge are fashioned from smoothly finished ebony, with bone nut and bridge saddle. The headstock is bound in spalted maple to match the body, providing a visual discontinuity to my eyes as the fingerboard does

not feature matching binding. However, the headstock is faced with a highly original and finely crafted ebony, wenge and black palm mosaic veneer, a detail which is echoed on the volute on the reverse of the headstock. Tuners are the highly efficient Gotoh 510s, with a slightly

Build and Features

The Meridian is a concert-sized guitar – think OM and you won't be far off – though this Baranik bears little resemblance to the classic Martin design. Its profile is rather more curvaceous and it's a tad wider at the lower bout. The sharp Venetian cutaway seems to suit this profile perfectly. Whatever your taste in guitars, I doubt that anyone could fail to be impressed by the sheer beauty of the woodworking in this instrument. The soundboard is bearclaw Sitka spruce, with relatively simple dark and light purfling. The body is bound back and front with spalted hard rock maple, which makes an interesting and pleasant change



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Technical specification

Manufacturer: Michael Baranik
Model: Meridian
Retail Price: £7,895
Body Size: Concert
Made In: California USA
Top: Sitka Spruce
Back and Sides: Wenge
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Frets: 20 Gold Evo fretwire
Tuners: Gold Gotoh mini with black buttons
Nut Width: 1 25/32"
Scale Length: 25.6"
Onboard Electronics: N/A
Strings Fitted: Elixir light
Left Handers: Yes. No Charge
Gig Bag/Case Included: Cedar Creek Custom

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What we think

Pros: Stunning woodwork and attention to detail, combined with superb tone.
Cons: Only the price.
Overall: Yet another magnificent instrument from a talented American luthier.

Our Ratings Explained

5 Stars: Superb, Almost faultless.
4 Stars: Excellent, Hard to beat.
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well.
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor.

Rating out of five

BUILD QUALITY
SOUND QUALITY
VALUE FOR MONEY



The sharp Venetian cutaway suits the looks of this guitar

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unusual cosmo black finish, featuring striking striped ebony buttons made by Mike Baranik himself.

The guitar features a soundport in the upper bout to provide the player with a more realistic impression of what the listener is hearing, but the most interesting feature of this instrument has to be the adjustable neck. On first glance you might be alarmed to notice what appears to be a slight gap around the neck joint. However, this is not poor build



quality – quite the reverse – it is part of the adjustable neck mechanism featured on this guitar. Essentially, the mechanism allows the angle of the neck to be tweaked, enabling the action to be adjusted without going through a workshop set-up and while the strings are still under tension. It's a simple mechanism to use. By inserting an Allen key into the strap button fitted to the heel and turning it clockwise, the pitch of the neck increases; turning the button anticlockwise decreases it, enabling the player to compensate for movement during transit, or due to changes in climate, or even to raise the action for a little slide playing. I was impressed by just how simple and effective the mechanism was to use.

Another feature of the Meridian's design is a slight asymmetry in the body which, combined with the tight upper bout and waist, optimises the playing position for comfort.

Sound Quality

The first thing that impressed itself upon me in terms of the sound of this guitar was the even balance across the strings – a characteristic that one often associates with concert-style guitars, but one which was particularly evident here. The bass and lower mids have a warmth and richness that remain, even when tuned down two or three semitones. Trebles, on the other hand, have both a sweetness and

a sparkle that ensure the sound is never muddy. There's just the right degree of separation to provide the kind of articulation fingerpickers require, without compromising the guitar's ability to provide coherent chords when strummed. Although concert-style guitars are often thought of as being fingerpickers' instruments, this guitar is far from being a one-trick pony and is a very capable all-rounder. As I so often find with single-luthier American guitars, I was quite reluctant to stop fingerpicking and use a plectrum, but the Meridian was more than capable of responding to a range of picking styles. It lends itself particularly well to acoustic lead playing, and while the bass doesn't quite growl in the way a rosewood dreadnought might – and nor would you expect or, perhaps, even want it to – it makes its presence felt in a way that would put a smile on the face of many a flatpicker.

Conclusions

The sheer quality of the woodwork makes this guitar a thing of beauty, and the attention to detail is second to none. The guitar is currently for sale at The Acoustic Music Company and you might be interested to listen to the sound clip on the shop's website. I was also pleased to hear another Baranik used to good effect on the forthcoming album from Devon-based singer-songwriter Rosa Rebecka. Mike Baranik's stated intent is to 'strive to make every guitar have the best playability, comfort, sound and beauty it can', and on the evidence of this Meridian he's certainly hitting the mark.

Richard Thomas