

Hoffman

Concert 12

This guitar has an unusual “mash-up” look, but as Richard Thomas finds out, the quality is consistent throughout.

In my experience, guitar makers come from a remarkably wide variety of backgrounds, but Charlie Hoffman's is, I think, unique. Whilst working on a PhD in American History, Charlie decided that a prospective career as a university lecturer was not for him and opened his guitar building and repair workshop in 1971. In the late 1980s Hoffman's career as a luthier took a back seat as he qualified and subsequently practised as a lawyer. Having returned to guitar making, Hoffman and his small team have been turning out highly regarded acoustic guitars for musicians such as Leo Kottke. Hoffman guitars are now available through The

Acoustic Music Company, and the Concert 12 is the first to be reviewed in a UK guitar magazine.

Build Quality

First impressions of the Concert 12 had me a little perplexed – it's an unusual-looking guitar. With its slightly dreadnought-like body profile, sharp Florentine cutaway, 12-fret neck joint and slotted headstock, it initially looked like the product of a game of guitar misfits. However, closer acquaintance soon changed my mind on the notion that ‘first impressions are the best’ in this case.

The first thing that struck me was just how incredibly light this guitar is. Giggling with this instrument on a shoulder strap

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isn't going to leave you needing physiotherapy. Although the guitar has a dreadnought-esque profile it's actually a little smaller than a dreadnought, with a narrower lower bout and shorter overall length, reminding me a little of Ervin Somogyi's modified dreadnought.

As we have come to expect from high-end American luthiers, build quality is immaculate. Back and sides are made of some nice koa – not the most highly figured I've ever seen, but lovely nonetheless as it shimmers under the flawless gloss finish. The top is high-quality Italian spruce, with a koa and abalone soundhole rosette and koa purfling. Inside, the guitar is as clean as a whistle, with the bracing sanded to a fine, almost polished finish.

The neck is a five-piece

laminated of mahogany, maple and rosewood, with a smooth ebony fretboard featuring a neatly scalloped profile at the soundhole and abalone dot markers. The distinctively shaped headstock is faced in ebony and is home to the Hoffman logo in mother-of-pearl and a fine set of ebony-buttoned Waverly tuners. The bridge is a very traditional-looking ebony affair, with a bone saddle (matching the bone nut) and ebony bridge pins, featuring abalone dots.

I'm not wild about sharp Florentine cutaways on acoustic guitars, but there's no doubting the practicality of them, especially on a 12-fret guitar like this one.

Sound Quality

The slim neck and 24.75" scale length make this an easy-playing





With its dreadnought-style shape, Florentine cutaway and slotted headstock the guitar's look is unusual but makes it stand out

instrument, and the cutaway makes access above the 12th fret a breeze. Despite the resemblance to a dreadnought, this is far from being a big booming box in the way that so many guitars of that type are. Firstly, the bass is warm and mellifluous, and while there's plenty of it, it doesn't dominate the overall sound unduly. Strumming open chords produces a sound not unlike a really good J-45 – strong but warm bass and mids, with bright but sweet trebles. Equally, the Concert 12 makes for a very engaging fingerpicker. The separation and brightness one normally associates with koa are there, plus a little extra something that's quite difficult to pin down. Koa is sometimes described as having a tone somewhere between mahogany and rosewood, and I think that description is pretty apt here. The tone is a little drier than one associates with rosewood but is richer than a typical mahogany

guitar. The combination of easy playability and a wide palette of tonal resources makes this guitar a lot of fun to play, and I found it difficult to put down.

Despite the short scale, this guitar handled alternate tunings pretty well, with no trace of flabbiness with the low-E string tuned down to D. I like the way those trebles sing out, while the bass provides a resonant, velvety underpinning that I can't imagine anyone failing to love.

Conclusions

I'm not really in a position to comment on Charlie Hoffman's career as a lawyer, or his potential as an academic historian, but based on my experience of this Hoffman Concert 12 I'd say that he has certainly found his true calling as a luthier. It's plain to see why acoustic master musicians like Leo Kottke play his instruments. It's an unusual guitar in many ways, but it's a joy to play

and the tone will please exponents of a wide variety of playing styles. With its custom Cedar Creek case the Hoffman Concert 12 simply exudes quality, and I'd be surprised if this one hangs around the dealer's too long.

Richard Thomas



HOFFMAN Concert 12

www.acousticmagazine.com for reviews



Technical specification

Manufacturer: Charles A. Hoffman

Model: Concert 12 Fret

Retail Price: £5695 (USA)

Body Size: 15 3/8" (Lower bout); 11 5/8" (upper bout); 4 1/2" deep

Made In: Minnesota, USA

Top: Italian Spruce

Back and Sides: Koa

Neck: Mahogany w/ maple/rosewood lamination

Fingerboard: Ebony

Frets: 19

Tuners: Waverly

Nut Width: 1 3/4"

Scale Length: 24 3/4"

Onboard Electronics: None

Strings Fitted: Light D'Addario Phosphor Bronze

Left Handers: Available on custom order – no extra charge

Gig Bag/Case Included: Cedar Creek

Contact details

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What we think

Pros: Beautiful materials, great playability and tone.

Cons: The design may take a little getting used to, but that's a minor observation and I certainly got used to it quickly enough.

Overall: A great guitar and a lot of fun to play.

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

