



Klepper Dovetail Madness

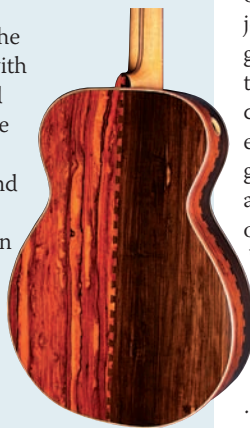
PRICE: £11,995

This guitar wouldn't look out of place in a modern art gallery, and neither would its price tag. Richard Thomas goes crazy with some Dovetail Madness.

“It is, quite frankly, the most extraordinary acoustic guitar I’ve ever seen.”

Woods Used

The top is European spruce on the bass side, with western red cedar on the treble side. The back and sides are a combination of African blackwood and highly figured ‘firestorm’ cocobolo



Howard Klepper first began working on guitars in 1968, though an unsympathetic economy saw him take a 19-year sabbatical to pursue an academic career. Returning to working with guitars, he began making again in 2001. His Dovetail Madness instruments are unique. In Howard's own words: ‘I had first thought about using a row of interlocking joinery in place of the decorative centre strip in the back of a guitar. Since the dovetail neck joint is traditional in steel-string guitar construction, I thought that making the dovetail into a decorative feature would both emphasise the joinery skills that go into guitar making and also be a somewhat humorous comment on a part of the job that many builders find challenging. Then, about nine years ago, I started building with double sides – laminating to an inner side of rosewood, walnut, or mahogany ... I did it originally for structure and sound projection, but I soon

realised that having the sides backed up gave me the freedom to play with multiple woods in an area that would otherwise be too prone to separations. After building a few guitars with multiple woods joined along their edges for the backs and sides, I started to think about how I might

combine this with the idea of decorative joinery, by dovetailing the woods along their joints in as many places as possible.’

The instrument we have for review is Howard's third Dovetail Madness and the first one imported into the UK. Trevor Moyle, who commissioned it for The Acoustic Music Company, said he wanted this one to have colour contrasts that were more subtle than versions I and II.

Build Quality

I don't think it's likely that anyone will be in any doubt as to the origin of the name ‘Dovetail Madness’ for this guitar! It is, quite frankly, the most extraordinary acoustic guitar I've ever seen. Nearly every part of the guitar is made from at least two different woods, with clean dovetail joints. The top combines



European spruce on the bass side, with western red cedar on the treble side, while the back and sides are a combination of African blackwood and highly figured 'firestorm' cocobolo. It would be overkill to deck such a spectacular guitar out in masses of abalone or pearl, so Klepper has wisely chosen to stick with wooden binding and purfling for the body – bloodwood and Ceylon satinwood for the former, and curly koa and curly maple for the latter. The soundhole rosette is also a two-piece affair,



“Quality of construction is faultless... the interior is as clean as the exterior”

featuring burl walnut and maple. The scratchplate is ebony, and the bridge – like just about everything else – is a blend of two woods: cocobolo and ebony, in this case.

The neck is mahogany,

laminated with wenge and maple and a pau rosa centre strip, enhancing both aesthetics and strength. The fingerboard combines cocobolo and ebony, with dot markers in mixed metal and resin. The wood binding continues around the fingerboard and headstock, the overlay of which also combines the fingerboard woods and features the Klepper logo in abalone. There are so many small details to note on this guitar – the Gotoh 510 tuners (gold-plated on the treble side and 'cosmo black' on the bass side), the hand-turned bridge pins in cocobolo and ebony, the walnut burl end-piece, the precisely cut bone nut and bridge saddle, the gold fretwire. Even the strap button is brass, inlaid with cocobolo and ebony. Quality of construction is faultless, with the interior as clean as the exterior of this guitar.

With its 15" lower bout, relatively shallow body, 24.9" scale length and 14-frets-to-the-body construction, the Dovetail Madness most closely resembles Martin's 000 design, though it has a rather more rounded profile.

What We Think

What did our test results reveal?

Pros: Stunning materials and build quality. You won't see many of these around.

Cons: Not everyone's thing aesthetically, I suspect, and the price is going to be prohibitive for most of us.

Overall: A unique instrument, with tone and beauty to match.

The neck has quite a shallow profile and feels comfortable in the hand, and the 1 3/4" nut width and 2 1/4" string spacing at the bridge, combined with a sympathetic set-up, make this guitar a breeze to play.

Sound Quality

There is no doubt that this guitar offers nothing short of a visual feast, but the question is, does it deliver an equally impressive tonal palette? I clearly remember playing a highly decorated guitar from the custom shop of a well-known American maker. It looked amazing but sounded like a cardboard box strung with elastic bands! The first thing you notice about this guitar is that it's loud. It might be modestly proportioned and relatively shallow, but it's no slouch when it comes to making itself heard. The bass and low mids are strong and resonant, with fat trebles and a consistent response right across the strings. It's a very balanced instrument. Sometimes that translates into 'lifeless', but not in this case. In fact, the Dovetail Madness is an incredibly lively guitar. It may

not be a big box, but its tone is commanding. If anything, I felt that on occasions it just might run away with me, and I felt as if I was playing on the edge a little. This isn't a criticism at all; in fact it's a good thing. This is an instrument you'll need to pay close attention to, because it's going to ensure that you don't slip into complacency when playing it. Fingerpicking is a real pleasure, and despite the shorter scale length, it handles dropped tunings effortlessly. That strong, resonant bass responds well to a pick too. It's not the boom of a traditional dreadnought, but a bit of flatpicking is well within its capabilities. Howard attributes the tonal response of his instruments to his approach to voicing – particularly his eschewing of the traditional spherical doming of the top in favour of arching it slightly laterally to a different profile (a spline curve for the geometry anoraks among us!).

Conclusion

This guitar is a truly remarkable piece of craftsmanship and is a superb testimony to Howard Klepper's skills. Whether or not the aesthetics appeal will vary from person to person. Similarly, the price will inevitably pose some questions about value for money. Given the amount of man-hours that must have gone into building this instrument, and the materials used, I can understand the expense. In addition to its extraordinary aesthetics, the Dovetail Madness is a serious instrument, a guitar for a real player – albeit a wealthy one!

Richard Thomas

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Technical Specification

Manufacturer: Howard Klepper
Model: Dovetail Madness III
Retail Price: £11,995
Body Size: 15"
Made In: California USA
Top: Western red cedar and European spruce
Back and Sides: "Firestorm" cocobolo and African blackwood
Neck: Mahogany, pau rosa, maple, and wenge
Fingerboard: Cocobolo and ebony
Frets: 18
Tuners: Gotoh 510 in gold and cosmo black
Nut Width: 44.5mm
Scale Length: 633mm
Onboard Electronics: N/A
Strings Fitted: Elixir light
Left Handers: To order
Gig Bag/Case Included: Hiscox Lite Flight Pro II Ivory

Contact Details

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The wood contrasts are beautiful



Attention to detail is meticulous

Acoustic Test Results

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

How well did this guitar fare?

Build Quality	★★★★★
Sound Quality	★★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★☆