

# Manne Ballarin Semiacustica

**ITALIAN GUITARS PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE** in the '50s and '60s. Sometimes their influence now seems limited to the retro-style – but new guitars like this, with original looks and sounds, may mean that's about to change. Review by Marcus Leadley

**SEMIACUSTICA RRP: £1395**

**A**ndrea Ballarin built the first Manne guitar in Italy back in 1986. Since then he's refined his own highly original design concepts and managed to maintain a philosophy that combines a strong element of handcrafting with prices that keep his instruments within reach of the serious amateur as well as the pro player. Just this month, TGM was ligging at a concert by film composer Ennio Morricone when we spotted a Semiacustica among the orchestra. How cool.

The Manne company has grown steadily and now, with an efficient website and an English distributor, it seems that an uncluttered range – includes a solid body electric with bolt-on or set-neck options and a bass line with 4-, 5- and 6-string models – is about to start appearing here.

One twist Ballarin brings to the UK market is that both his basses and guitars are semi-hollow instruments equipped with both magnetic pickups and piezo bridges, providing a suitable crossover point for electric and acoustic players. No, it's certainly not the first time someone had delivered such a hybrid option (think Parker, Music Man, PRS, Godin, Fender...) but the

construction and the simple but highly effective electrics make Manne instruments worth considering.

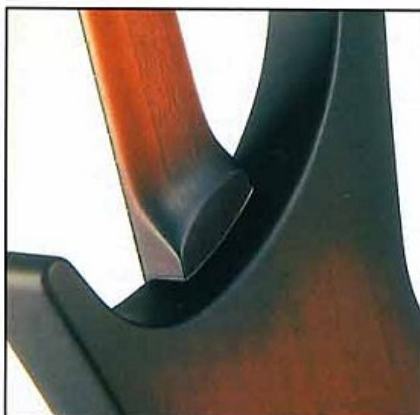
Worth considering, that is, if you're attracted to Manne styling. Straight out of the box the comments around the TGM office ranged from 'cool' to 'ugh'. No Italian retro pearloid or voluptuous curves here: the Semiacustica offers sharp, race track lines and a very unusual matt – not gloss – sunburst gum-wax finish. It looks both unusual and charming: you have to wonder how it will wear, but right now it looks very stylish.

The tightly waisted cut of the body makes the already extended horns seem devilishly sharp. Arguably this is all a bit '80s and metal-looking – which seems a little incongruous for a very modern instrument designed to deliver amplified acoustic tones. But then the '80s are cool again, metal is massive and mix and match is the flavour of the times. Confused? We all are.

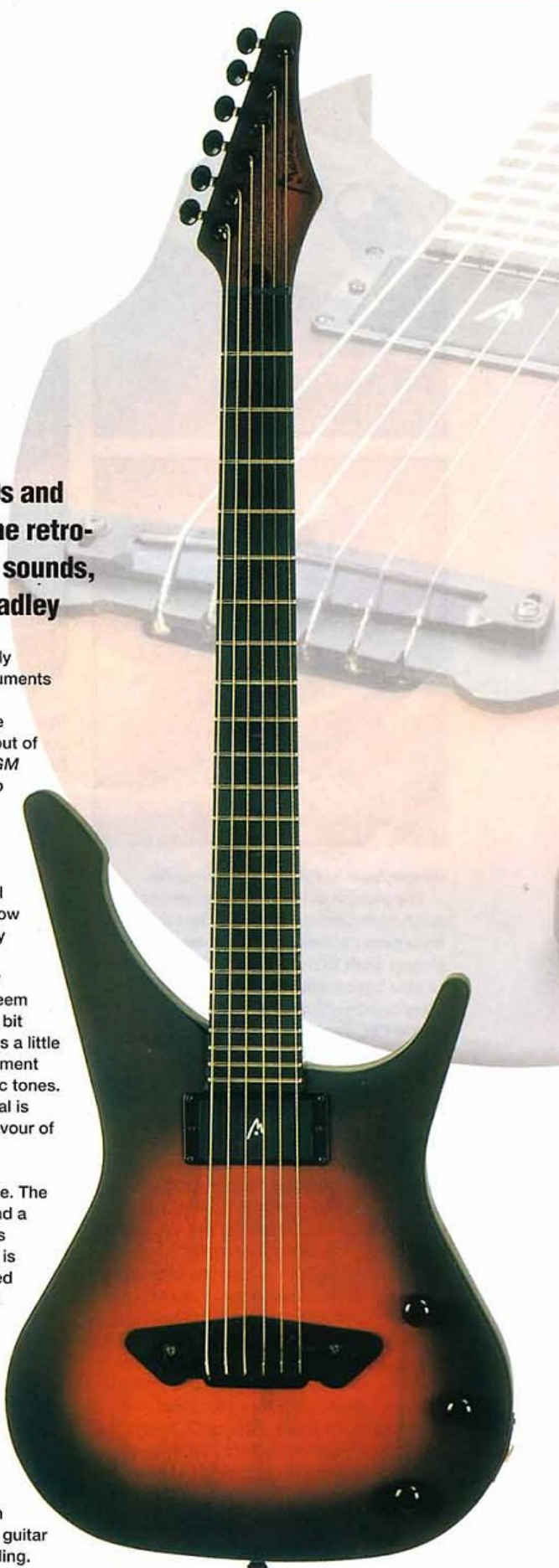
Looks aside, the timber and body construction are definitely on the case. The two-piece body is made of poplar, and a glance inside the back control access plate (where the battery for the piezo is sited) reveals that it's been fully routed out as far as the neck pickup – which sits solidly in the wood. Under the bridge you'll find a solid timber block for strength and support. The top is solid spruce and around 5mm thick. The absence of any ribcage contouring is a little disconcerting given that the guitar is unusually deep for an electric-style instrument, being nearly 5.5cm at its deepest. However, the strongly waisted design tends to compensate for this and the guitar is comfortable both seated and standing. And it's very light, too.

Turning to the neck we find yet more unusual construction techniques. It's made up from three sections: the outside two are solid maple, while the thick central section is

formed from multi-laminated 1mm-wide maple strips – a good recipe for stability, strength and a twist-free long life even under extreme conditions. It's also the strongest



Look closely and that three-piece neck reveals itself



## CHECK OUT...

Looking for a piezo-equipped electric style instrument that can provide a good acoustic guitar sound as well as a bit of rock potential?

**MUSIC MAN's** single-cutaway Axis Sport (£1325) is equipped with a Fishman Powerbridge and P90-style pickups, **contact** Strings & Things ☎ 01273-440-442. **PARKER** specialise in this sort of thing. According to budget, try their hybrid P38 (£599), the deluxe 24-fret Fly Vibrato (£1995), or for nylon-strung strummage the Spanish Fly (£2450), **contact** Korg UK ☎ 01908-857100.

**CHRIS LARKIN** can also provide an

instrument in your price range – the ASAD Solid (from £1100), which has a mahogany/cedar construction with two-band Headway preamp, **contact** Chris Larkin Custom ☎ 00353-66-713-9330.

Bristol bespoke makers **KINKADE** do a nice device called the Glastonbury, a thin-body mahogany/spruce Fishman-equipped electro with a Schaller Golden 50 humbucker by the neck and all the mixing options you could want (£1600), **contact** Kinkade ☎ 0117-924-3279.

Finally **GODIN** has the LGX3 (£1420) with three Duncans and an active piezo bridge, or the synth-ready LGXT (£1720), **contact** EMD ☎ 0129-386-2612.

reference so far to '60s Italian building as necks like this used to show up on Eko electrics – and more recently, BC Rich used this technique on its NJ series guitars in the mid-'80s.

The actual cut of this Manne neck is asymmetrical (helical). It feels wide, and while this profile is designed with player comfort in mind I have to say that this neck feels suited for a larger hand than mine. Further idiosyncrasy is to be found behind the graphite nut: a pronounced 'volute' or carved lump where the neck meets the headstock is certainly not common these days – and this one is a monster. Used in the past as an element to strengthen this notorious weak point, it seems unnecessary and clumsy on a neck already this sturdy.

Rosewood fingerboard? Forget it; this material is referred to as F-resin and it has almost the look and texture of ebony. It's actually a very pleasing surface to play on and despite a hint of scratchy newness from the frets, the feel is fast and inviting. Upper neck access is good and while there are no position markers on the board itself, adequate reference is provided in traditional dot fashion along the side of the board.

A final word on the headstock: it's pointy. Otherwise, it's a fairly traditional 6-in-line design, with no string trees nor truss rod cover, and Manne branded tuners.

Now for the electrics. Once more the Semicustica is set to perplex. While the neck humbucker is familiar-looking, the piezo bridge is Manne made and employs what appear to be two sorts of high-tech plastic. Broadly speaking it follows an acoustic guitar bridge design; a baseplate is firmly attached to the guitar body and a moveable bridge with a separate string saddle is screw-mounted on top. The strings anchor in a quick-change friendly fashion to slots in the back of the baseplate. String clearance is provided by a small cutaway in the spruce top which exposes the internal block under the bridge: hmm... could there be an acoustic reason for this?

When it comes to controls the Semicustica is a breeze to operate. We have single tone and volume controls and a mix facility that lets you blend the sound of the two different types of pickups. There's a central indent for an equal balance.

## SOUNDS

Plugging the Semicustica into a clean Fender-style amp is immediately pleasing. With just the piezo pickup and a pair of closed eyes it's hard not to think of this as a classy, if slightly bright amplified acoustic: the high tone is ringy and percussive and the bass end clear and well-defined. Moving straight to the mix control and adding just a little of the neck pickup sound mellows out the bright edge beautifully and the Semicustica starts to shine as an instrument for vocal accompaniment. The neck feels great for fingerpicking and rolling in classic acoustic guitar effects like short echoes and chorus builds an excellent sound that breathes nicely and presents all those rich overtones and harmonics when you start to hit the instrument hard. The sound is quite robust enough to take some thrashy aggressive playing without losing focus, too.

More action with the blend control proves that this instrument has far more tonal possibilities than most; you're not limited to just a selector switch, so an amazing range of useable sounds awaits discovery. Bringing in the very effective tone control adds even more options. Basically you can tune your sound to a song or a mix at the guitar end much in the way an engineer might work with desk EQ... very nice.

Exploring the sound of the neck pickup alone takes you off in a quite different direction. The Semicustica's character becomes far more electric and you find yourself with a big fat Gibson-like humbucker

## VERDICT

This is quite an unusual instrument in every respect. As far as style goes the Semicustica will almost certainly receive a mixed response – but even if the look doesn't do it for you (and I really should say I'm not convinced) the instrument's quality and playability will win most people over. The basic piezo acoustic sound is very useable and

## FACTFILE

MANNE BALLARIN SEMIACUSTICA  
RRP: £1395

Italian-made semi-hollowbody guitar. Poplar body with spruce top and maple set neck, F-resin 24 fret fingerboard. Manne piezo acoustic bridge pickup, single neck humbucker, pickup blend control, single tone and volume controls. Deluxe gig bag included in price.

**Options:** none

**Left-hand options:** In the pipeline.

**Colour options:** 15 natural tints including three yellows, three browns, two oranges, four dark reds (one as reviewed), plus dark green, dark blue and aquamarine.

**Contact:** Basix Custom Instruments ☎ 07780-500200.

Dimensions  
(In mm unless stated)

Scale Length	648 (25.5")
Width of neck	
...at nut	44
...at 12th fret	53.2
Depth of neck	
...at 1st fret	20
...at 12th fret	21.8
String spacing	
...at nut	36
...at bridge	52
Action as Supplied	
...at 12th fret treble	1.4
...at 12th fret bass	1.6
Weight (kg/lbs)	2.27/5

tone at your disposal. It's very warm and bassy (even with the tone control would fully in) and needs a little more amp top end to really cut through, but it's a very competent jazz solo tone which can move towards trad or modern styles. Wind all the tops off for a big old-fashioned rhythm sound... and just for good luck kick a distortion pedal and find yourself standing between Robert Fripp and Wild Willy Barrett. It's bluesy, it's progressive and it's rocking.

Experiments with distortion and the piezo bridge don't really suggest a great deal of musical promise – not that this is a real surprise. Much of the natural richness fades away into papery mids, and squeals await those who trespass here. But there are textures to be had here for those inspired by the likes of Derek Bailey or Blixa Bargeld.

the many blend options with the humbucker offer a far broader sound canvas than most electro-acoustic players will ever have had the opportunity to explore before.

For the singer/songwriter who currently fronts a band with an acoustic guitar and occasionally wants to pull a lead solo, the Semicustica would be ideal. It represents a feedback-free, flexible instrument for just this application. **G**