

**Schertler SM Electro Acoustic.**





# Schertler SM Electro Acoustic

**Sam Wise takes an** in-depth look to see if the new Swiss-designed Schertler SM is King of the Eiger, or is it just making **mountains out of molehills?**

**S**witzerland: land of chocolate, yodelling, supercars with unfeasibly long names and now, unexpectedly, guitars. Information is scarce on the Schertler; at the moment the company's website has no pictures and only the scantiest amount of information, and the launch announcement in the last issue of *Acoustic* had passed me by, so I had no idea what to expect when I first received the SM. Schertler was founded in the early 1980s, with a focus on developing better sound reproduction for acoustic instruments, and their acoustic pickups and amps are considered best in class, or thereabouts, by those in the know. With this in mind, I was rather excited to hear that they'd entered into partnership with a Swiss luthier and a Korean factory to make their own guitars. Ordinarily, I'm very much a fan of the traditional in acoustic guitars, so when the strikingly contemporary-looking Schertler came out of the copious packaging, I wasn't immediately taken with it. Even the semi-hard case that comes with the Schertler seems to shout that here is something a little different. It comes in a Cordura fabric pod-style case, with the guitar's shape cut out into a very lightweight material that appears to be polystyrene, but since it's covered with black velvet-like fabric, it's hard to tell. The effect, however, is luxurious, practical and much lighter than a regular hard case, whilst appearing to provide

perhaps even more protection. The Schertler guitars were designed by Claudio Pagelli, and looking at other examples of his work on the internet, I realise that the SM is positively restrained and conservative by his standards. It appears Pagelli might get a lot of his inspiration from Picasso! The SM, however, while not remotely vintage looking, is relatively conventionally styled, and very attractively so. The body

**“The plugged-in sound is, quite simply, just like the unplugged sound, which is very good and very versatile”**

is slightly offset, with the right side of the lower bout pushing forward further than the left, with a cutaway and a stunning monochromatic look. The top is spruce, very evenly and finely grained, though no information is supplied as to its type or country of origin. The back and sides are solid mahogany, but the binding, bridge, soundhole, fingerboard and headstock veneer are of, what looks to be, ebony. This, combined with the lack of adornments – there is a simple Schertler logo with no text, no fingerboard markers and not even a pickguard – gives the guitar a very clean look, which from the front is all blacks and whites. The soundhole is oval, with no rosette, but instead with a raised piece of ebony surround

which is thicker at the ends than in the middle and looks very classy, the shape being echoed by the treatment of the bridge plate. The fingerboard is a quite beautiful slab of ebony, unadorned but for the well-dressed frets, and ends in a slotted headstock faced with ebony once again. Schertler have designed their own tuners, individually mounted rather than three-on-a-plate as on a classical guitar, and an example of their

attention to detail is that the mounting holes are slightly different sizes at each end, to avoid binding. Even the tuner buttons continue the theme, being made of ebony once more. It's only when you turn the guitar over that the black and white motif is broken, and here too the figuring of the mahogany is a visual treat. The binding is simple but elegant, with a tiny strip of mother-of-pearl within a wider strip of ebony. The overall effect is one of traditional values of craftsmanship translated into a very non-traditional guitar indeed. The guitar is wonderfully well put together, and I could find no fault with the construction whatsoever. The innovation continues under the skin, with braces cut from the same trees

## Key Facts

**Model:** SM Steel-string Mahogany  
**Price:** £899  
**Manufacturer:** Schertler  
**Built in:** Korea - Switzerland  
**Body Size:** Cutaway – Concert-Stage guitar  
**Woods used:**  
**Top:** Alpine Swiss Spruce – (moon cut)  
**Back & sides:** Mahogany  
**Neck:** Mahogany  
**Fingerboard:** Ebony  
**Frets (No. & size):** 18 - Narrow Fretwire  
**Tuners:** Waverly 4110 Gold Plated with Snakewood buttons  
**Nut Width & Scale Length:** 45mm 25 ½" scale – 650mm  
**Electronics:** Schertler dual onboard custom electronics  
**Weight:** n/a  
**Strings Fitted (Gauge & Brand)** DR Extra Life  
**Left handers?** No  
**Gig Bag/Case Included:** Schertler Semi-Hard Case

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## Schertler SM Electro Acoustic.

### What we think

#### Build Quality

★★★★★

I couldn't find fault with anything on this guitar; it's by far the best Korean-made guitar I've seen.

#### Sound

★★★★★

I'm a fan of warm-sounding cedar or mahogany-topped guitars, but this still captured my heart. It's fantastic.

#### Playability

★★★★★

Immediately welcoming and feels fantastic everywhere on the neck.

#### Value

★★★★★

The Schertler is as good as guitars costing twice as much, maybe better.

#### Wow Factor

★★★★★

Love it or hate it, it'll make you draw breath and look again. It is a stunning-looking guitar, which refuses to pay too much lip service to tradition.

### Acoustic ratings

★★★★★ **Exceptional**

★★★★ **Excellent**

★★★ **Good**

★★ **Average**

★ **Poor**



Designed from the ground up, Schertler's own machine heads.

**“The acid test is what the guitar brings out of you, and within minutes of playing the SM, I was coming up with new ideas and creating new music”**

as the tops, and split rather than sawn to avoid compression and improve responsiveness.

Electronically, the SM is blessed with Schertler's finest pickup system, the Dual Onboard, which combines their under-saddle electrostatic transducer, the Bluestick, and their dynamic transducer, the D-DYN. The Bluestick, named after the blue colour of its casing, is hermetically sealed into a phenolic resin chamber under the saddle, designed to capture the vibration of the guitar while isolating it from any outside vibrations, keeping the signal-to-noise ratio low. This should result in a very clean sound with minimal feedback, even at high volumes. The D-DYN is directly mounted to the top, offset a little way from the bridge, to capture different aspects of the tone. These two pickups are connected to a control panel on the upper bout, featuring the expected volume and 3-band EQ controls, plus a mix control and a battery test. This is all mounted on a black plastic plate, but with white edges echoing the theme of the guitar. So, enough of looks and specs; how does it play?

First impressions on picking up the Schertler are that it's very light; subjectively, at least, very much lighter than my all-mahogany dreadnought. It's comfortable too, with a slim body and narrow top bout giving you plenty of space to move.

The neck has a fairly slim C section, which feels as though it fattens up just slightly as you go up the frets, although close examination suggests this is an illusion. Schertler intend this to be a recording and performing guitar with a great amplified sound and exemplary tuning stability, so I wasn't sure how much to expect of it, unamplified, in a front room. I needn't have worried; it's magnificent. This lightweight little guitar gives the impression of good responsiveness when you first pick it up, and that impression is extended when you play – it really feels alive in your hands. The tone is light and silvery, sparkling at the top end but without any of the excessive stridency that spruce tops sometimes deliver. The bottom end isn't what you'd call booming; with a body this size, that's to be expected, but it has a velvety quality and is not at all boxy. It's not rich, exactly, in the way a cedar-topped guitar might be, but it's smooth and warm, with plenty of sustain. String-to-string balance is excellent and the guitar's sound is uniform over the whole fingerboard. For picking, in particular, it's very lively and bright but the strumming sound is also great, particularly for percussive playing. The only thing it really lacks is the big bottom

end of a dreadnought, but no guitar can do everything. I found the SM immediately welcoming, with an engaging, complex sound and a really easy playing feel which made me feel instantly at home. Many other guitars I've played have been pretty good at first sampling but have revealed their truly impressive talents over time, but this Schertler was great from the very first touch. The acid test is what the guitar brings out of you, and within minutes of playing the SM, I was coming up with new ideas and creating new music.

Plugged in, which is how this guitar is designed to be used, it also impressed. I set the controls of my amp completely flat in order to let the guitar do the work, and dialled in just a little bit of reverb. The first thing that struck me was how usable the whole range is on the SM; there are no bad sounds because Schertler seem to have made an EQ that doesn't go to ridiculous extremes. The combination of the 3-band EQ and the mix of the two very different-sounding pickups gives you a very impressive tonal palette, without ever starting to sound



like a different guitar. I suspect that rotating the mix control all the way to the left engages the Bluestick only, and the opposite end is the D-DYN; certainly there's zero feedback to be found at the left-hand end, whilst the same cannot be said of the other. I found that the more D-DYN I dialled in, the more feedback-prone the guitar became, particularly if you boosted the bass or mid a lot, but this was with me breaking every rule, sitting and facing the amp with the volume up loud. With my back to the speaker, things were a lot better, but the solution to any feedback problem is to move towards the Bluestick end of the scale, where feedback is nothing but a distant memory! The plugged-in sound is, quite simply, just like the unplugged sound, which is very good and very versatile. It gets a little honky and strident if you push the treble too far, but it would probably be ideal for stinging blues lines, whilst pushing the bass up in an attempt to find a dreadnought sound will eventually result in something a little boomy. Compared to most other guitars I've tried, however, the problems are minimal. If I have any niggles at all, it's that the control knobs are a little small for my oversize fingers, and I could imagine finding them slightly frustrating under pressure.

Overall, this is a fantastically good guitar, and very capable. If you need to keep the booming backbeat in a band it's not going to be the box for you, but if you need a guitar which can cut through the mix, on which you can pick, strum or solo, then it's fabulous. The amplified sound is instantly accessible and excellent, yet it doesn't seem to sacrifice acoustic sound at all. It doesn't have a woody, cedar sound, but then it's not got a cedar top either. I'd feel very happy playing solo on it too; it has a more complex tone than many spruce-topped guitars. Where the Schertler will divide people is its looks; it's undeniably striking but the very modern styling will not be for everyone. The finishing is of excellent quality, and over the time I had it I came to appreciate its looks, but I'll confess that it hasn't overtaken a more traditional shape in my appraisal. At £899 it's a huge bargain, and if it looked a bit more conventional it would go immediately to the top of the realistic part of my wish list. As it stands it's more of a close run thing but, to be honest, I think the excellent sound would be enough for me to learn to love the looks.

**Sam Wise**



From left to right luthier Claudio Pagelli; Stephan Schertler with colleague Dietmar Winkler.

## Stephen Schertler Interview

**Russell Welton** talks to Stephen Schertler, pickup and amplifier designer, about the birth and evolution of their **new acoustic protégé**.

### Tell us a little about your background and how you got involved in what you do.

I come from a mechanical and electrical engineering background. I was shocked by what I saw at an industrial level and stayed in that field for only a few months. My musical interests were in playing jazz. I played keyboard, piano, acoustic guitar and then spent 14 years playing double bass. When I gave up engineering I became a professional musician for the theatre in the south of Switzerland. In 1986 I decided I would try to overcome the problems I had with the poor sound reproduction of my double bass. The idea was not to make a company but to find a solution for me. I wanted an organic sound, a sound that breathes, that makes me crazy. I wanted to hear the whole range, the overtones and remain transparent. The first business I did was for fellow double bass players who loved the sound of my pickups. My first electrostatic guitar system was built in 1990 but it was complicated and too bulky.

### What teething problems did you encounter with the guitar's development?

The miniaturisation process and materials' selection took much research. We tried different plastics and ceramics to produce our hermetically sealed acoustic chamber that would produce no feedback. Combining studio-quality condenser and dynamic microphone technologies, to fit under a traditionally popular bridge saddle, was very challenging. The existing manufacturers are very cautious about incorporating new concepts with their existing heritage and way of operating. So I decided to build my own.

### How is this guitar different from anything else in the current market place?

We wanted a design that was classy and elegant but would have something innovative. Without that it would be freaky or exotic. We wanted a stage electro-acoustic guitar that wasn't restrained by being too conservative or too pragmatic; something that shows we care about the needs of the customer. Our guitars come with the active Duo D-

DYN pickup system and our own bracing patterns. That is how our pickups are different. They reproduce the guitar's inherent sound by listening to its characteristics, rather than producing a simply functional sound; very much like the human ear. The bracing is unique, using split and not sawn Swiss Alpine spruce. The wood and design for our Korean-built guitar both come from Switzerland. The wood is specially harvested from Alpine spruce trees which are only felled for two months of the year and come from the same lot of trees that we use to make our tops. The machine heads have been redesigned from the ground up to optimise tuning stability and to avoid the shaft binding in the headstock.

### With such a competitive market place, why did you decide to build acoustic and classical guitars?

I wanted to build a guitar that would be a platform for our pickup system. There were design concepts that would optimise the way our pickups work without compromising. We have tried to make a sexy guitar that would showcase our preamp and give our competition a kick in the ass; not financially but for allowing the guitar's true voice to be heard.

### What can we expect to see from Schertler in the coming months?

We have a new range of steel-string and classical guitars featuring either mahogany, Indian rosewood, bubinga or Indonesian rosewood back and sides. The future models will have a bridge saddle angle at 12 degrees for improved intonation and tension on the pickup. We are also planning a no-expense-spared, premium-quality studio microphone with phase, gain and EQ filter controls. Additionally we are working on a top-of-the-range successor to our flagship Unico amplifier, which will employ a totally unique preamp circuit that no-one else is currently using. It will be Class A and uses no negative feedback in the preamp signal. Nobody else is doing this.

**Russell Welton**