



Ibanez EP9 Euphoria £799



It's good enough for Steve Vai – but did the new Ibanez EP9 pass muster with *Guitarist*? by Henry Yates

The rivals

Alvarez Masterworks	
MD80C AURA	£925
Martin DC-16RGTE	
AURA	£1,649
Martin OMC-AURA	
	£2,549

Investigation of potential rivals to the EP9 reveals that AURA technology doesn't come cheap. At £925, the Alvarez Masterworks MD80C is one of the closer competitors, with its cutaway dreadnought styling, solid spruce top, mahogany body and all-important AURA preamp offering a strong package. Further up the scale, the Martin DC-16RGTE AURA combines spruce and rosewood to attractive effect, while at £2,549, the Martin OMC-AURA probably has the raw tone that deserves the most protection.

The new EP9 Euphoria is not Ibanez's first attempt to create a signature acoustic for Steve Vai. Lest we forget, this model follows on the heels of the original EP7, which was launched to great fanfare at Los Angeles' NAMM trade show in 2004. At that time, both luthier and artist seemed pleased with the fruits of their labours, with Vai describing the single-cut design as "a dream to play", and Ibanez reporting strong sales in the months that followed its release. All the evidence suggested the EP7 would be a permanent fixture in Ibanez's increasingly popular acoustic line.

Less than three years later, the

The tone is bright and characterful with fingers, yet retains its natural warmth and depth when you dig in with a plectrum

production run of the EP7 has ended and the EP9 has emerged to replace it. Vai himself refers to this new Euphoria as the "older younger brother" of the original, but that's a slightly misleading description. In terms of aesthetics, electronics and tonewoods, there are major differences between the two, to the point where it's possible to view the

EP9 as both a totally new design and a veiled admission that its predecessor was lacking in certain areas.

Putting aside the price cut (the EP9 costs £100 less than its forebear), the most immediate differences here are cosmetic. By Ibanez's own admission, the forest green colouration of the EP7 was a dividing factor, and here it has been replaced by a low gloss resonant root beer finish that will surely cast this model's commercial net wider. Another notable visual improvement is the addition of a yellow pearloid 'Tree Of Life' fretboard inlay (the original was green), while Vai's 'Light Without Heat' symbols make a welcome reappearance →



Despite the soundhole signature, this isn't just a guitar for Vai fans





Above: The tortoiseshell tuner buttons are retained from the EP7

IBANEZ EP9 EUPHORIA

PRICE: £799 (inc case)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Electro-acoustic

TOP: Solid Engelmann spruce

BACK/SIDES: Solid African mahogany

MAX RIM DEPTH: 98mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 410mm

NECK: African mahogany

SCALE LENGTH: 641mm

TUNERS: Grovers, with tortoiseshell buttons

NUT/WIDTH: Ivoire II/45mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, with yellow pearloid 'Tree Of Life' inlay

FRETS: 24, medium Ivoire II/55mm

ELECTRICS: Fishman Acoustic Matrix pickup and Onboard AURA preamp

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.75/4

OPTIONS: N/A

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Resonant Root Beer (low gloss)

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There are plenty of soloing options thanks to a generous cutaway

More on the Aura...

"Pickup technology has reached a plateau," explains company president Larry Fishman of the Aura's genesis, "and while mics work well at capturing the beauty and complexity of your instrument, they are not really applicable to a performance environment. There are feedback issues; leakage issues; people can't move around onstage. We realised we had to come up with a solution."

The Fishman Onboard Aura preamp – as it appears on the EP9 – is the perfect compromise. Essentially a compact version of the Aura Acoustic Imaging Blender launched by Fishman in 2004, the defining difference between the Onboard Aura and lesser preamps is that it includes six 'Sound Image' algorithms based on pro-quality microphones, so the

natural tone of the EP9 is conveyed as it would be if you were using a mic.

Created in a professional recording studio, the virtual images featured on the EP9 cover six major brands of mic (Shure Beta 58A, Neumann U47, Soundelux E47, DPA 4011, Shure SM58 and SM57) and place them at a virtual distance of either 'close' or 'far'.

The EP9's Onboard Aura also offers an impressive array of secondary functions. Alongside the tuner and three-band EQ you would expect, Guitarist was impressed by features allowing us to edit and save the Sound Images, blend the ratio of Matrix piezo to Sound Image, change the phase of the pickup relative to the Sound Image, and isolate and cancel feedback using an intuitive switch. No wonder that Steve Vai personally insisted on this preamp for the EP9...

→ on the EP9's custom wood soundhole rosette (formerly brass). Despite these embellishments, and the presence of Vai's autograph on the soundhole label, the EP9 generally keeps its signature status under its hat – presumably to attract more neutral players.

More significant changes are afoot beneath the surface. Where the EP7 employed quilted maple for its soundboard and body, the EP9 turns to the more traditional combination of solid Engelmann spruce for its top, solid African mahogany as the basis of its body and neck, and rosewood to fill what little space is left by the extravagant inlay on the bound fretboard. The grain is generally even across the top (if slightly less so around the sides), while the hardware is dependable stuff, with Ivorex used to neat effect at the EP9's nut and saddle, and Advantage pins locking the D'Addarios in place convincingly at the bridge. Frustratingly, Ibanez has retained the tortoiseshell buttons on the Grover tuners, but these are perhaps the only real missed trick on

a package that does real credit to Ibanez's Chinese operation.

Ultimately, while the relative merits of tonewoods and cosmetics are open to debate, the EP9's one undeniable trump card lies in its pairing of a Fishman Acoustic Matrix piezo with a Fishman Onboard Aura preamp (the EP7 featured the more pedestrian B-Band UST pickup and A5 preamp). A system that has featured on various Martin acoustics to great effect, the Aura combines the convenience of a pickup with the sound quality achieved by mic'ing up. Instead of a physical microphone, of course, it offers a selection of six 'Sound Images' based on a series of pro mics [see boxout].

Vai's pre-eminence as a shredder implies that his signature acoustic should be capable of audacious techniques, and while this proved the case, the EP9 certainly doesn't rule out less flamboyant players. With a manageable body depth that places you close to the action and a neck profile that should feel familiar to aficionados of the EW and AEL lines,

IBANEZ EP9 EUPHORIA	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** The fantastic raw tone; faithful conveyance of the Aura system

■ **WE DISLIKED** Vai fans might be let down by the lack of visual nods to their hero...

the EP9 is an unqualified physical success, whether you're sliding chord shapes up and down the length of the neck, racing through fast and loose legato passages, or soloing across the two octaves of fretboard unlocked by the generous cutaway.

SOUNDS: Unamplified, the EP9 presents a strong argument for its revised combination of spruce and mahogany. The tone is bright and characterful with fingers, yet retains its natural warmth and depth when you dig in with a plectrum. Overall, there's a great sense of tonal balance, and an authoritative level of volume that – combined with the playable neck – ensures you don't have to work too hard to get your point across.

Assuming you combine it with a competent acoustic amp (we used a Headway SK120), the Matrix piezo allows impressively clean amplification of the EP9's raw tone, particularly when you iron out interference using the anti-feedback switch. Rather than colouring this, the Aura's six Sound Images bring different aspects of the EP9's tone to the fore by placing a series of 'virtual mics' at a variety of 'virtual distances'. At this, we felt it was a huge success. Cycling through the six settings via the intuitive dial brings great versatility to the table, and from the close virtual mic'ing of the Beta 58A to the distant placement of the Neumann U47, the level of realism makes the EP9 a serious option for professional musicians.

Verdict

For all the undoubted merits of the original EP7 Euphoria, there's little doubt it has been bettered by the EP9. Not only does this model offer a marked improvement over its predecessor in every department from electronics to tonewoods, but it also achieves the elusive balance struck by few signature models; managing to appeal to both Vai fans and guitarists who simply appreciate great playability, comfort and tone. At a fierce price point, the less visually arresting EP9 might face a battle to make its voice heard, but those who investigate should be more than satisfied with its performance. ■

Ibanez EP9 Euphoria

Guitarist RATING

★★★★★