



# KEN POWELL SFG

Ken Powell's 'smiley face' guitars stand out visually amongst the plethora of small high-end builders, but can they compete in other ways?



**K**en Powell's one-man business is no mystery to regular readers after we profiled his work in issue 32, but for me, personally, this is the first time I've met any of his instruments in the wood, and a pleasant experience it was too. Ken is not one for building identikit Martin-a-likes, nor for following every detail of the 'rule book' of guitar building, and the SFG, or smiley face guitar (apparently his wife's sense of humour!), is all the better for that.

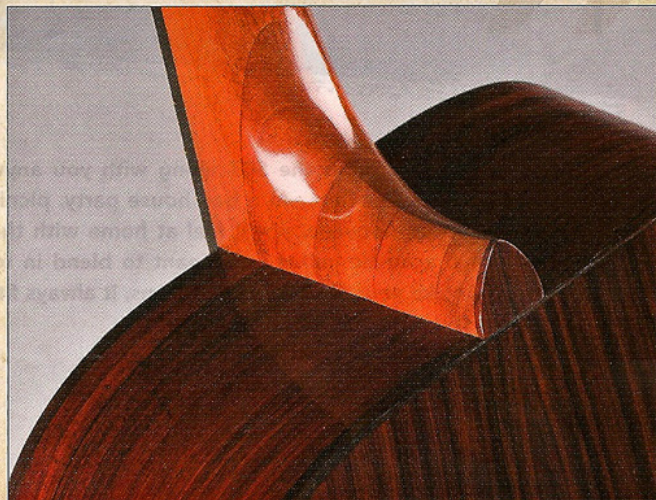
## Build Quality And Features

If not for the bridge the SFG could almost be a vintage instrument: its unusual proportions, chequered binding and shellac finish put me in mind of instruments featured in Collector's Piece. The top is made of wonderful western red cedar, bound with what looks like mahogany and maple in alternating strips, whilst the back and sides are cocobolo, a wood I more readily associate

with Alembic's very exotic electric basses. Cocobolo also appears to have been used for the soundhole rosette, which is understated but beautiful. The neck is 100-year-old reclaimed mahogany, and one has to wonder whether this practice will become ever more common as stocks of tonewood deplete. Elsewhere, ebony is the wood of choice for the unadorned fingerboard and bridge, whilst the headstock seems to be faced with more cocobolo. The guitar shows every evidence of being

craftsman built: the quality is wonderful throughout, and the looks have unquestionably come from the mind of a single man, not from a focus group. The only thing which might raise questions is the shellac finish. This looks wonderful – lustrous and rich and deep – but I can't help but wonder if it will be more easily damaged than a conventional finish. In true custom style, however, Ken tends to recommend clear scratchplates to those whose playing style entails regular

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contact between plectrum/fingers and top. Couple this with the fact that the finish is far cheaper and easier to repair than cellulose, and the gorgeous finish might just be a winner.

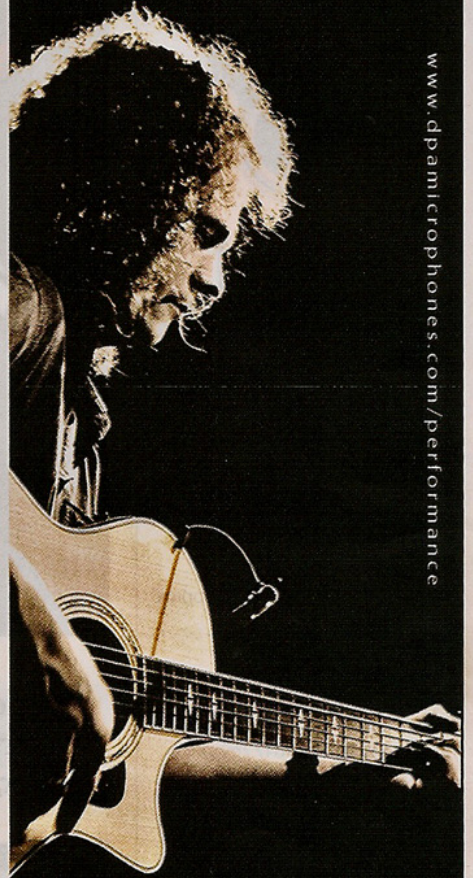
### Sounds and Playability

Powell describes this largest of his SFG sizes as a concert, but frankly it's much bigger than that. Footprint-wise, it has more in common with a jumbo than anything else, but it's also colossally

deep – considerably more so than my dreadnought, and yet very light. Interestingly, I didn't find the size a challenge in practice, but smaller players should take care (though since Ken likes to meet and hear the playing of all his customers, fit issues are probably easily avoided). The neck is an interesting beast: the voluptuously curving heel had me expecting a vintage V profile, but this is a much more modern and relatively slim D shape, bearing one

of the flattest fingerboards I've ever seen on a steel-string guitar. I have found flat fingerboards baulky to fingerpick, but on the Powell this was not an issue at all. The SFG is a big-sounding guitar, but big in a way that was new to me. Jumbos can be obnoxiously loud, and overwhelmingly bassy too, but whilst the Powell is loud it's never obnoxious. Ken designs his guitars with fingerpickers in mind, and his light construction makes a guitar which has

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**POWELL**  
SFG

[www.acousticmagazine.com](http://www.acousticmagazine.com) for reviews

**Technical specification**

**Manufacturer:** Powell Guitars  
**Model:** SFG  
**Price:** £2,300  
**Made In:** Cheshire, England, UK  
**Body Size:** Concert  
**Top:** Master grade western red cedar (thuja plicata)  
**Back & Sides:** 1st grade cocobolo (dalbergia retusa)  
**Neck:** Reclaimed mahogany (approx' 100 Years old)  
**Fingerboard:** Ebony  
**Frets:** 19, medium  
**Tuners:** Gotoh 510 chrome  
**Nut Width:** 43mm  
**Scale Length:** 25.5" (647.7mm)  
**Onboard Electronics:** N/A (can be fitted at extra cost)  
**Strings Fitted:** D'Addario EJ 16 (light gauge)  
**Left Handers:** Made to order  
**Gig Bag/Case Included:** Hiscox Std-Ac

**Contact details**

**Powell Guitars**  
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**Please Note:** This instrument is hand made and finished with shellac (using the French polishing method) The instrument, especially the internal bracing pattern is wholly my design. Please also refer to my interview in issue 32 (August 2009) of the Acoustic Magazine

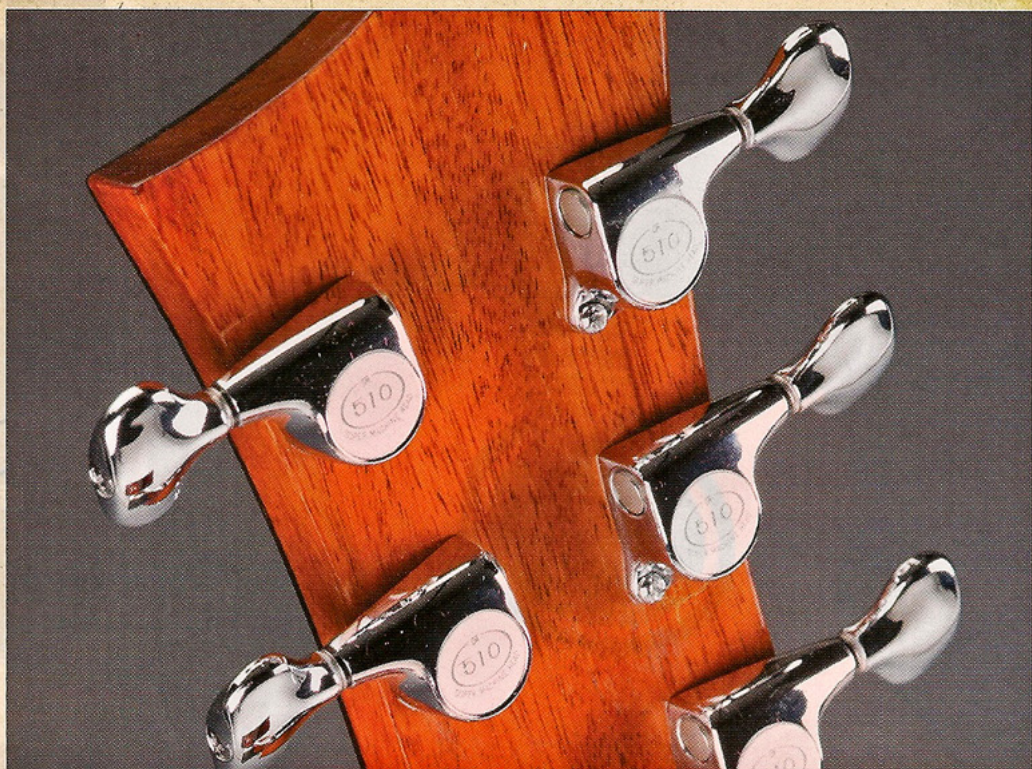
**What we think**

**Pros:** Unusual but classy looks, fabulous rich fingerstyle tone.  
**Cons:** Looks like a jumbo but doesn't sound like one.  
**Overall:** A quirky but wonderful and winning guitar.

**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**

<b>BUILD QUALITY</b>	★★★★★
<b>SOUND QUALITY</b>	★★★★★
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b>	★★★★★



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buckets of projection and power, but is well balanced and never feels out of control. The warm harmonics we expect from cedar are evident in spades, but the sheer size and depth of the body seem to amplify them further, making for a wonderful richness of tone. Played fingerstyle, the tone is delicate and warm, and also much better balanced than you might imagine with such a big body. The one risk is that with so much volume available it's easy to overpick one note when playing quietly (and that's a relative term – this is not a guitar for when the wife and kids are in bed!) and have it boom out. Strummed, the excellent tonal balance remains, but despite

the looks this guitar has neither the bright top nor the huge bass to do the classic country 'boom-chick' rhythm style well. Indeed, it's best to treat it as Powell describes it: as a concert. It has exceptional depth of tone, but most of the characteristics of a really big guitar are simply absent, and it's none the worse for that.


**Conclusion**

This is a guitar which defied my expectations of large-bodied instruments. It's a sweet fingerpicker, using its body size to add depth and projection to the tone, rather than to simply load up the bass. Strummed, it's still a very solid performer, but its performance as a picker overshadows that aspect of its personality. One cannot simply walk into a local music shop and try out a Ken Powell, but if you're a fingerstylist, and serious about finding the best guitar for you and you alone, I recommend paying him a visit: they're as good as many guitars that cost twice as much.

**Sam Wise**