

James Tyler Variax JTV-59 (Korea) - The 48 Hour Review

L6 Expert Review by Nick Mattocks

Manufacturer:	Line 6
Model:	James Tyler Variax – JTV-59
Finish:	Cherry Sunburst
Country of Origin:	Korea
Current street price (UK):	£1099 GBP
Date Received:	17 June 2011

Packaging

The guitar arrived in a strong cardboard box inside which there were two foam end-caps supporting the same reasonably robust Line 6 Variax gig-bag that was supplied with earlier model Variax 700 guitars and in the same light grey colour. Having ordered and paid for the guitar over ten months ago – I have to say I was somewhat excited to say the least to see it actually in a big cardboard box in my front room after so long ☺ But hopefully I kept my excitement under control well enough to appreciate what I have actually got and to write a balanced review of my findings after owning and playing the guitar during the first 48 hours or so of ownership.

The first thing that should be visible when opening the box correctly at the top end is an A4 sheet detailing what should be contained in the packaging and where it is located. The end cap at the top of the box contained: the battery, battery charger, battery charger cable/PSU, various clip-on mains adapters, USB Variax WorkBench interface and VDI cable. The gig bag pockets contained a small tool kit comprising several Allen wrenches of different sizes for truss rod adjustment, bridge height adjustment and intonation adjustment.

With my guitar everything was exactly where it should be and the packaging was more than robust enough to have withstood the journey from the factory in Korea to Line 6's warehousing facility in Holland and then by couriers to the UK and finally on to me via a local supplier.



1: the guitar still in its bag – unopened and un-played

The Guitar – First Peek

Straight out of the box, the guitar looked stunning. The cherry sunburst finish over the flamed maple top of the guitar looked superb and any photograph really wouldn't convey the subtleties of the high gloss finish.

The headstock appeared equally well finished as did the neck and the back of the guitar.



2: The guitar as-was straight out of the box and as-yet still un-played

Compared to some Epiphone and PRS SE guitars which I believe are made in the same factory, this guitar compares very favourably at first glance.

The setup looks good out of the box. The string action looks slightly higher than I normally would like, and the pickups look slightly lower in their mounting rings than I would normally like, but both of those things are part of the initial set-up I would give any of my guitars, and are exactly what I'd expect to see with any brand new guitar that hasn't yet been tweaked to its owners preferences.

The guitar has been fully checked over and tested after arrival in Europe by Line 6 and appears to have been factory fitted with the new style 3-way pickup selector switch (with cream tip) which in

my opinion leaves a slightly unsightly recess which is somewhat larger than the nut and washer which retains the switch in the body. However I had expected this to be the case and was already prepared with a cream coloured Rhythm/Treble plastic switch surround 'plate' at the ready, which as it turns out, perfectly matches the pickup rings and the tip of the pickup selector. Fitting the plate was simple enough: I carefully removed the knurled nut from the selector switch and then I replaced this with a thinner standard hexagonal nut to retain the switch in the body (this step was necessary to build up the height of the central area to match the height of the surrounding wood and to thereby prevent the 'plate' from 'dishing' as the original nut was replaced. There isn't a huge amount of thread left to play with once the plate is in place, but fortunately there was just enough to be able to get sufficient 'bite' to accept the original nut and to retain the 'plate'.



3: Rhythm/Treble plate fitted

This is purely a cosmetic thing, but in my opinion it does offer an improvement to the guitar's overall appearance in the one area that I felt it was slightly let down.

How does the guitar feel?

In a word: **NICE!** I felt it was necessary to capitalise and embolden the word 'nice' because it feels way more than a single word in the form of 'nice' could ever really convey. It's not a light guitar but it's not an overly heavy guitar either if you are used to say a Gibson Les Paul or a Yamaha SG1000 type guitar. I own both those other guitars and I'd estimate the weight is about the same. It's not a neck heavy guitar at all and it balances very well when played in a sitting or standing position.

The neck has a high-gloss finish which, again if you are used to a Les Paul or Yamaha SG type finish you'll be more than happy. The neck is not overly slim, but is not a million miles away from either

my Gibson Les Paul Custom, Japanese Tokai LP copy or my Yamaha SG1000 and is exactly the type and profile that I would have expected.

Out of the box the guitar is very playable as-is, but the action is a little higher than I would normally have my guitars set and the magnetic pickups do seem to sit slightly lower in their rings than I would normally set them.

My only complaint is that out of the box the D string was out of tune. I did think of returning the guitar to have this 'serious' fault looked at, but I have decided to live with it by modifying the scale patterns and chord shapes I use ☺

The machine heads are good quality Schaller types without being overly expensive, but typical of other makes of 'normal' guitar in the £500-£750 GBP price bracket and are more than adequate for the job. They don't exhibit signs of excessive play and do hold the guitar perfectly in tune.

The strings as supplied are good – and are d'Addario 10's. They have been wound on to the tuning pegs evenly and the ends have been trimmed neatly.

At the bridge end there is a slight roughness under the palm of my right hand where the unwound top three strings come out of their retaining recesses in the one piece bridge assembly, however this is nothing to do with the guitar or the bridge design, but rather it is where the string has been wound around itself after returning on itself after the ball-end.

String replacement is easy with everything being accessible on the front of the guitar – no through-body threading of strings is required.

Looking at and feeling the neck, the jumbo frets have been fitted very well and are level. The fret ends are properly chamfered and there is no sign of any roughness as they sit in the fretboard. I like these frets very much, however, some people may find the fret height slightly higher than they would normally expect, but any decent set-up guy would be easily able to resolve that if it were to be a problem for anyone. Compared to my Les Paul Custom the fret height is very similar, so it's not a problem to me at all.

The neck itself feels perfect, and the only tiny and incredibly slight imperfection I have found is where the heel of the neck is jointed into the body. If I run the tip of my finger over the joint, I can feel a very slight bump in the lacquer in one specific spot, but it is so slight that it's simply not going to be a problem at all and IF I was so inclined a bit of 1200 grade wet and dry paper would smooth it out before re-polishing. And, by 'slight' I mean you have to work quite hard to even notice it. These are the sort of incredibly slight imperfections that I would expect on a good quality but factory mass-produced guitar in the price range £500-£750 where the level of hand finishing is not the same as you'd find on a Custom Shop hand finished instrument costing four times as much.

After having had the guitar in my possession for nearly 48 hours and having played it fairly solidly from Friday afternoon and pretty much all day on Saturday, I have lowered the action quite significantly and it is now what I would consider to be as low as I would comfortably expect – and without any buzzing. I have slackened the truss rod about 3/8 of a turn to allow a little more relief and to avoid a slight buzz that I was getting on the fourth string around the tenth fret or so. I may still tweak it a little more as necessary, but right now the guitar feels like it's had a very good set-up

I have adjusted the magnetic pickup height upwards slightly and I've also adjusted the pickup pole-pieces to better follow the curve of the finger-board.

These adjustments are exactly what I would have expected to have to make with any guitar and are very much a matter of personal taste.

The control knobs and switches all feel very firm and responsive. Both the rotary model selector knob and the Alt tuning knob are also 'press' switches, which are used to either switch between magnetic pickups and models or between the 5 available models in each model bank. The press switches do need to be pressed firmly to register a change in mode. You can always tell with the JTV-59 which mode you are in because of the LED colour under the rotary model selector knob: none = Magnetic pickups; pink = model selector positions 1-3-5; blue = model selector positions 2-3-4 as related to the five way selector switches on the JTV-69 and JTV-89.

The connector panel for all connections to the outside world is on the lower edge in the same place you'd expect to find the output jack on most solid bodied guitars. It's essentially the same arrangement as you'd find on the original Variax 700, with both a standard ¼" TRS jack that will accept a TRS power and signal cable from either an XPS Mini or XPS-A/B box (not supplied), or a standard instrument cable, and; an RJ-45 based VDI socket with a sprung plastic protective dust flap. Connecting a VDI cable requires lifting the lid and pushing the end of the VDI cable into the hole. Removal requires pressing the retainer clip button on the guitar and pulling the plug out. I am slightly wary of breaking the plastic dust cover as it remains raised whilst the VDI cable is attached, but perhaps more-so because when removing the VDI cable there is a tendency for the plastic dust cover to get caught on the Neutrik casing of the VDI plug. With care, this shouldn't be a problem, but plugging the VDI cable in is something that's best done whilst not wearing the guitar.

Placing the guitar on a standard 'A' type guitar stand whilst having the VDI cable or standard instrument cable connected may slightly interfere with one of the guitar support arms and you may need to lean the guitar slightly over and slightly off-the vertical axis to avoid this, and in doing so there is a small risk that the guitar could fall. This is a problem that other guitars face too, so is not a criticism of the JTV-59, but just a point to bear in mind when choosing the type of guitar stand to use given that with the JTV there is potentially a little bit more going on in the jack socket area.

Now the important bit – how does it sound ? – Part 1: Magnetic Pickups

So far I have had the guitar connected by both VDI and alternately by a standard instrument cable to my POD HD500 and then on to a Line 6 DT50 212 amplifier by L6-Link.

The guitar's natural resonance and sustain is pretty much the same as I get from my Les Paul Custom or my Yamaha SG1000, so it is good and exactly what I would have hoped for 😊

The magnetic pickups so far, seem to be exactly what you would expect from a pair of decent mid-price humbuckers as fitted to any guitar in the price range £500-£750 GBP.

It's early days for me and I really need to spend another few weeks or so with these pickups before I make my mind up entirely. To put this in context, my other humbucker-capable guitars tend to use Seymour Duncan pickups, Gibson PAF or Ibanez's own V7/V8 humbuckers, and all these pickups are fairly hot and 'in-your-face'.

So far the JTV-59 magnetic pickups do seem pretty powerful when compared to the on-board models, but they don't have quite the same bite or presence that I'm used to. Pickups are very much a personal choice, and whilst these James Tyler specified pickups are absolutely fine, I am going to take a few weeks to adjust whatever is adjustable with them and personally get used to them as the guitar becomes more 'played in' before perhaps deciding to swap them out for

something by Seymour Duncan. The guitar is still less than 48 hours in my possession and NEEDS to be played so that the fingerboard loses that brand new guitar feel and the initial brightness of new strings fades a bit to the 'normal' period before they start to sound skanky.

I would not recommend that anyone immediately goes out with the intention of buying replacement pickups for a JTV-59 without giving the factory fitted pickups a fair chance. Ultimately you may or may not feel a change of pickups is warranted to suit your personal taste.

To put this in context, I purchased my Yamaha SG1000 a couple of years ago and can certainly see why they were known as Les Paul Killers – the guitar was beautifully set up with an action like silk, but the pickups had a definite and different quality to what I'm normally used to, but they are great pickups and all it took was for me to get to know the guitar properly over the next few days/weeks to become used to the subtleties of the pickups, and it's really no different with the JTV-59. As I recall, when I had my first Ibanez RG550 and my Gibson Les Paul Custom it was exactly the same story 😊

So, the magnetic pickups do perform as stated on the tin and they are definitely more than just OK, but they may not suit everybody's tastes, and if that should turn out to be true, swapping the humbuckers for something else is not going to be a difficult job, and in fact Line 6 have probably made this an easier job than it would be on other 'normal' guitars.

The important bit - How does it sound? Part 2: the models

Well here we are at last 😊

The models are exactly the same as you'd find in any of the older series 1 Variax guitars – except they do sound better straight out of the box than their older counterparts, and this is in no small part due to the increased processing power available in the JTV range of guitars as a whole.

My guitar arrived on Friday with firmware version 1.60 pre-installed at the factory, and to be fair this produced a pretty good sound as-is, but one of the first things I did was to connect to Line 6 Monkey and check for any updates. Firmware version 1.70 was ready and waiting to be downloaded and installed, so I quickly made a backup of the existing JTV preset bundle using WorkBench and then applied the firmware update using Monkey and which took about seven or eight minutes to complete.

With the previous Variaxes (I own both a 300 Electric and a 700 Electric as well as a 700 Acoustic and a 300 Acoustic Nylon Variax), there was/is always a slight feeling of latency as the guitar is played, but it is very slight and it's easy to get used to it, however you do know that you are playing a modelling guitar because of this. There is still a bit of that same kind of sensation with the JTV-59, but it is much less obvious due to improved DSP, however given the technology in-play here, however small, there is almost certainly bound to be some latency.

Clang! – is it still in play? Well as an owner of four previous generation Variaxes, I have to say that the phenomenon never bothered me – maybe it was just good luck or maybe it's just something about my playing style that never caused this to show up, however whatever the reasons I never heard it with my own guitars, I have experienced it directly on a different Variax 300 – and it is VERY noticeable if the guitar in question is at all susceptible. I am pleased to say that my JTV-59 does not exhibit any sign of Clang!

All the models perform excellently and give a very realistic impression of whatever is being modelled. My only criticism here as with the previous generation Variaxes is that out of the box all

the twelve string emulations are set up too aggressively for my taste and that being the case there is still a tendency for the models at their default patch settings to 'warble' – particularly on the lower three strings. However, that problem is easily remedied in Variax WorkBench, and having attended to it in exactly the same way as I did with my earlier Variaxes by reducing the detune between the physical and virtual strings and also lowering the mix level of the virtual strings, the tendency to warble is almost totally eliminated. In fact I have to play really sloppily to cause even the tiniest hint of a 'warble'.

In terms of overall output level, the models seem to be a little quieter than the magnetic pickups, but there's not a lot in it, and in any case the Variax presets can be tweaked up in level using WorkBench.

I have some POD HD500 presets that I previously set up to use with my Variax 700 and with some slight adjustment to the HD500 input settings and Variax forced model control to account for the dual channels of the JTV and the associated switching mode those presets sound great through the HD500 and DT50. I have transferred some of the new factory acoustic presets from the POD HD (Bean) to the HD500 where they sound exactly the same as they do in the Bean, and these tended to sound a little distorted with both the JTV-59 and the Variax 700 through the DT50, but the patches were not designed for the Variax, but more for a traditional electro-acoustic guitar.

One thing that did catch me out was the dual channel operation of the JTV where both magnetic and modelled outputs can become mixed if the inputs are not correctly set in the HD500, and when trying to assess the acoustic models from the JTV, having the magnetic pickups in the mix can obviously colour the impression you get, so it is worth bearing the different output options that are available from the JTV range in mind over and above the single output option from any standard series 1 Variax – particularly if things don't sound quite as you expect 😊

Playing the JTV-59 into the POD HD500 and then through to a pair of near-field studio monitors (KRK Rokit 6 G2) via my mixing desk produced excellent sounds – and particularly so from the acoustic guitar models.

The models themselves in the JTV are noticeably improved over the previous generation Variax models, and the added ability for using the virtual capo and alternate tunings even with the 12 string emulations is a big bonus.

Variax WorkBench Software

All the James Tyler Variax guitars ship with a USB Variax WorkBench interface and a special Variax Digital Interface (VDI) cable. The software is freely downloadable from Line 6's Web site.

Variax Workbench is now compatible with all current computer operating systems and Intel based Mac systems.

I have used Workbench in my initial tweaking sessions so far with my new JTV-59 to modify the default factory 12 string presets – exactly as I did with my older Variax 300 and 700 guitars, to reduce the detune between the real and virtual 'octave' strings and reduce the mix between the real and virtual strings so that the 'jangle' effect is more akin to how either my Fender 12 string acoustic or my Ovation Elite 12 string acoustic sound in real life – and I am pleased to say that the sound of these twelve string models is exactly as I'd expect them to be and very close indeed to how both my Fender and Ovation twelve string guitars sound as electro-acoustic instruments when plugged in to a mixing desk, PA or acoustic amp such as an AER Compact 60 or Marshall AS50D

Conclusion

As has always been said, this guitar is a typical \$700-\$800 instrument with \$700 worth of sophisticated modelling electronics added.

As an \$800 base instrument, my first impressions of the production guitar I've received are really that it punches above the competition in a similar price range – even from the same factory.

The electronics are obviously what sets these guitars apart from so called 'normal' guitars and there are noticeable improvements over the previous Variax range.

The modelling is definitely the best that I've heard when compared to the competition. It's not 100% perfect but is certainly within easy reach of being 100% perfect and noticeably better than generation 1 Variax modelling.

Line 6 will need to work extremely hard and the competition even harder if they want to 'top' the quality of modelling and electronics as it stands now with the James Tyler Variax range.

Would I recommend the JTV-59 to other people? Yes. Most certainly.

How good on a scale of one to ten based on expectations is the reality of the actual product I have in my hands. I'd say right now with everything considered and as discussed here that it is a good 9.5/10 – and with a little attention to the 3 way switch cover as I've applied myself and the default 12 string model presets to tame the tendency to warble, out of the box the JTV-59 would score 10/10 with no problem.

Am I completely stoked with my new bit of kit? I think you could safely say I am 😊😊

Nick Mattocks, 19 June 2011

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This reference can be found on-line here: <http://line6.com/community/docs/DOC-2120>