



NYLON-STRING ELECTRO ROUND-UP £440-£1,058  
ELECTRO-ACOUSTICS



# Nylon-string electro round-up **£440-£1,058**

Looking for a new slant on your playing? Four electro-classicals line up for inspection... *by David Gallant*

**T**oo long overlooked, the nylon-strung 'classical' instrument seems set to make a comeback, due in no small way to the current popularity of world, latin and jazz. With its mellow tones and lyrical voice, it offers an intimate, quieter, more reflective sonic character, in contrast to the wild, musical mood swings of its steel-string acoustic and electric counterpart.

Although the classical guitar as we know it is said to have started life as the 'guitarra latina' with the Italian luthiers of the 16th century, today's instruments are clearly

modelled on the mid 19th century Spanish 'Torres' form, built by luthier Antonio Torres, with its larger body and more simplified styling. This was not the only school of guitar making in 19th century Europe, however. Lacote, a highly respected French luthier, was producing lavishly decorated instruments out of his Parisian atelier and there was also a thriving group of luthiers in greater Germany, most of whom had migrated north from their Italian homeland to service a vibrant musical scene in the city of Vienna. The most notable of the city's luthiers was Johan Stauffer with his unique

'persian slipper' headstock, and these instruments with a harmonic bar rather than the accepted fan bracing, were to sound very different to their Spanish counterparts, having a more rapid attack and a treble or mid-range dominance. Later developments in Germany by the Hauser lutherie would see the adoption of fan bracing as standard. However, the tonal and timbral characteristics were still subtly different to the Spanish model, this is a point which was not lost on the great classical guitarist Segovia, who at one point in his career favoured a Hauser above all other models.

Today, most quality nylon-strung classical instruments are made in Spain, with names such as Conde Hermanos, Rodriguez, Ramirez and Contreras heading the frame. But there are also the highly sought after Hauser and Hanika instruments from Germany and a small clutch of quality Japanese manufacturers such as Yairi, Asturias and Matsuoka.

The variety of instruments, especially electros, is wider than ever before, from the standard classical shape to the 'cutaway' with cedar or spruce tops matched to rosewood or mahogany back and sides. Undersaddle pickups and preamps have become so highly developed over recent years that it is now perfectly possible to use a nylon-strung acoustic on the bigger stage, without facing feedback problems.

We've sampled a cross section of what is available to the serious player in the lower to middle price range and come up with four current electros: two full-bodied and two cutaways. >

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS

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**Admira Virtuoso E £440**

This **Admira** marries a solid cedar top with laminated rosewood back and sides that are well figured and book-matched. There is single carriage lining and black purfling to both the top and bottom of the rims with a very flowery transfer rosette around the soundhole. Set on the 'C'-shaped mahogany neck, with its pointed heel, is a rosewood fingerboard with 19 medium size frets. The headstock is faced with rosewood laminate and has a set of gold-plated three-on-a-strip tuners with pearloid buttons, while the synthetic nut looks awkward and is matched by the chunky nylon saddle on a 'production line' rosewood bridge. The electrics are by Shadow – a Nano SHL99 Piezo undersaddle pickup is powered by a FourPlus pre-amp, which is set into the rim of the front bout with four-band EQ and shape switch, volume and phase invert switch.

**Sounds**

With an ideal 'classical' bridge spacing, the Virtuoso is an easy and very forgiving player. Unplugged it offers typically warm Spanish colours in the mids and lows, but with a

higher register that is a touch thin toned. Dynamics overall are healthy. However, sonic depth and body is limited and there is a distinct timbral edginess – particularly in the lower register. That said, articulation and separation is good and harmonics pop out clearly across the full range.

The Shadow Four Plus preamp seems underpowered, but along with the Nano undersaddle pick-up does a good job at reproducing the natural sonic character of the Virtuoso. Clearly it is possible to affect the balance through EQ frequency adjustment and bass, mid, treble and brilliance slide settings, but it is refreshing to find that an untainted tone and timbre is available. It is also good to see a phase invert switch to counteract possible feedback.

**The Bottom Line**

**We like:** Value for money  
**We dislike:** 'Chunky' nut and saddle  
**Guitarist says:** Excellent basic instrument with authentic sounds

**Alhambra 7PCWE2 £1,058**

This **Alhambra** cutaway is topped by solid German spruce with cross-silking, while the back and sides come in figured Indian rosewood. There is a single carriage-line and wood purfling to the top and bottom of the rims, together with a central strip between the book-matched back. The transfer rosette circles a larger soundhole – its pattern is repeated on the tie block to the rear of the rosewood bridge. Cedar is used for the neck, set on a scooped neck block, and is reinforced with an ebony strip. The smooth ebony fingerboard carries the 19 medium frets, which are well-polished, while at their head is a bone nut. The headstock is faced with an expertly cut piece of rosewood, while to either side are the decorative, gold-plated three-on-a-strip tuners with ebony buttons. A Fishman Prefix Pro Blend system, with mic, controls the undersaddle Acoustic Matrix pickup.

**Sounds**

The 7PCWE2 has a narrow string spacing at the bridge. This makes fingerstyle difficult for those used to a

classical instrument, but more comfortable for the rock 'n' roll or jazz player. Clearly Spanish in character, there is a dryness to the sound, but with depth and width. Balance across the range is exceptional, as is articulation and separation, while harmonics are easily found and ring out true.

Plugged in, the Fishman Prefix Pro Blend system proves powerful with permutations and sonic possibilities and more than enough scope for raising the ratios. Going through each of the settings and EQ-ing to preference produces convincing ambient, mic sounds, and we found that setting the blend arm nearer to mic than pickup gives the most authentic 'clean' classical sound. The notch-filter proves to be an indispensable tool for curtailing feedback.

**The Bottom Line**

**We like:** Rosewood tones  
**We dislike:** Narrow string spacing at bridge  
**Guitarist says:** Ideal if you're a plectrum player rather than a traditional fingerpicker



### Orpheus Valley Solea £950

With its solid cocobolo (South American mahogany-type) back and sides, the Solea is a very striking guitar. A single light wood carriage line outlines the back of the instrument, while the two book-matched sections are separated by a wider piece of light wood. Binding around the body of the Solea is also in wood and the single carriage line is repeated on the solid red cedar top with its unique 'V' pattern marquetry rosette. The classically shaped Honduran cedar neck is set on a scooped neck block and comes with a carved cocobolo heel plate and carries a 19-fret ebony fingerboard. To the head is a bone nut, while to the side of the fingerboard is a very useful white position dot marker by the 7th fret. A carved ebony facing adorns the headstock, which is fitted with high quality three-on-a-strip black tuners with ebonite buttons. The bridge is once again made of ebony with a bone saddle.

#### Sounds

Not only is the Solea visually unique, there is also a distinct uniqueness to its sound. Very bright and lively, it has the clear,

clinical characteristics of the Hauser-style while at the same time displaying some of the warmth and richness of the Spanish instruments. There is a creamy depth to the Solea's voice, which is very appealing, and it displays excellent separation and articulation with harmonics popping out with ease.

Although the Solea carries no onboard sound modification, and therefore no unsightly control panel, it does benefit from the remarkable 'plug in and power', battery free, MiSi Trio system with its preamp located within the body of the instrument just behind the end jack. This, along with an LR Baggs undersaddle pickup, gives a natural and unadulterated amplification of the Solea's admirable acoustic qualities.

#### The Bottom Line

**We like:** The battery free p/u; individual sound quality

**We dislike:** Nothing

**Guitarist says:** Forget the label – this is a quality instrument

### Takamine TC132SC £980

The solid cedar table of the TC132SC carries a rich, warm, golden hue and triple cream carriage lines to the binding. The soundhole rosette is finely detailed with a mix of marquetry and transfer. The solid rosewood rims are figured with the same classy cream double carriage lining to both the top and bottom, while the equally sumptuous book-matched solid rosewood back is outlined by more double carriage lines, which are again repeated in duet down the central spine.

With a modern half moon rosewood-faced heel, the solid cedar neck and its truss rod carries a rosewood 'board with 19 medium frets, while the rosewood-faced headstock with 'T' script carries three-on-a-strip brass tuners with plastic buttons. The bone nut matches the bone saddle set on a matt rosewood bridge.

Electrics are Takamine's Palathetic pickup and the new CTP-2 Cool Tube preamp system, which includes a useful green 'operating' light, an onboard chromatic tuner and an auxiliary jack and volume knob for controlling an add-on pickup.

#### Sounds

The TC132SC has a very open sound, but this comes with a thin toned treble – although there is plenty of warmth and depth in the lower register. Like many Japanese-made classical instruments it has a liquid-y, almost syrupy voice allied to a strikingly bright timbre.

Equipped with the very latest CTP-2, the TC132SC comes alive when it is plugged in. It's a very well-spec'd preamp but the onboard valve technology seems to add more weight and depth to the tone at the expense, however, of reproducing the natural acoustic sound. You may like that addition; this reviewer finds it intrusive. But such is the diversity of amplified sound that we must stress how important it is to get out and try these guitars plugged in.

#### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Feel; playability

**We dislike:** Thin tone; lack of body in the treble; expensive

**Guitarist says:** Nice playing instrument, not the best for authentic plugged in sound



### The Rivals

#### Cutaway

The **Camps 600** (£895) has a cedar top, rosewood back & sides and Fishman Prefix Pro Blend. The **Almansa 435E** (£1,250) spec as Camps.

#### Full Body

The **Strunal 477H Electro** (£240) has a cedar top and Shadow Four Plus system. The **Raimundo 120E** (£725) has cedar top and Fishman Classic Four system.

### The Verdict

In the classical market, you usually get what you pay for. However, as always, there will be those that are, well, just remarkably good value for money. The *Admira* is one such instrument. It may not have the depth and richness of tone of its more expensive counterparts, but it does have that Spanish vibe, it's well balanced and is in our opinion an ideal introduction to the nylon electro – definitely our credit crunch choice too.

If you're looking to mix it with an electric set-up, then the *Alhambra* is an excellent 'crossover' instrument, with its slightly narrower nut and

narrower string spacing at the bridge making it an easier transition for electric players who are more used to plectrums than fingers. This instrument also has a beautiful mellow Spanish voice, which can be enhanced by the Fishman Prefix Pro Blend electrics.

The *Takamine* is one of the easiest classical players that we've encountered but it carries less weight as an acoustic instrument, with the treble being particularly weak. Plugged in, however, it comes to life. But this reviewer found the Cool Tube preamp system seemed to want to add its own colouring at the expense of the guitar's natural tone.

Perhaps the most interesting of all these instruments is the *Solea*, hence its *Guitarist Choice* award, although at double the price of the *Admira* it's a more serious purchase. Sound-wise its more Germanic than Spanish, with its bright attack and full middle, but its MiSi preamp really impresses. Not only does it come closest of all on review to translating the natural acoustic sound of the instrument but it's also a very eco-friendly and easy way to power up a preamp and play for up to 16 hours.

A *Headway Shire King 60* Acoustic amp was used in this test with EQ levels centred with a flat response. **G**



### Admira Virtuoso E

**PRICE:** £440  
**ORIGIN:** Spain  
**BODY:** Solid cedar, laminated rosewood back and sides  
**NECK:** African mahogany, 650mm scale, 52mm nut  
**FINGERBOARD:** 19-fret rosewood  
**TUNERS:** Classic gold-plated three-on-a-strip with pearloid buttons  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Rosewood/56.5mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Shadow Four Plus pre-amp with Nanoflex pickup. Four-band equaliser with bass, mid, treble & brilliance together with EQ-shape button and phase invert switch  
**OPTIONS:** No  
**FINISH:** Gloss natural (as reviewed)  
**Barnes & Mullins 01691 652449**  
[www.bandm.co.uk](http://www.bandm.co.uk)



#### Test results

**Build quality** ★★★★★  
**Playability** ★★★★★  
**Sound** ★★★★★  
**Value for money** ★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Alhambra 7PCWE2

**PRICE:** £1,058  
**ORIGIN:** Spain  
**BODY:** Solid German spruce, solid Indian rosewood back and sides  
**NECK:** Cedar w/ebony reinforcement, 650mm scale, 50mm nut  
**FINGERBOARD:** 19-fret ebony  
**TUNERS:** Classic gold-plated three-on-a-strip with ebony buttons  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Rosewood/52mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Fishman Prefix Pro Blend preamp with Acoustic Matrix undersaddle pickup. Master volume & blend controls, shelving style bass & treble plus semi-parametric 'Contour' EQ. Phase switch and adjustable notch filter  
**OPTIONS:** Pick guard, matt finish  
**LEFT HANDERS:** Yes  
**FINISH:** Gloss natural (as reviewed)  
**Classical Guitars Plus 01363 881174**  
[www.classical-guitars-plus.co.uk](http://www.classical-guitars-plus.co.uk)

#### Test results

**Build quality** ★★★★★  
**Playability** ★★★★★  
**Sound** ★★★★★  
**Value for money** ★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Orpheus Valley Solea

**PRICE:** £950  
**ORIGIN:** Bulgaria  
**BODY:** Solid red cedar, solid cocobolo back and sides  
**NECK:** Honduran cedar, 650mm scale, 51mm nut  
**FINGERBOARD:** 19-fret ebony  
**TUNERS:** Classic gold-plated three-on-a-strip ebonite buttons  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Ebony/58.5mm  
**ELECTRICS:** MiSi Acoustic Trio preamp with LR Baggs undersaddle acoustic guitar pickup  
**OPTIONS:** Made to order instrument. Nitro satin finish  
**LEFT HANDERS:** Yes  
**FINISH:** Nitro-cellulose gloss natural (as reviewed)  
**Sandarac 01787 238350**  
[www.sandarac.co.uk](http://www.sandarac.co.uk)



#### Test results

**Build quality** ★★★★★  
**Playability** ★★★★★  
**Sound** ★★★★★  
**Value for money** ★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Takamine TC132SC

**PRICE:** £980  
**ORIGIN:** Japan  
**BODY:** Solid cedar with solid rosewood back and sides  
**NECK:** Mahogany, 650mm scale, 50mm nut  
**FINGERBOARD:** 19-fret rosewood  
**TUNERS:** Classic gold-plated three-on-a-strip pearloid buttons  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Rosewood/58mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Takamine CTP-2 Cool Tube Pre-amp with Palathetic pickup, chromatic tuner, graphic EQ (bass, mid & treble) plus rotary knob for semi-parametric EQ mid-range. 'Cool Tube' rotary knob for tonal control + auxiliary input jack and volume for extra pickup  
**OPTIONS:** No  
**LEFT HANDERS:** No  
**FINISH:** Gloss natural (as reviewed)  
**Fender GBI 01342 331700**

#### Test results

**Build quality** ★★★★★  
**Playability** ★★★★★  
**Sound** ★★★★★  
**Value for money** ★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★