

## **Guide to Buying a Nylon String Guitar**

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The classical guitar has an enigmatic simplicity. With little variation in shape, size, materials, or design, it's been adapted to a wide variety of musical styles. This simplicity can make it hard to know what to look for in an instrument. Look at a dozen classical guitars hanging on a wall and the differences may seem slight and superficial. Some are light, some are dark. Most have machine tuners, but some use wooden pegs like violins. Most have necks that join the body at the twelfth fret, while others have a cutaway. Which of these differences are meaningful and which are merely decorative?

For many just starting out on the guitar, its simplicity makes it an appealing first instrument. Although its wider neck and softer strings are gentler to novice fingertips than steel strings, the best guide for your first instrument should be the kind of music you want to play. If your real interest is in one of the 'steel string' styles like blues or fingerpicking, then certain aspects of a nylon string guitar are going to hold you back a bit. If you're more interested in classical, flamenco, or Latin American styles such as Brazilian music, then you really need to start out on a nylon string guitar.

Just about any nylon string guitar will do if you're just starting out in one of these styles of music. If you plan to pursue one particular style more seriously, you need to get an instrument suited to that kind of music. Before we look at the different types of nylon string guitars, let's look at some of the features all these instruments have in common.

The soundboard, the top of the guitar, is the single most important factor in shaping the tone of a classical guitar. As a rule, you should avoid guitars with laminated tops and stick to solid top guitars. Although California luthier Jose Oribe often uses redwood for his soundboards, classical guitar soundboards are almost always made of spruce or cedar. The tone of a spruce top guitar will change dramatically during the first year or two after construction, improving and 'opening up.' Although it's very unlikely that a well-built spruce top guitar will deteriorate in sound quality during this time, you won't really know

what it's going to sound like until it has been broken in. A cedar top, on the other hand will sound open from the beginning, changing little over time.

Beyond these basic characteristics, these two types of wood each have their own subtle qualities which contribute to an instrument's musicality. The clarity of a good spruce top guitar is very suited to playing contrapuntal music like Bach. Most flamenco guitars have spruce tops for a clear, crisp sound. A good cedar top guitar, such as a Ramirez, has a warmer, darker tone that many prefer for playing Spanish classical music.

A reputable, experienced dealer should be able to tell you whether a given guitar has a spruce or cedar top. In the raw, cedar has a reddish brown color. Spruce is almost white. Although a colored finish can mask the underlying color of the wood, you can often find it by looking inside the instrument around the soundhole.

Traditionally, the back and sides of a classical guitar are made of either Brazilian or Indian rosewood. Many luthiers disagree strongly on which is best. Both are beautiful. A flamenco guitar traditionally has cypress back and sides. A recent development is the "flamenca negra," a flamenco guitar with rosewood back and sides for a warmer tone. Many builders, including Fritz Mueller (Canada), G. Giussani (Italy), Blöchinger (Germany), and German Vazquez Rubio (U.S.), are now building both classical and flamenco instruments with maple back and sides. These instruments tend to sound brighter than rosewood instruments.

Nylon string guitar necks are usually made of either cedar or mahogany. Either is fine. What's more important is the shape and size of the neck. The back of the neck can be flat, rounded or C-shaped. Which one is right for you depends on the shape and proportion of your hand. Whichever feels right is right. Playability is also affected by length of the neck. A 650 mm scale length is now the standard, but instruments ranging from 640 mm to 674 mm scale length aren't uncommon.

Clearly, classical and flamenco guitars can be made of the same materials and the same size. The difference lies in the way the two instruments are constructed. A flamenco guitar is, at heart, a percussion instrument. Generally much lighter than a classical instrument, it has a quick response, low action, and a bright timbre. A flamenco guitar will also have golpeadors, plastic tap plates on either side of the strings for the percussive

golpe technique flamenco players use. A classical guitar, in contrast, is built to carry multiple melodic lines. A good classical guitar will give a player a wide variety on tonal colors to choose from in any position and allow for longer notes and a more singing tone.

For other styles of music, such as Jazz, Brazilian, and other Latin American styles, it's a matter of personal taste. There are no design styles specific to these types of music, although many players prefer a cutaway for easier access past the twelfth fret. A number of manufacturers including Gibson, Yamaha, Takamine, Ovation, and others offer acoustic/electric instruments that work well in these styles of music. These instruments tend to play a little more like a steel string or electric guitar with a narrower neck and lower action than a classical instrument. These instruments tend to offer less tonal variation than an instrument design for playing classical music.

Although prices for nylon string guitars begin under \$100, the least you can reasonably expect to pay for a usable instrument is about \$300. Anything less than that and you're going to have a hard time getting any kind of tonal variation out of an instrument. Canadian manufacturer La Patrie, offers a simple, unadorned classical guitar for around \$300.

Although it is possible to find hand made instruments under \$1,000, most of what you'll find in this price range are factory made instruments from Japan or Spain, including labels such as Alhambra, Raimundo, Manuel Rodriguez, Vicente Torres, Alvarez, Yamaha, Takamine, and Esteve. There can be a wide variation among similarly priced instruments in this price range, so it's best to try out as many instruments as you can.

Between \$1,000 and \$2,000, you'll find a mixture of high end factory made instruments such as Hirade (Japan) or Antonio Sanchez (Spain) and hand made instruments such as those from Paracho, Mexico where guitar building is the primary industry. Benito Huipe and Francisco Navarro are two builders from Paracho who make beautiful sounding instruments at a reasonable price. In the \$2,000 to \$3,000 you start to find affordable and/or used instruments from some of the better know builders such as Ramirez as well as top of the line factory built instruments. For instruments in these price ranges, you may have to look carefully to find out the difference between instruments

differing hundreds of dollars in price. Often this difference lies in features which don't really affect the sound such as purfling or rosette design, whether or not the back and sides are laminated, etc. As always, the sound and playability of an instrument should be your guide.

For guitarists looking for their first really good guitar it's easy to be moved by the beautiful tone a good hand made instrument can make. If you've always had to struggle to get a nice sound out of your instrument, a warm, rich tone can be quite seductive. The problem is, if that's the only tone that instrument can produce, then you're stuck with it. This is often a problem with low end instruments from well known builders. It's like having just one color to paint with. No matter how beautiful that color is, it's better to have a broader palette to draw on.

Guitarists looking to buy their first quality hand-made instrument are often swayed by the myth that the best classical and flamenco instruments are to be found only in Spain. Some will even make special plans to visit famous makers' workshops across Spain in search of that perfect instrument. Although visiting a luthier's workshop is a great experience for any guitarist, it's not a very good way to find the instrument that's just right for you.

First of all, the top builders all having waiting lists that are years long. Arcangel Fernandez, , for example, has a waiting lists that stretches out for the rest of his career. You're simply not going to be able to walk into one of these shops and walk out with a new, top of the line instrument. The instruments you'll find in these shops are, for the most part, factory made student models sold under the builder's or some other label. One exception is the Ramirez shop in central Madrid. This shop is a semi-independent operation and receives instruments from the Ramirez workshop just like any other retailer.

If you're thinking of buying a guitar in Spain, it's also worth remembering that your choice will be limited to what's available at the time you're there. If you're thinking of spending anywhere from \$3,000 to \$7,000 and above for a fine hand made classical or flamenco guitar, whether from Spain or anywhere else in the world, it's best to find a

reputable, experienced dealer who can help you find the instrument best suited to your tastes and price range.

The main advantage a good dealer has to offer is experience. Whereas you may come across one or two instruments by a top builder, a dealer will have handled dozens of guitars by that same builder and is in a much better position to recognize that builder's best work. Also a dealer can offer you a better range of prices than you'll find contacting the workshop directly. A new instrument from a top Spanish builder will run you around \$6,000. A dealer may be able to offer you an instrument from the same builder at a fraction of the cost, as well as giving you a chance to compare it to dozens of other instruments from other builders you may be less familiar with. Even if there's no dealer in your area, most reputable dealers of fine instruments will ship you an instrument on 48 hour approval. If you don't like the instrument, return it in the same condition you received it for a full refund and try again.

Another reason not to limit yourself to buying an instrument in Spain is that first class instruments are being built around the world. Classical guitar legend John Williams plays an instrument built by Australian luthier Greg Smallman. You can see Williams visiting the Smallman shop in his video *The Seville Concert*. Segovia played guitars built by German luthier Hermann Hauser. Brazilian guitarist Baden Powell played instruments by the German builder Hopf for years. Spanish flamenco artists Paco de Lucia and Vicente Amigo both play instruments built by American luthier Lester DeVoe. Eric Sahlin of Canada also builds great flamenco instruments.

Each country where guitars are built has its own set of traditions in guitar building, not surprising when you take into account the fact that luthiers often learn their art as apprentices in the shops of more established builders. These traditions contribute to the sense that there are national characteristics among guitars. As you try out different guitars, you're likely to get a sense of these national characteristics. Again, don't let yourself be swayed by this. A guitar doesn't have to be from a particular place to have particular sound.

Whatever guitar you end up buying, it's a good idea to have a luthier or repairman used to working with fine instruments look it over for any flaws or potential problems

you may have missed. They can also make slight adjustments to the instrument to help it suit your playing style. Also, if you happen to come across an guitar that looks or sounds great, but has an obvious defect like a buzz, a warped neck, or a crack, it's worth having a luthier take a look at it to see if it can be brought back to life. Also, if you're looking at spending a lot of money on an instrument from a well known maker, and the price still seems too good to be true, it's worth having someone familiar with instruments from that particular builder check it out. As luthier Richard Bruné points out, there are a lot more 'Santos Hernandez' guitars out there than Hernandez ever made.

Any way you look at it, a guitar is a major purchase, if not in the amount of money you spend, then in the amount of time you invest in practicing. As with any major purchase, the best way to protect that investment is to gather as much information as you can to make an informed choice. Fortunately, there are a lot of sources to choose from. There are books and videos on everything from guitar construction to catalogs of rare instrument collections. José Ramirez III's book *Things About the Guitar* presents the history of a famous family of guitar builders as well as his insights into the art of building a guitar. José Romanillos' biography of 19th Century Spanish luthier Antonio Torres is another great resource.

Many luthiers and guitar dealers now have web sites which can take you right into their shops. Guitar Salon International's web site, for example, ([www.guitarsalon.com](http://www.guitarsalon.com)) is well worth a visit. With so much information available, it's easy to get over-informed. Issues like bracing patterns, for example, are very big among guitar builders, but there's no need for players to try to learn the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. As flamenco great Benito Palacios advises, "Buy the guitar, not the label." In the end, the best guitar for you is the one that best helps you to explore the music that drew you to the instrument in the first place.

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