



## Things to Consider when Buying a Classical Guitar - 25 years of perspective ...



**A guide to the key things to consider and look for when buying a classical guitar, that suits your playing style and personality.**

*by Pierre Herrero*

At GuitarsOnline, our mantra ...

***Selecting the best guitars worldwide, to bring superb tone and pleasure,***

is more than a goal, or a mission statement – it’s what we live for – and we’re very good at it!

But, after a lifetime of travelling to Spain, and throughout Europe, visiting some of the most important luthiers throughout the world and literally testing and importing thousands upon thousands of guitars, and advising and recommending “that special guitar” for many, many hundreds of people – I’m now almost at a loss for words!

Where do I start?

How do I put into words the answer to the question ...

### **“what should I look for when choosing my next guitar”**

OK – here I go ...

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If you think about the process that you go through when you select that special guitar (or should that be, when the guitar selects you), you typically ask two questions:

#### ***What makes a good guitar?***

Followed by ...

#### ***Which guitar is for me?***

When guitar players speak with me, or visit me in our showroom, they often ask why I stock so many brands and models.

It's simple really (or perhaps it's complex) – It's because as players we are all different and seek different things!

Some guitar brands are great for power, projection and sustain, some makers for left hand ease and playability for players with stiff joints, arthritis, or smaller hands; others because they offer great value for money, some offer unique musicality and an appealing soundscape.

So, rather than you having to compromise – I would much rather carry a much wider range of options, to ensure that your next truly special guitar, is perfect for you.

So, to get back to answering the questions “*What makes a good guitar?*” and “*Which guitar is for me?*”

Rather than a simple step-by-step checklist, I'll take you through the process that I use, where the process of matching player and guitar is one of listening to a player and matching them to an ideal guitar profile.

A process, incorporating an aural soundscape of different guitars that I have developed after many, many decades of international travel, talking to makers, teachers, players from around the world and from playing literally thousands of guitars.

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# The first step in the process of helping you find the perfect guitar

To establish a baseline on where you are at with your playing, and what you are looking for, some of the first things we might discuss could include:

- If coming to the showroom, I'd suggest you bring your current guitar and any favorite music. I might ask you to play a little, so I can get a feel for your style.
- If you don't have a guitar – that's fine! If you are a player I might ask you to play a model to get a feel for your style and preferences. If you are a complete beginner, we will take things one note at a time.
- We'd discuss any physical considerations such as left-hand preference or arthritis.
- It's good to have a general discussion about your current guitar and playing; what you like or don't like, what you want more or less of. What kind of repertoire do you play, do you want to play? What guitar music do you listen to? Do you have any favorite players?
- And of course, there's budget to consider!

From our discussions, I would then select a number of guitars and you could get down to the serious-fun side of things of playing them back to back, and comparing which one suits you better. Cull the guitar options that appeal least, and retain strongest contenders until only 3-4 options remain.

Throughout the process, remember:

1. We all hear differently and want different things in a guitar. There is no right or wrong, only what is right for you.
2. Within the tonal range we hear we have a tonal preference and each guitar has a tonal 'palette'. It really is up to your ear and what you prefer.
3. Higher-end level guitars will produce better and more varied sound with higher levels of player technique.

Throughout your testing I will continue to ask questions that will help you refine your search. I watch carefully which guitars you spend time with and which you immediately put down. It's not just about what you consciously know or say about a guitar; it's often just as important what they do and do not do that informs the next choice I will put into their hands.

It's not about what I like in a guitar – it's about what you as the player is seeking. I provide a guided discovery process. Hopefully you will find something you love from our collection of new, used and vintage guitar collection. Or it may be that you choose to order something to be specially made from our range of suppliers.

## Technical and set up issues to be checked before playing

A key consideration during my visits with luthiers, is their commitment to stringent quality control processes. Luthiers can only give three year warranties and defect free guarantees because of their commitment to quality.

Key quality and technical checks that you should look out for when considering any guitar, include:

1. Make sure the guitar is tuned to concert pitch.
2. Check for 'wolf' notes.
3. Check for 'buzzes'.
4. Check the playability. Check the height of the strings above the fingerboard.
5. Check notes on the first string. Listen for the attack and decay.

Keep in mind throughout the selection process: Not all guitars are created equal and it is not always just a question of money. Trust your hearing, play and compare many brands and models back-to-back until one stands out for you. There will be at least a couple, so in terms of which guitar is for you, I always say to buyers that if they cannot hear or feel the playing difference between two favorites **buy the cheaper model** and then upgrade when you can justify it.

As [Nicole Neal wrote in one of her guitar articles](#) “You’ll know when you’ve picked up the instrument that is the right one for you – something just clicks, it plays perhaps more fluidly than any of the others, the sounds, the tones, the vibrations resonate in your ears and your body like none of the others do. It just feels right. It’s something akin to falling in love. If you can’t take that guitar away with you right there and then, you just can’t stop thinking about it. The sound. The vibration. The feel. It’s true love! Well at least deeply amorous infatuation!

To coin a phrase, I heard an associate of mine use recently (you know who you are!) – **“there’s no “perfect” guitar, there’s only “perfect right now”**”.

This is excellent because it means we get to go through the whole exciting and enthralling journey again in the future, experiencing developments in both guitar construction but also in ourselves - hearing with different ears, playing with different hands and fingers.’

Having looked at the search process from both the supply end i.e. what are the best guitar options and from the player’s perspective, let’s look at what guitars I might showcase to different players based on budget and the objective/physical/tonal factors.

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## For the Beginner: Recommended Classic Guitars

### Budget Guitars are they Value? • \$90-299

For players learning guitar for the first time - there are “**cheap**” guitars and there are “**entry-level**” guitars – and believe me, *cheap* and *entry level* mean two completely different things.

These *cheap* guitars, tend to be all-plywood guitars, often found in supermarkets and cheap department stores.

They are really not much more than “toys”, with a very high action making them almost unplayable - especially for children. I have personally evaluated these brands and even imported samples (rom China where they are made), but inconsistency and quality control issues were so significant, that I rejected them all. The total cost of cheap product, with rising Chinese prices, returns and quality issues, means that I would not recommend going down this path.

At the same time quality Spanish makers have become much more competitive. It’s reached the point that the original Spanish version can be bought for a close price to the Chinese copy!

This is why a quality *entry-level* Spanish guitar, is the correct place to start – a good quality solid top set up – a great entry level investment for your time and money.

As an “investment”, a good Spanish solid top can cost **as little as \$346** and after several years use, can still be resold at 70% of its original value , as there are always other students looking for a good entry level guitar.

So, if you consider the initial purchase price, less the (estimated) second-hand resale value – over several years of use, this quality entry level guitar has cost only \$120 – while in comparison, the cheap guitar has typically zero resale value.

# So what good quality Entry Level - Intermediate guitars do I recommend?

## **Beginner's budget: \$346 - \$599**

Within the beginner's budget level, all these models feature solid tops are perfectly set up and easy to play for beginners come with a three -year warranty and have good resale value.

- Almansa Model 400
- Almansa Model 401
- Alhambra Z
- Alhambra 1C
- Camps Son Satin

## **Mid-Range budget: \$599 - \$960**

In taking the next step in budget, these models feature higher-grade tone woods, better quality machine heads and represent a step up in quality. Sometimes traded-in guitars at this level can be found in [the Bargains and Vintage section of Guitarsonline](#).

- Alhambra 2C
- Alhambra 3C
- Prudencio Saez 2A
- Prudencio Saez 4A
- Camps Sinfonia

## **Mid -Intermediate Level Quality: \$900 - \$1,900**

When taking another step-up again in budget, the refinement of the guitar takes yet another leap, with superior tops, ebony fingerboards, precision machine heads and solid back and sides tone woods as well as solid Cedar or Spruce tops.

- Prudencio Saez 16
- Prudencio Saez 31
- Alhambra 4P
- Alhambra 7C
- Prudencio Saez G9

# For the Serious Classical Guitar Student; Advanced & Concert Guitar Options

## Why Upgrade? Which instrument should a Classical Guitar Student Chose?

You have now been playing classical guitar for a few years and are developing your skills and taking great steps with your playing and technique.

You already have a guitar, so what are the reasons you would be looking to upgrade?

The answer is one of two factors:

1. You have an exam looming and you really need the extra firepower
2. You want to enjoy your practice more and get more out more pleasure out of your playing.

A guitar is an investment in both a work of art and in **making the most of your practice time.**

Consider that at this next level, your special guitar has been hand crafted and with the cost of the tone woods being such a large part of the final cost, the old maxim of “you get what you pay for”, in this situation, really does apply.

So when I’m advising a serious classical guitar student as to their more advanced and convert guitar options, their options and the considerations open up further.

Although it is hard to generalize and compress decades of experience and expertise into a series of dot-points, the key elements that must be balanced by the serious classical guitar student, are still musical experience, talent and budget.

Generally, it is better to play an instrument that is a bit too good for you rather than one that is "just right". **The better instrument stretches you, rewards you, and inspires you.**

Within each budget level, though – the number of years of playing experience, will also influence the most appropriate guitar model for you.

I’ve tried to summarize all this in the following table:

Budget up to	Years playing			
	Up to 1	Up to 2	Up to 3	3 or more
\$700	Alhambra Z Alhambra 1 or 2C	Alhambra 2C		At this level, there is a very wide choice of instruments available at a very wide range of prices
\$1,100	Alhambra 4P	Alhambra 4P	Alhambra 4P	
\$1,500	Alhambra 5P  Alhambra 7C	Alhambra 5P  Alhambra 7C  <u>Prudencio Saez Model G-9</u>	Alhambra 5P  Alhambra 7C  Juan Hernandez 8  <u>Prudencio Saez Model G-9</u>	
\$2,000			<u>Prudencio Saez Model 28 Rosewood</u>  Juan Hernandez 11	
\$2,700		Alhambra 7P	Alhambra 7P	
\$3,500 and above			Alhambra 10P Alhambra Professional	

*For more details on these guitars, please click here:*

Another general guideline, is that **the better you play, the greater your choice of instruments.**

For example, if you are a good player with three or more years' experience:

- with a limited budget, you will get great pleasure from a 7C, however,
- if your budget can stretch a bit up through the \$2,500 mark, there are quite a number of intermediate/advanced student instruments, that deliver a stunning result.

Beyond this, as an adult student, sometimes the opportunity to treat yourself to a quantum leap in playability, volume, string separation and tonal beauty – rewarding yourself with a stunning hand crafted guitar from one of the world's greatest luthiers – is based more on simple emotion!

**And with more than 300 Spanish and Australian hand made Luthier concert guitars in stock – at GuitarsOnline, we can help you explore all your options.**

# Advanced and Concert Level Players Guitar Options

**Guitar building techniques are advancing constantly** and staying abreast of the developments on the part of guitar builders and trends on the part of concert performers is a full-time job. It certainly keeps me busy!

There are three main contenders at this level of guitar building

1. Traditional Spanish Fan Braced
2. Lattice braced
3. Double tops with either Fan bracing or Lattice

## Advanced/Concert Level: \$5,000 - 7,500

At the advanced and high-end Concert Level, (as you would expect), the guitar options becoming increasingly sophisticated.

Some options I would typically start with when showcasing guitars at this level are:

- Caldersmith Lattice
- Paulino Bernabe Model 5
- Jason Elazzi Concert
- Caldersmith Concert
- Margarit and Mengual Luthier Rosewood
- Margarit and Mengual Ziricote (Lattice or New Torres)
- Paulino Bernabe Model 15

## High End Concert Level \$7.500+

- Paulino Bernabe Model 20, 30, 50 Torres, Especial, Royal
- Manuel Adalid Cathedral Double Top
- Vilaplana NT
- Jose Miguel Moreno Lattice



# How do different construction techniques & technical differences used by the luthiers impact the guitar, its tonal quality & price?

Normally when showing guitars, I do not dwell on the technical differences until the player likes the guitar and wants to know more. Why? The player does not usually care about how the maker achieves the tone, ease of playing, and so on, until they can hear/feel the difference and like the way it performs in their hands.

(So, rather than continuing to read on with this article, I'd rather you call me so I can show you the differences in person – I promise not to be boring!!)

However, for the purposes of completeness (and for those who like technical detail), I'll briefly explain the differences.

## The Traditional Spanish Method of Classical Guitar Construction

The definition of what is considered "traditional Spanish guitar construction" is a complex topic.

I have summarized four of its most important elements.

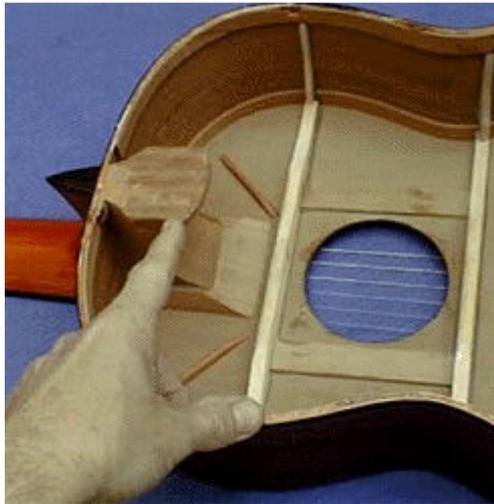
### 1. The Spanish Method is characterized by an integrated neck-body construction.

Spanish Method construction displays an extension of the neck--called the "foot"--inside the sound box which is glued to the interior back of the guitar.

This design makes the neck-body connection very strong and ensures a powerful sound. The presence of a Spanish "foot" shows that the guitar was built by the Spanish Method not by the dovetail method which simply adds the neck to a completely assembled sound box.



Here is a roughly cut neck. The finger indicates the portion of the neck called the "Spanish Foot"



Here we see the "Spanish Foot" inside of an assembled guitar

## 2. The Spanish Method uses fan bracing as opposed to X-bracing or ladder bracing.

Steel string guitars generally use an X-bracing to withstand the tension of the steel string which are 2-1/2 to 3 times higher tension than the nylon strings used on a classical guitar.

Ladder bracing is currently used on cheap Asia plywood guitars. In the early 19th century ladder bracing was used on the guitars of the day which were considerably smaller in size.



This is a photo of a flamenco soundboard.

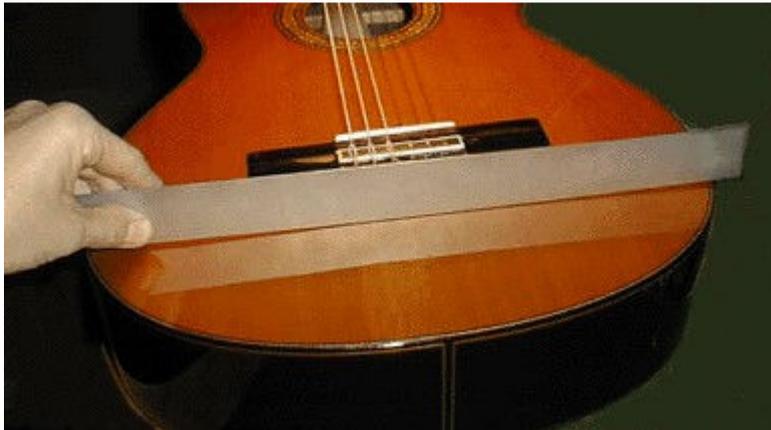
It has a very typical 5-strut face bracing.

My finger is touching the "contra puente" which is a thin, wide brace which stiffens the area below the bridge.

### 3. The Spanish Method uses a domed soundboard (especially the lower bout).

You can see the slight dome across the lower bout of the guitar by setting the edge of a straight piece of paper or cardboard on the soundboard.

Without such a domed top, the guitar will not be as loud or project as strongly.

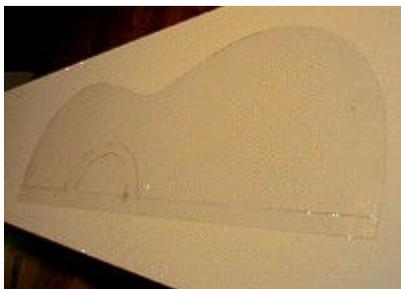


The dome in this top is evidenced when you put a ruler across the lower bout.

### 4. The Spanish method uses a "plantilla" (which is simply a template of one-half of the guitar face) to establish the outline of the soundboard.

Then, the braces are glued onto the soundboard while it is held in a scooped-out work board called a solera.

By gluing the braces to the soundboard while in the solera the luthier is able to construct a domed soundboard.



Finally, the face, sides, neck and back are put together on an assembly board called a **molde** or patron.

## "Handmade" vs "Factory made" Guitars



What are the key elements that makes a guitar “handmade” rather than “factory made”?

In Spain, the most relevant distinction is between **guitarras de artesanía** (artisan guitars) or **guitarras de fabrica** (factory guitars), not what is a "handmade" guitar.

Due to the nature of guitar building all guitars are handmade in some way – the issue though, is “the quality of the hands” – ie is the guitar crafted and handmade by a qualified artisan, a master with hundreds of guitars to his name, or hand assembled by a factory worker!

Typically, we find that artisan guitars or master luthier guitars are signed and dated. In contrast, "estudio", production (factory) and apprentice guitars are not normally signed and dated.

## Currently guitar production in Spain is organized in 3 basic ways:

### Independent Artisan Workshops.

In such shops, the master artisan has full control over design, manufacture of all parts and assembly.

Each instrument is an original--it is a one of a kind. Thicknesses of soundboard, types and number of bracings are determined by the artisan according to his evaluation of the properties of the particular pieces of wood.

Guitar parts are made in small quantities. The master works alone or with an apprentice, offspring or sometimes a partner. There is little division of labor compared with the factory method.

Woods are air-dried for many years. Production is 12 to 30 guitars a year.

Examples of world class makers in Spain are Felix Manzanero, Archangel Fernandez, Marcelino Barbero, Miguel Rodriguez of Cordoba, Manuel Reyes of Cordoba, Ignacio Fleta, Antonio Marin Montero, and many others.

*These independent artisan workshops tend to produce the higher priced, high-end Master grade concert instruments*

### Factory System

This produces a committee guitar and these can also be of high quality.

The Factory System produces numerous copies from the same guitar plan.

Many people make the parts and many people assemble the parts. Woods are air-dried and kiln dried. The bracings and thicknesses of parts are standardized and are not altered to respond to the individual characteristics of the specific pieces of wood.

*Good mid-range and high- end Student guitars are produced under this system representing great value for money and performance.*

### Journeyman System

This is a hybrid of the artisan and factory methods.

In this system parts are manufactured by a number of people but a single experienced craftsman does all of the crucial assembly operations and modifies the thicknesses of parts according to his intuition. Finishing and fretting are typically done by a number of people in the factory.

Nowadays around Valencia, Spain aspects of the factory and journeyman system are combined in what are called **artisan factories**.

In such situations, certain guitar models are made by committees in the standard "factory" system while other more expensive, all-solid models are made by skilled workers who do the crucial assembly supported by factory workers who make the parts.

Alhambra, Ramirez and Vicente Sanchis Guitars are made in artisan factories.

*The best of these artisan factories can rival the craft of the Independent artisan workshops, but it's critical to know what you are looking for.*

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## So how do I decide what makes it into our showroom?

The only way that I have found it possible to keep up with the ever changing trends and changes, is every year, to visit guitar manufactures and luthiers across all three types of workshops and evaluate their progress individually on a case by case basis.

After days of back to back playing, testing and comparison, repeated every year, over many decades, I then purchase the best of what I have seen, played and tested, and bring it back to my Melbourne showroom.

**And this, is the range from which you select your next special guitar.**

*For more information and to view our complete range of guitars, please click here:*



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