

Classical Guitar Essentials:

1. Equipment

by Matt D'Netto

i) Spruce Vs Cedar

One of the earliest issues that you will encounter when choosing a classical guitar will be the type of wood used in construction, and particularly the type of wood used to form the top of the guitar. The most common woods for the top are Cedar and Spruce, it's better to choose a solid top Cedar or Spruce guitar and avoid cheaper materials like Linden Plywood tops. Typically the back and sides of the guitar are Rosewood with Ebony for the fingerboard but it's the wood used for the top which is the determining factor for the timbre of a guitar.



Cedar Top Paco Castillo Guitar



Spruce Top Paco Castillo Guitar

Cedar is often characterised with a darker tone quality, whereas Spruce is generally brighter. Spruce is also a harder wood and will take more time to 'open out' than a Cedar top guitar. Usually, a Cedar guitar with sound fairly consistent throughout its life while the sound of a Spruce guitar will change more over time and it's characteristics will develop. Spruce guitars also tend to offer better room for variation in tone colour. For this reason, when choosing between two very closely matched Spruce and Cedar guitars, I tend to opt for the Spruce top on the chance that it will mature more than a the Cedar guitar. For cheaper models, Cedar is a safer choice as cheap, low quality Spruce can produce a poor sounding guitar. Having said that, choosing a guitar is very personal, so the most important factor rather than Spruce Vs Cedar is how you personally feel about a guitar. Take the time to try all sorts of different makes/models in your price range before buying to see which suits you best.

ii) Foot Stool V Guitar Rest

The ideal playing posture involves holding the classical guitar at an angle so that the neck of the guitar approaches an angle of around 30°-45° as opposed to the neck being horizontal as in acoustic, electric, jazz and flamenco guitar playing. The main reason for this position is that it allows for better projection of the sound out towards the audience because, if sitting correctly, the back of the guitar is left relatively un-touched by the guitarist and is therefore free to resonate. It also allows the left hand to access the entire fret board easily, it is a very secure position and finally, it allows the guitarist to be in a position where the wrists of both hands are relatively straight and not over-arched. This is vital as over-arching or excessive bending of the wrists can cause problems such as tendon injuries in the long term.



Hohner Hfs-S1 Classical Guitar Foot Stool



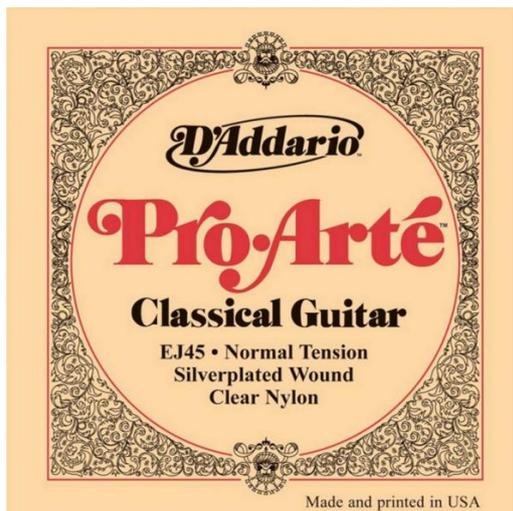
Ergoplay Tappert Model Guitar Rest

There are two options when it comes to achieving the correct posture, the first is a conventional foot stool. This is a great basic option where the guitarist will place the footstool under the left foot (for right handed players) to raise the neck of the guitar to a comfortable angle. However, this introduces an asymmetry to the body with one leg raised up by the foot stool and one leg down on the floor. It also almost tends to encourage the guitarist to slouch over the instrument, especially when concentrating on the left hand fingering. All of this can put an unnatural pressure on the spine and can particularly cause problems in older students learning to play the guitar later in life, when the body is unaccustomed to sitting in this slightly odd position for a prolonged time.

An alternative and increasingly common option is to use a rest like the Ergoplay which attaches to the bottom of the guitar, elevating the guitar to the correct angle whilst leaving both feet flat on the floor. The rest basically sits between your left thigh (for right handed players) and the underside of the guitar, fixed on with suction cups. This tends to force the guitarist to sit in better posture. The only minor draw-back is the need to use a non-slip grip mat to stop the rest from slipping against the thigh. There are also padded cushion style rests available like the Dynarette Support Cushion. These do a similar job to the Ergoplay style rests but they don't need to be fixed to the guitar in any way.

iii) Nylon Classical Guitar Strings

There are plenty of options in terms of classical guitar strings but here's a basic run down of the different types of strings available. In the past, the guitar was strung with organic gut strings produced from the intestines of sheep, goat or sometimes cattle. Modern guitars have evolved to make use of synthetic nylon strings, where the three treble strings are made of a single nylon filament, giving them a smooth, clear appearance. The Three bass strings are composed of a central core of fine nylon fibres wound with wire, giving them an opaque metallic appearance. These differ from electric and acoustic guitar strings which have steel trebles and wound basses, these strings are not compatible with classical guitars.



D'Addario Pro Arte EJ45 Strings



Savarez Cantiga 510 CJ Strings

There are plenty of options when it comes to choosing a particular brand of strings. The most common would be the D'Addario Pro Arte EJ45 strings. These are normal tension strings and are the first choice for most guitarists. Savarez are another great option that I've been using in recent years. I personally like the Savarez Cantiga 510 CJ strings, which happen to be higher tension and seem to be fairly durable. I tend to replace my strings every three months or so, but that depends very much on how much use you get out of your guitar. Other reputable string makers include La Bella, Augustine and Hannabach. I've tried La Bella strings in the past, using their 900B Golden Superior set of strings with golden alloy wound basses and black trebles. I've also used both Augustine Blue and Augustine Red strings and all sound good but the Savarez strings work best for me.

With regard to string tension, I tend to use higher tension strings due to my peculiar nail shapes on my right hand which make it very easy for my nails to catch the strings. I find that higher tension strings help me to keep this under control, so purely a personal choice to suit my own nails. A set of normal tension D'Addario Pro Arte EJ45s are probably the best starting point and perfect for beginners. Start with a set of EJ45s and then later move on experiment with different tensions and different brands/types of string until you find a particular type or tension that works best for your guitar, your nails or your technique.

iv) Tuner & Metronome

Two indispensable tools as a beginner are a good electronic tuner to keep your guitar in tune and a good metronome to keep yourself in time. There are many types of tuner on the market. You can go for a simple digital tuner which picks up the sound of the guitar through a small internal microphone and uses a simple digital display to indicate whether a string is sharp or flat. An example of this type of tuner would be a Quik Tune QT11 tuner. One step up from these would be the slightly more sophisticated chromatic tuners with an analogue dial and options for alternative tunings, such as the Boss TU12 tuner. A great alternative for tuning in noisy environments and at gigs is a clip on tuner like the Intellitouch tuners that clip on to the guitar (or the guitar rest) and pick up the sound through the vibrations of the guitar, I tend to use one of these during noisy background performances. It also has the advantage of being a very discreet tuner to use while performing since you can just leave it clipped to the guitar/rest throughout any gig.



Intellitouch Clip-on Tuner



Wittner Taktell Super Mini Metronome

As for metronomes, these are great tools for helping you to develop a sense of rhythm and build speed and accuracy. There are two types of metronome, the first being the more basic, portable electronic metronomes which produce a beep and a flash of light from an LED on every beat. These are fine, but a better option is a pendulum metronome like the one pictured above. The benefit of these is that you can see the pendulum moving which gives you a better feel for the timing and the rhythm between each beat, making it much more predictable and easy to use than electronic metronomes. Wittner are by far and away the most widely used brand of pendulum metronome. I particularly like the Wittner Taktell range which includes the Piccolo, Piccolino and Super Mini metronomes, which have the advantage of being pendulum metronomes that are portable enough to fit into gig bags, as opposed to the more traditional iconic large pyramid shaped pendulum metronomes you might have seen before. Finally, you can also use a metronome app on a smart phone, or use Google to find free online metronomes including virtual pendulum style metronomes.

v) Nail Shapes, Files & Buffers

The right hand nails are incredibly important to the sound of a modern classical guitarist. It's the use of nails that allows a guitarist to project effectively and it's the varying combination of flesh tone and nail tone when playing that gives rise to the variation in tone colour and dynamics that brings a piece of music to life. Scott Tennant provides a great reference for nail shapes in his technique handbook 'Pumping Nylon' which is mentioned in the next section. Basically, it is necessary to first shape the nails of the right hand using a coarse nail file, and then use a finer graded file to smooth out the nails, followed by a buffer in order to really give a glass-like smoothness to the nails. At the end of the process you should be left with a set of nails that allow you to play through the strings smoothly and effortlessly.



Oasis OH-19 Nail Shaper for Guitarists



Scott Tennant's suggested 'Ramped' Nail Shape

To achieve this goal there are all sorts of options, the Oasis OH-19 Nail Shaper has four different grades in one file and is designed specifically for classical guitarists. Alternatively you can buy separate shaper and buffer files, each with different grades. Some guitarists also opt to use fine grades of sand paper wrapped over a small block, which has the advantage of only having to replace sandpaper rather than continually buying new files. The best idea is to pop in to a shop like Boots or The Body Shop and pick up a bunch of different types of nail files and buffers, experiment to see which types suit you best. You might find that some thinner types of file can slip off the nail when filing, or that some of the more coarse grade shapers wear out quicker than others. Maybe some buffers give a better finish than others. Generally the all-in-one Oasis style files are the most convenient and a good starting point, I tend to stick to this type file for convenience, although for the initial coarse shaping stage I prefer to use a Boots metal nail file, which tends to be very durable.

In terms of nail shape, the idea is to make a surface that allows the string to pass over the nail as smoothly as possible. Generally, the more nail that the string moves over, the better the quality of sound. Scott Tennant suggests creating ramps (see photos above) that allow the string to pass over the whole length of the nail. The combination of nail tone and flesh tone is vitally important, and you can see from the side view (photo above) that the nail is not too long. If I was to hold a file against the tip of the nail and the fingertip, the file should be at 90° to my finger, whereas the file will be angled forward or backward for nails that are too long or short (leading to an overly tame fleshy tone or an overly bright nail-heavy tone).

vi) Instructional Books, Sight Reading material & Studies

Here's a short selection of books that should cover everyone from younger beginners to adult learners, from those who just want to improve their repertoire to players who are looking to improve their sight reading ability and also intermediate players looking to develop their technical ability.

Title	Author	Publisher
Solo Guitar Playing Vol. 1 & 2*	Frederick M. Noad	Music Sales Ltd
The Guitarist's Way Book 1-4*	Peter Nuttall & John Whitworth	Holley Music
Guitar Exam Pieces Initial-Grade 8*	Trinity Guildhall	Trinity College London
Guitar Scales & Exercises Initial-Grade 8	Trinity Guildhall	Trinity College London
Sound at Sight Book 1 & 2*	Lee Solloroy	Faber Music
Sight Reading for the Classical Guitar Levels (I-III) & (IV-V)*	Robert Benedict	Alfred Publishing Co.
Pumping Nylon: A Classical Guitarist's Technique Handbook	Scott Tennant	Alfred publishing Co.
Fernando Sor: The Complete Lesson, Studies and Exercises	Fernando Sor edited by Brian Jeffrey	Tecla Editions
25 Etudes Op.60	Matteo Carcassi edited by Brian Jeffrey	Tecla Editions

*denotes a set of books rather than an individual volume, e.g. one book per grade for Guitar Exam Pieces

The Frederick Noad tutor books are a little old fashioned but great for adult learners, starting right from the basics and developing all the way through to playing some really advanced pieces from the standard classical guitar repertoire. This is the book that used myself when learning to play. Newer editions come with a CD so you can get a better idea of how to play some of the pieces and exercises. The Guitarist's Way books are great for children. They take their time to cover the fundamentals in a very progressive manner. The Trinity Guildhall grading books provide a great selection of pieces along with all of the scales and arpeggios that will allow the guitarist to develop musically and technically. The two Sound at Sight books are a great sight reading resource, even better are the Robert Benedict books which give lots of pointers along the way and also introduce the concepts of phrasing and dynamics very methodically and at the earliest stages of learning to read.

The final three books in the list are for more advanced students but are invaluable resources. Pumping Nylon is a one of a kind technical workbook with an array of exercises for the development of both the left and right hands, synchronisation and scale velocity to name but a few. The Sor book contains mainly intermediate to advanced level studies but also has material for beginners and is a must have for guitarists. Finally, the Carcassi Etudes are a great set of studies for any intermediate to advanced level guitarists. These are just some of my suggestions to get you started, there's plenty of guitar music out there to tackle.

vii) Capos (Cejillas) and Peg Winders

A couple of handy extras to consider for the guitarist are Capos and Peg Winders. Capos are pretty much vital for anyone wanting to study flamenco, but slightly less important when studying classical guitar. In flamenco music it is very common to have a capo placed at the second or third fret when performing a Soleares or a Bulerias, for example. Classical guitarists tend to use capos less frequently but they can be handy to change the key of a piece of music due to personal taste or as a result of needing to perform in the same key as other instruments in an ensemble situation.



Planet Waves Guitar Peg Winder



Shubb Classical Guitar Capo

Acoustic guitar capos have a slight curve to them as the fret board of acoustic guitars tends to be thinner with a slight arc. The fret board on a classical guitar is wider and completely flat. This means that it is very important to get the correct type of capo with a completely flat edge in order to correctly put pressure across all six strings. Shubb Classical Guitar Capos are a great first choice. I have not personally used the Planet Waves NS Capo but it also looks like a good option. Both the Shubb and Planet Waves NS capos have the advantage of a very minimal, unobtrusive locking mechanism, which is great as it reduces the chance of the capo interfering with the left hand thumb while playing. Another new development worth having a look at is something called the Spider Capo, which allows you to pick and choose exactly which strings are fretted by the capo, which works like having six mini capos, one for each string as opposed to just putting a solid block across all six strings. This can be used to create some interesting tunings for the guitar, and might be useful when transcribing pieces from another instrument to avoid awkward fingerings. A Cejilla is a more traditional flamenco style capo, often made from a small ornate block of wood held to the fret board with part of a nylon treble string which fastens with the use of a wooden peg at the front of the capo, gripping the neck of the guitar with a leather strap. These are the least invasive in terms of the left hand thumb but not the most reliable in terms of wear and tear.

Peg winders are great little time savers which allow you to change strings much quicker and with less effort, they are particularly useful if you find yourself in the nightmare position of needing to change strings close to or even during a performance.

iix) Amplification, Pickups & Microphones

As a performing guitarist you'll often be in a situation where you will need to be amplified. This is most important during background performances where you need to cut through a lot of noise. In recital halls or church halls you'll probably find you can get away with playing unamplified as long as your technique and your guitar itself allows you to project well. Before touching on the different types of amplifiers, it's important to first consider how to capture the sound of the guitar. A microphone will give the most natural sound as it captures the sound from just in front of the guitar. A good choice for an instrument microphone would be a small pencil-like condenser microphone like the Shure SM57, the SE1a or the Rode NT5. These are three of the less expensive entry level microphones on the market. Generally speaking, the more you spend the better the sound quality. Always test microphones before buying though to see which best suits you and your instrument.



Rode NT5 Condenser Microphone



John Pearse Transducer Pickup

You might need to buy a pre-amplifier if your amplifier itself doesn't already have one built in. A pre-amp allows you to boost the signal from the microphone ready to be passed to the amplifier. ART produce a good range of transparent low noise pre-amps that are very robust and affordable such as the ART USB Dual Pre. Transparent here means that the sound of the guitar as captured by the microphone emerges un-altered from the pre-amp. The condenser microphones also require 48V phantom power which is provided via the microphone XLR lead either from the amplifier, the pre-amp or from a separate phantom power unit (ART also produce these). Many amplifiers have built in phantom power switches and most pre-amps should provide phantom power.

Another option for capturing the sound of the guitar is a pickup. Traditional acoustic guitar pickups do not work on the nylon strings of a classical guitar, but you can buy what's known as a transducer pickup. These pick up the sound through the vibrations of the body of the guitar and can either be stuck temporarily or semi-permanently to the body of the guitar or you can get more sophisticated bridge replacement kits. An affordable brand is the John Pearse pickup, originally designed for folk instruments like the mandolin, which produces a nice high output and can be temporarily tacked to the guitar, leaving no marks. A slightly more high-end option would be a transducer by Fishman or Shadow, which are tailored

more specifically to the guitar. A pre-amp by Fishman would be a good pairing with a transducer pickup. These pickups are particularly useful in noisy background gigs or outdoor gigs where the microphone may pick up excessive noise. Other options include having pickups or microphones built into the guitar or purchasing an electro-acoustic guitar which has everything built-in (including a pre-amp), allowing you to simply plug the guitar into an amplifier like an electric guitar.



Roland AC-60 Acoustic Amplifier



MiniPro 250 Flat Panel Amplification System

As for amplifiers, Roland do a decent range of acoustic amplifiers in the form of the Roland AC-60 and the smaller Roland AC-33 (which can be battery powered, perfect for summer busking). Carlsbro produce a range of more hefty acoustic amplifiers which are at the upper end of what I'd be willing to haul in and out of gigs in terms of weight and size. A portable PA system would be another good option, with speakers mounted up on high stands. This allows the sound of the guitar to cut through, or more correctly, project above background noise. Ground based amplifiers often do not project very well at busy, noisy events. Another option, and my amplifier of choice at the moment, is the MiniPro250 produced by Sound Leisure. This is a flat panel amplifier/speaker which can be mounted low to the floor or on optional high stands and you can buy a second slave speaker to turn it into a PA system. The flat panel speakers mean that the sound is projected very evenly across a room, rather than conventional speakers that project very directionally and it is also very portable and is well priced compared to similar systems. As with the microphones and pickups, you can spend more money to get better sound quality, but these are the some of the more affordable options that I have personally looked at and used.

So that's about it for this little synopsis of classical guitar paraphernalia, I hope you found it useful. Choosing the right guitar and accessories/equipment eventually all comes down to personal taste, be sure to shop around and find a guitar in your price range that suits you personally, pick strings that you feel comfortable playing with and when it comes to microphones and amplifiers, test out as many as possible within your budget until you find a setup that best reproduces and colours your sound.