

# 1 ABOUT THE CLASSICAL GUITAR

## Introduction

*This course is designed to teach you the first important steps of playing the classical (or Spanish) Guitar. It is the equivalent of about 6 lessons and should provide you with sufficient material for many hours of practice in between.*

*There are audio tracks that accompany this text, and you will be instructed when to play the track, and what to do. These may be supplied on disk, or available on line, depending on how you are accessing the materials.*

*In order to learn, you must practice, and the more you practice the quicker you will learn, as long as you are doing it correctly! Listening is important, but no amount of listening will compensate for lack of practice. Small amounts of regular practicing (ie every day) are better than several hours once a week.*

*The basic principles learnt in the first lesson or two of 'Play Classical Guitar' are very important, and affect the way you play hereafter. Although the word "basic" has connotations of "easy" this is not really the case. Basic means "fundamental" and although it's not that difficult it must be learnt and practiced in a methodical manner.*

## Right and Left Handedness

This book follows the presumption that the reader and players are right handed. If you are left handed, sorry but you are probably used to the discrimination by now and please reverse the instructions accordingly! If you are a total beginner and are not sure (many children are wrongly assumed to be left handed, but they are just checking out what feels most comfortable to them) then assume a right handed position first, and if after a few weeks you still feel strange, then you could really be left handed. If you are a left handed writer, play football with the left foot etc then there is a good chance you are left handed!

## The Method

The Classical/Spanish guitar style involves using the right-hand fingers plucking the strings, rather than strumming. The method used to teach the classical guitar therefore involves concentrating on the RIGHT HAND fingers (at the beginning) rather than the left. That is, the playing/plucking/strumming fingers rather than the fretting fingers. (If you are left handed, please remember to reverse the instructions when referring to hands.) This is because the right hand is used to produce the sound, and is actually the more difficult to control.

You will soon grasp the technique and progress on to the left, or fingering, hand. It is best to learn one thing at a time, and so that is why we present the material in this way. When you come to play some exercises, however, combining both hands, some errors are bound to creep in. That is why it is always best to revise as many of the exercises as you can every day. Sometimes your left hand and will improve quicker than the right, or vice versa, and that is natural.

If you want to learn the Classical guitar, you must learn to read music. It is not that difficult, if you start at the beginning and learn it through the instrument. It will help you teach yourself, and open up horizons in all fields of music, not just classical. If you have already started to play the guitar, but can't read music, and you want to learn the classical/finger style then you have a certain advantage, but must develop the discipline to go back to the beginning and start again to learn the right hand technique.

How long does it take to master it? How long should you spend studying music? These are commonly asked questions with no real answers. There is no end point – we are all students, no matter how adept we are. The important thing is to feel that you are progressing, and trying to learn something new every day, no matter how little. Playing the guitar is a physical activity too, so progress will be determined not only by musical talent, but the facility of your fingers! You set your own goals, and enjoying what you do will help you attain them.

Before we start in earnest, here is clarification of a commonly (mis) used word, - 'classical':

### **What exactly does the word 'Classical' mean?**

"Classical" can mean three things - referring to the style of playing the guitar, the guitar itself, or the music played.

1. **Classical Guitar** – This is sometimes also called the Spanish guitar, though they are not necessarily the same thing. The classical guitar has a wider neck than, say, an electric or folk guitar, and should have nylon strings. . A Spanish guitar may actually be a flamenco guitar, which is slightly smaller, lighter, and with a percussive sound. The bridge and headstock are different too. Nowadays, classical guitars look fairly uniform, with a front made of either spruce or cedar wood, a rosette round the sound hole, and string length of approximately 65cm.
2. **Classical-style playing** - means playing with the fingers of the right hand, ie plucking as against strumming. This is called the technique of classical guitar. Technique is a word used to describe the way the fingers work, or the nuts and bolts, of playing. The left hand is also disciplined to operate in a particular way, for maximum efficiency. What it amounts to is that you can play tunes and accompaniments, or melody and harmony, at the same time. Finger style playing may not be exactly the same. For example a rock or folk musician may use their fingers to pluck the strings, but not in the same fashion as a classically trained musician.
3. **Classical Music** - is a term often used to describe all music (aside from pop) that is played on the classical guitar. In other words, its a style of music rather than an era of music. So, to the average listener Stanley Myers "Cavatina" (sometimes called the Deerhunter theme) which was written quite recently, is grouped together with "Greensleeves" which is very old. Bach would be lumped together with Debussy, in this generic bag. However, strictly speaking, classical music refers to the period 1780-1830 approximately, and would include the works of Beethoven, Haydn, and Mozart and others of that time. Bach, who died in 1750, is a Baroque composer, rather than a classical one.

So you can see the problems with definitions. However, if we had to stick to one definition, and we couldn't use classical in its wider sense, then what could we use?

### **What sort of guitar should I learn on?**

You can learn this style of playing on any sort of guitar, though it is much easier on a nylon strung classical guitar. You can start off on a steel-strung guitar (acoustic or electric) and progress on to a classical guitar. However, you will have problems holding the instrument, and it will not give you as full a tone when played with the fingers as a nylon strung guitar.

Using the correct strings for your instrument, and the way that your guitar is 'set up', is very important to ensure ease of playing. If in doubt consult your local dealer, or a knowledgeable friend, and this will save you many heartaches, and sore fingers! The reason why most people give up is having the wrong equipment for the job, and not asking for assistance at the right time.



Classical/Spanish guitars are made to exacting standards. The more expensive the instrument, the more the 'hand made' it will be. The main differences will be in the quality of the wood especially that used for the soundboard, which is either cedar or spruce. Good wood has to mature before a luthier can use it, and it's becoming harder to find in recent years. The quality and finish of the other components like frets, machine heads, saddles etc will also determine the price, and the ease of playing.

Correctly fitted nylon strings on the appropriate guitar are the requirements to proceeding rapidly with the classical guitar method. Again, take your guitar into a shop to make sure the strings match the guitar, or if you are not sure how to fit them correctly.

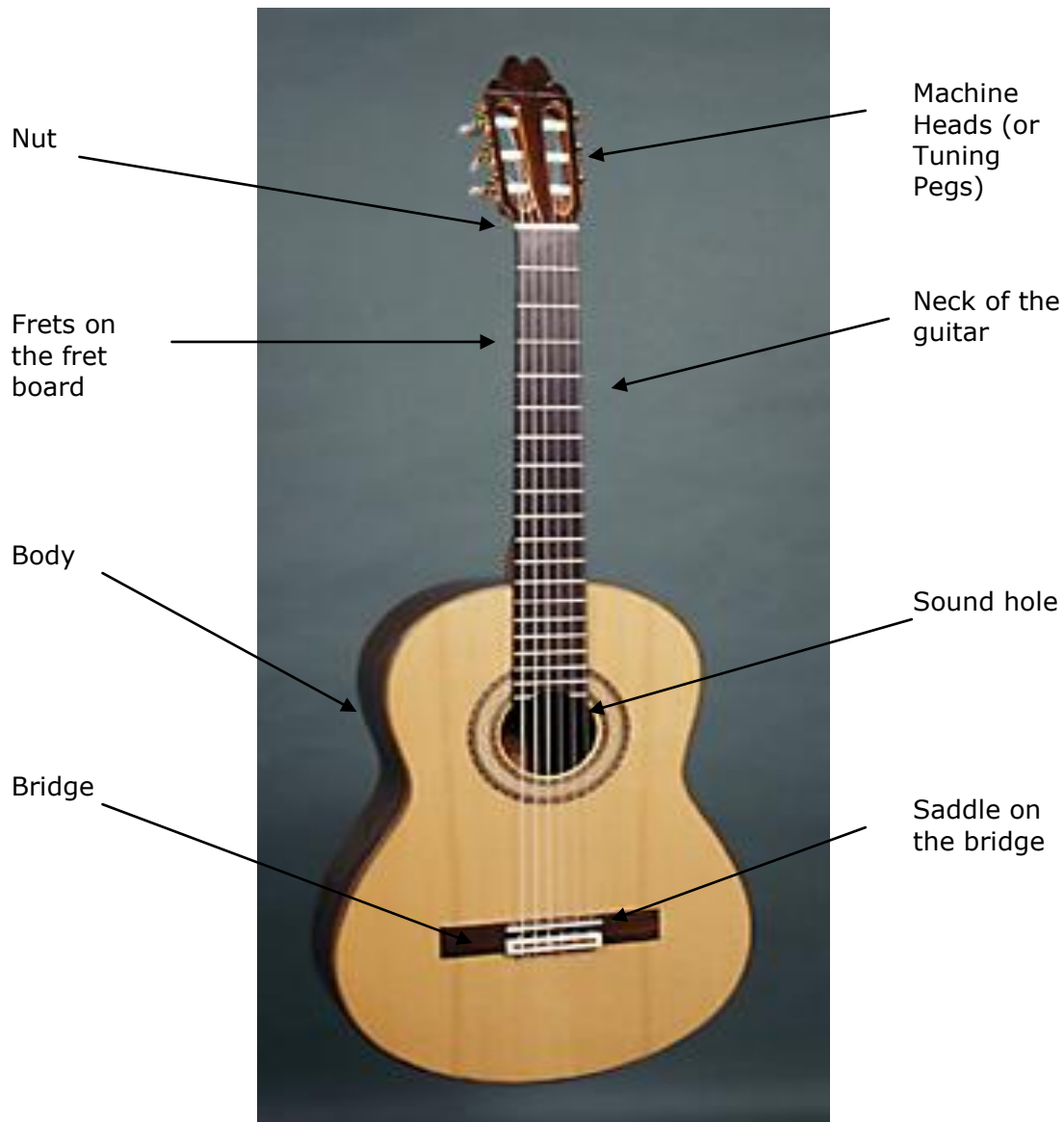
By the way, the three thickest strings (called the 'basses') are actually wound with thin steel, and it's only the thinnest three (called the 'trebles') that are all nylon!

If you are a beginner, your fingers will hurt a little at first, but you will get over that. If the "action" on your guitar is too high – that is the distance the strings are off the fret board – your fingers will get very sore, and your progress be impaired. Take your guitar to a shop or technician for checking. However, there will always be some soreness in the early stages until the tips of your fretting hand develop a 'pad'.

## The Classical (Spanish) Guitar

Most modern Spanish or Classical guitars have 19 frets, and the 12th fret is located where the neck and the body of the guitar meet.

The string length of the guitar is usually around 65 or 66 cms and strings are made from fine wire filaments wrapped around a central core. The treble strings are usually solid nylon.



## About the Spanish Guitar

The Spanish or classical guitar has evolved over the centuries, and the current shape arrived at some point in the mid 19th century. It is believed that the history of the guitar began in the ancient Near East (Babylonia). In Egypt and Rome, instruments had features that could be the predecessor of the guitar. The Guitarra Morisca was brought

by the Moors in their conquest of Spain. However, the Guitarra Latina is thought to be the type that undoubtedly developed into the modern guitar.

In the Middle Ages, the co-existence of three, four and five string guitars was noted. By the fifteenth century, the four-double strings instrument excelled in popularity. In the sixteenth century, it in turn was gradually replaced by the five double string guitar. Sixteenth century guitars are described as vihuela from the time of Luis Milan, Rizzio guitar from France, chitarra battente from Italia, and some are still in existence. Composers for these instruments wrote mostly in tablature notation. Italy was the capital of the guitar world of 17th century.

In France, the guitar became the instrument of the nobility but the Spanish school of guitar making did not begin to flourish until the end of the eighteenth century. Italians composers wrote a substantial number of works and, like the guitarists and even guitar makers, travelled widely.

The most important factor in the development of the guitar was the addition of the sixth string during the middle of the eighteenth century.

During the 19th century, changes in social conditions and improved means of transportation contributed to a growing knowledge of the guitar and enabled performers to travel widely.

Guitar music flourished in nineteenth century Spain and the modern guitar owes much to Torres who developed the basic form of the guitar in which it is now known. Virtuoso guitarists like Francisco Tarrega in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Andres Segovia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century helped shape the technology as far as construction of the sound boards, and types of woods used, as well as inspire composers the world over to create the repertoire for the instrument that we know today.

## **The Nails**

In Classical guitar playing the nails are used to produce the range of sounds and tones that the music requires: from firm and loud, to delicate and soft. The guitar is an expressive but quiet instrument, and to achieve definition and projection, you need nails that are the right length, and shape.

Remember that the quality of the sound you produce will depend as much on your nails as it does on your strings, and even the guitar! As you know, nails are prone to breaking, and some people even bite them! Good nails take looking after. It is an eternal problem for the Classical Guitarist: how to live a normal life and maintain a good nail, without them breaking or catching. Some guitarists even resort to glue or other artificial assistance from varnishes, but in the end, the best sound and hardest nails are natural and depend on general good health. Always carry a nail file with you, to make repairs, and if you do break one, then you have to try and work around it for awhile.

The nails of the right hand should be not too long and not too short! Too long and they break, too short and they can't produce a tone. Good tone production will depend on the nails on your right hand being carefully smoothed and shaped. Everyone's hands and nails are different, and you must experiment to find the best nail length for you.



Nail length and shape is important. Everyone's fingers and nails are a different shape and thickness, with varying degrees of strength and flexibility etc. You should have your nails

Smooth with no catches or rough edges and shaped so a half-moon shape is just visible if you hold your finger up, with your nails away from you.



The exception to the rule is young children, (up to 10 or so) whose nails are usually very soft and pliable. It is often better that they learn to play without nails, and then over time, as they develop their skills, they appreciate the difference that nails could make.

It's not absolute length that counts, but the profile of the nail over the tip of the finger. Good tone depends on a combination of the fleshy part of the tip of the finger *and* the nail – too much of one and the sound will suffer. If your nails are too long they will probably break. Too short and you won't get a good sound.)

Remember that nails on the left (or fretting hand) are to be kept as short as possible.

There is more information on nails in the Appendix.

*Tip: If you have weak nails, try and eat a cube of Jelly every day. Keep a nail file handy and smooth out any irregular surfaces or edges that could catch. If you do break a nail, file it down to a convenient size and shape, and then practice with the other fingers more, to allow the nail to grow back.*

## End of Section One

Hopefully your appetite has been whetted!

### **So far you have learnt:**

- **About the method and what you will be doing in this course**
- **A little about the background to the classical guitar**
- **The main parts of the guitar and how they are built**
- **A little on the sorts of strings that are used**
- **The word 'Classical' and what it actually means**
- **Why nails are important and how you shape them**