

# Chapter 1

## An Acoustic Guitar in a League of Its Own

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Defining the term *classical guitar*
  - ▶ Surveying the classical guitar's history in music
  - ▶ Breaking down the classical guitar's parts
  - ▶ Noting the differences between a classical guitar and other guitar types
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**I**n the right hands, the classical guitar can produce some of the most beautiful sounds in all of music. With it, a skilled performer can create miniature moments of intimate tenderness or stirring sagas of grandeur and passion. One reason the classical guitar is capable of such wide-ranging textures and emotions is that it's one of the few stringed instruments that can play chords and single notes with equal ease. And many people credit its special emotive powers to the fact that the performer uses both hands to touch the strings directly to make a sound, allowing him to coax out the softest melody or to vigorously ring out triumphant, full-voiced chords. The tonal variations you can achieve on a guitar played in the classical way rival the colors of the entire symphony orchestra. Even the great Beethoven agreed, calling the guitar "a miniature orchestra in itself."

In this chapter, we start off with the very basics, explaining the two different connotations associated with classical guitar to give you a solid understanding of what you're reading about in the first place. (Many people may not realize that simply playing a classical piece on a guitar doesn't necessarily qualify as classical guitar!) We then conduct a side-by-side comparison of the classical guitar and its traditional acoustic counterpart, exploring their differences in physique as well as in technique and musical requirements. Finally, we expound on the allure of this lesser-known stringed instrument to whet your appetite for what's in store.

## *Classical Guitar: One Term, Two Meanings, and a Bit of History*

The first thing you have to sort out is just what's meant by the term *classical guitar*. It can describe both a type of instrument and a style of music played on that instrument. When referring to the instrument itself, you're talking about a guitar that has a particular design and construction, is made of certain materials, and requires playing techniques that are unique to this type of guitar, as compared to other guitars. To mine the depths of all the tonal and textural richness that await you in the world of classical guitar music, you must employ those specific right- and left-hand techniques, which together comprise the *classical guitar style*.

In this book we focus exclusively on the techniques that get you playing the classical guitar style — using a nylon-string classical guitar and stroking the strings with your right-hand fingers. Doing this empowers you to play the music written by the great classical composers throughout history and follow in the footsteps of concert-level virtuosos who for centuries have brought this music to guitar-loving listeners in the same way Vladimir Horowitz did with the piano and Itzhak Perlman did with the violin. The guitar has its own Perlmans and Horowitzes, and you can read about them in Chapter 17.

The guitar as we know it is a relatively young instrument, having evolved to its present form in the 19th century. As such, it doesn't have the rich body of music available for it that, say, the violin does, which has been around for more than 500 years. But the classical guitar has been, how shall we say, *industrious* in the way it has “borrowed” music from other instruments to claim as its own. As a result, studying classical guitar means that in addition to playing music written for the guitar, you play a lot of music that wasn't written for the guitar in the first place, nor written by a composer who would recognize the instrument you hold in your hands. But that's just part of the adventure of being a guitarist; you have to be somewhat of a pioneer with your instrument.

Nevertheless, nowadays composers write for the instrument all the time, ensuring its continued place in the field of serious musical instrument study. Many guitarists, associations, and organizations commission well-known composers to write compositions for the guitar in the same way that wealthy benefactors commissioned Beethoven and Mozart to write symphonies and sonatas.



Some well-known composers from the 20th century who've written for the guitar include Heitor Villa-Lobos, Luciano Berio, Benjamin Britten, Elliott Carter, Peter Maxwell Davies, William Walton, Alberto Ginestera, Ástor Piazzolla, and Leo Brouwer. If you think of the classical guitar as playing just the work of the great masters or having an undeniably "Spanish sound," check out what modern musical thinkers are cooking up for the classical guitar all the time.

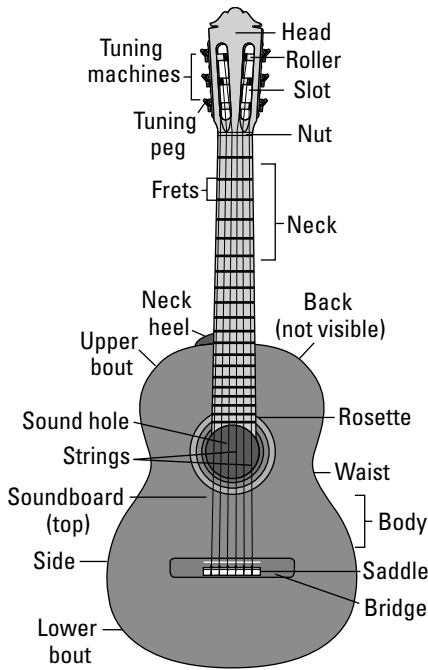
After taking a while to come into its own historically, the classical guitar is now a permanent member of the classical music community. Classical guitar is taught in universities and conservatories, it's a frequent program entry for concert and recital halls, and it's found readily in new recordings by major classical music record companies. As far as music for the guitar goes, however, it's definitely in the minority, at least in terms of music that gets heard by the public at large — with rock and pop being the major players in this arena.

## What a Classical Guitar Looks Like

Viewed from the front, or facing the instrument in its standing up position, the classical guitar body has an upper section, or *bulge*, where the wood curves outward; a lower section; and an inward curve in the middle separating the upper and lower parts.

The purpose of the guitar's body is to amplify the sound that the vibrating strings make. So the guitar's back and sides are made of stiff, hard wood that reflects, or bounces, the sound off its surface and through the top of the guitar and the sound hole. The traditional wood for the back and sides is rosewood, though lower-priced guitars sometimes use mahogany or maple. For the top, a different wood from the back and sides is used because the top's function is to vibrate freely with the notes that the plucked strings produce. So the wood for the top is softer and more resonant — spruce and cedar are the two most common top woods.

They say a picture's worth a thousand words, so we present a picture of a classical guitar, which allows us to use a lot fewer words than a thousand to describe its various parts and functions. Figure 1-1 shows an illustration of a classical guitar with its main parts labeled. The bulleted list after Figure 1-1 is a corresponding list of those labeled parts with their definitions and brief descriptions of their functions.



**Figure 1-1:**  
A typical  
classical  
guitar with  
its parts  
labeled.

Here's a list of the classical guitar's parts:

- ✔ **Back:** The flat part of the guitar *body*, parallel to and opposite the *soundboard*, closest to the performer.
- ✔ **Body:** The “box” or sound chamber of the guitar, which acts as a resonator or amplifier for the vibrating *strings*. The body is also what gives the guitar its particular — and beautiful — tone.
- ✔ **Bridge:** A thin, rectangular piece of flat wood that's glued to the top of the guitar and secures the strings at the body. The bridge transfers the sound from the vibrating strings to the guitar's body. Sitting in a slot of the bridge is the *saddle*.
- ✔ **Fingerboard:** Also called the *fretboard*, this is a thin, flat plank of wood glued to the neck and divided into frets. The fingerboard is usually made of ebony, a dense, dark, and hard wood that provides a smooth feel underneath the left-hand fingers as they move up and down and across the neck. Some fingerboards are made of rosewood.
- ✔ **Frets:** Thin metal wires on the fingerboard that run perpendicular to the strings. Pressing down a finger behind one of these shortens the vibrating length of the string, changing its pitch. **Note:** When used in left-hand fingering discussions, *fret* refers to the space below the actual fret wire.

- ✔ **Head or headstock:** The slotted section at the top of the neck beyond the *nut* that holds the *tuning machines*, where the strings fasten.
- ✔ **Lower bout:** The large, outwardly curved section of the body that surrounds the bridge.
- ✔ **Neck:** The long, semicircular piece of wood jutting out from the body, with a *head* on one end and strings stretching the full length and beyond. Usually made of mahogany, maple, or other hard woods, the neck's light weight and grain strength enable it to hold its shape while under the considerable tension produced by the taut strings drawn up to pitch.
- ✔ **Neck heel, heel:** The outward-sticking part of the neck that joins the neck to the sides and back of the body.
- ✔ **Nut:** A synthetic (formerly ivory or bone) strip of material that sits between the fingerboard and the headstock. Grooves cut into the nut hold the strings in place as they pass through the nut on their way to the tuning machines.
- ✔ **Rollers:** The white plastic cylinders inside the slots in the head that go perpendicular to the strings and that create a spool for the strings to wrap around as they're wound up or down to pitch. The rollers rotate by means of the *tuning pegs*.
- ✔ **Rosette:** The decorative ring around the *sound hole*, usually made of *marquetry* — inlaid bits of colored wood and other materials (such as mother-of-pearl) arranged in a mosaic-like pattern.
- ✔ **Saddle:** A synthetic (formerly ivory or bone) strip of material that sits in a slot in the bridge. The strings rest on top of the saddle, pressing down on it before passing through the bridge holes, where they're tied off (or otherwise anchored).
- ✔ **Sides:** The narrow, curved wooden pieces between the top and back of the guitar. The sides are made of the same wood as the back and serve to hold together the top and back and to help reflect sound out of the body and through the top.
- ✔ **Slots:** On a classical guitar, the long, oval-shaped holes in the head that expose the rollers and allow the strings to pass through the surface of the head to reach the rollers.
- ✔ **Sound hole:** The circular opening in the soundboard, directly underneath the strings in the upper bout. The sound hole helps to project the sound, but it isn't the exclusive source of sound emanating from the guitar.
- ✔ **Soundboard or Top:** Also referred to as the *table*, the top is the flat, lighter-colored wood on the body that faces the listener. Its function isn't to remain rigid and reflect sound but to resonate (vibrate) with the strings, amplifying them and projecting the sound in the process.

- ✓ **Strings:** The strings are what the guitarist touches (fretting with the left hand, plucking with the right) to make sound. The six strings travel the length of the neck from the head, where they're wrapped around the tuning machines' rollers to beyond the fingerboard, where they're tied off at the bridge. The top three, or treble, strings are solid nylon. The bottom three, or bass, strings have a nylon core and are surrounded by a metal wrap. (All six strings are referred to as nylon strings, even though the bottom three have an outward metal material.) Strings are available at different prices (usually determined by quality) and are categorized by the degree of tension (such as high and medium).
- ✓ **Tuning machines:** The metal hardware system of gears, shafts, and *tuning pegs* used to wind the strings to different tensions to get them in tune.
- ✓ **Tuning pegs:** The *handles* or *buttons* of the tuning machines that guitarists grip with their fingers to allow them to tune the strings by tightening or loosening them.
- ✓ **Upper bout:** The large, outwardly curved section of the body that surrounds the sound hole and the upper frets of the fingerboard.
- ✓ **Waist:** The narrow, inwardly curved part of the body between the upper bout and the lower bout.

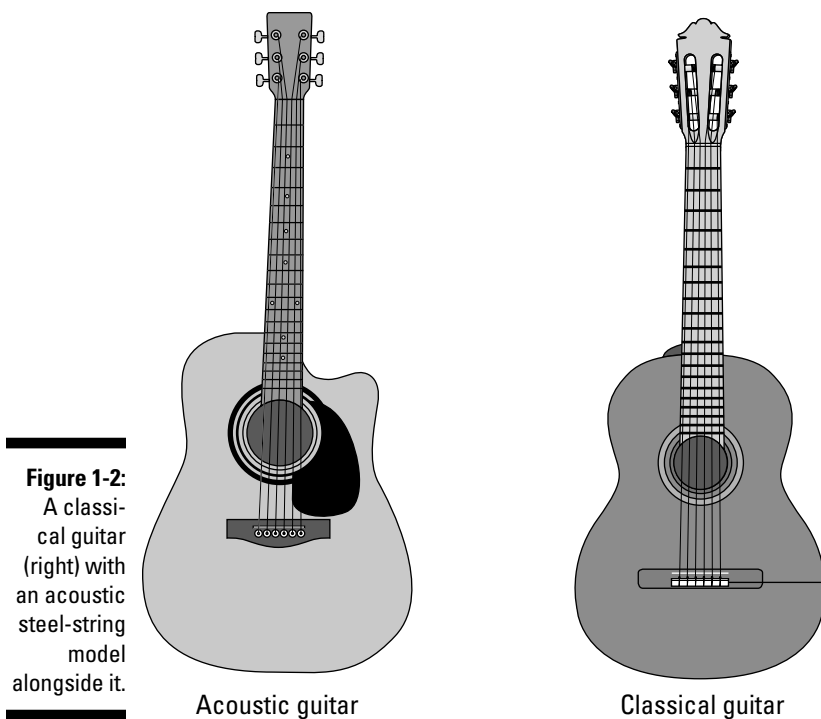
## How a Classical Guitar Is Physically Different from Its Peers

A classical guitar is like every other guitar in overall physique. And like other types of acoustic guitars, the classical guitar produces its sound, well, *acoustically* — that is, without the aid of amplification — unlike the Stratocaster of Jimi Hendrix, which must be played through a guitar amplifier (though it is possible to amplify the acoustic sound of a classical guitar with a microphone).



But watch out when you hear the term *acoustic guitar*. A classical guitar produces its sound without amplification, so all classical guitars are in a sense acoustic guitars. But not all acoustics are classical.

Sometimes the best way to know what something is and what makes it special is to know what it isn't. Check out Figure 1-2, which shows a classical guitar alongside a popular traditional acoustic model. Then read through the following list, which sums up some of the major differences between them:



**Figure 1-2:**  
A classical guitar (right) with an acoustic steel-string model alongside it.

✔ **A classical guitar uses nylon strings.** All other acoustics used for unplugged purposes are built for steel strings. And you can't just swap out a set of nylons in your steel string and start playing Bach. The parts that connect the strings to the guitar are built differently, and you'd have a tough time securing a nylon string onto a steel-string guitar. Nylon strings have a gentler sound that suits classical guitar music better than the steel variety.

Some people use the adjective *folk* to mean any unamplified guitar, so it's always a good idea to clarify whether they mean the nylon-string (classical) or steel-string variety — assuming they're aware of the difference. The guitars played by James Taylor, Paul Simon, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Dave Matthews, and Sheryl Crow are all *steel-string acoustics*, though some folk, pop, and jazz musicians do play their brand of music on a classical guitar, including jazz guitarist Earl Klugh and, somewhat improbably, country music legend Willie Nelson.

Though the instrument is officially known as a *classical guitar*, other nicknames have sprung up that have come to refer to the “instrument played by classical guitarists.” Some of these names include *nylon-string guitar*, *Spanish guitar*, and *gut-string guitar*.



- ✔ **A classical guitar has only one body size.** Acoustic guitar bodies vary widely with regard to size and shape, with names like *jumbo*, *dreadnought*, *orchestra model*, and *grand auditorium* to help you keep track of them all. It's much easier with classical guitars — they're all the same size and they all feel exactly alike when you hold them. So anything you learn on one classical guitar will transfer over to any other without a major adjustment.
- ✔ **A classical guitar has no cutaway.** Many acoustic guitars have a scoop on the *treble* (toward the skinny, higher-pitched strings) side of the upper bout that allows upper-fret access for the left hand. On a classical guitar, the body is symmetrical.
- ✔ **A classical guitar neck is wider than the necks on most steel strings and joins the body at the 12th fret.** Steel-string necks are skinnier to facilitate strumming with a pick, and most modern-style steel-string necks join the body at the 14th fret. The wider frets of the classical guitar accommodate playing with the right-hand fingers, and tradition dictates the 12-fret union of neck and body (although some classical guitarists lament the more limited range of a 12-fret neck).
- ✔ **A classical guitar has no pickguard.** A pickguard helps protect the soundboard from the ravages of a pick. But because you don't play classical guitar with a pick, the pickguard is unnecessary and is left off to expose more of the wooden surface. In flamenco guitars, though, a clear protective plate (called a *golpeador*) is added to protect the top from the percussive taps a performer is sometimes required to play as part of the style.
- ✔ **A classical guitar has no fret markers.** Acoustic guitars have inlay patterns both on the fingerboard and on the side of the neck. Sometimes these inlays can be quite elaborate, even gaudy. But classical guitars shun such showy displays and present the fingerboard in its natural, unadorned state. Occasionally, a classical guitar may have a single dot fret marker on the side of the neck.
- ✔ **A classical guitar never has the following images painted or stickered onto its surface:** skulls, lightning bolts, flames, your girlfriend's name, or politically incorrect slogans of any kind.



## Antonio Torres: Inventor of the modern classical guitar

Plucked string instruments have been around since ancient times, but the shape that all modern classical guitar makers follow was established by a *luthier* (the term for guitar maker) named Antonio Torres (1817–1892), who lived in Spain and built guitars in the middle of the 19th century. Up until that time, a classical guitar could be found in a range of sizes, which affected the tuning and your entire approach to playing the instrument. For the guitar to be accepted, it had to be standardized, and Torres did that. In fact, an 1863 Torres-made guitar is almost indistinguishable from ones built today. One of the most important things Torres did was establish the string length at 650 millimeters, which hasn't changed. The string length has

helped to determine other things, like the body proportions, the neck length, and the guitar's overall dimensions. Many bold makers have tried alternate shapes and materials and added strings, but no one has successfully improved on the basic design of Torres's creation.

Modern improvements have been made, of course, especially in the manufacturing process and in some of the materials (such as synthetic substitutes for the bone or ivory nut and saddle, and better alloy chemistries for the metal tuning parts). But the woods and design have remained largely unchanged since Torres codified them back in the mid-1800s.

## *Beyond Physique: Other Unique Attributes of Classical Guitar*

You may find yourself in a position of trying to explain to someone what's different about the classical guitar when compared to other types of guitar music or guitar playing styles. (You may even want to be clear on what you're getting into yourself!) Sure, the most fundamental difference is that classical guitar is acoustic and played on a nylon-string guitar, but you could say that about other styles and other performers. (Willie Nelson is just one famous example of a nonclassical nylon-string guitar player.) So you have to dig deeper into the essence of classical guitar.

In the next section, you explore some of these key differences — in terms of the physical approach to the instrument — between classical guitar and other acoustic guitar styles.

### *Player's form and technique*

Classical guitar requires that you hold the guitar in a certain way and position your hands in ways that are different from those of other styles of music.

Using these positions makes playing pieces easier, especially when you have to play up the neck or play notes with certain right-hand strokes in order to achieve the fuller tone of classical guitar music. The most important factors are how you hold the guitar, how you place your hands in playing position, and how your right-hand fingers pluck the strings.

### ***The way you hold the instrument***

You can hold an acoustic guitar a number of different ways: balanced on your right leg, balanced on your left leg (either between your legs or with your left leg crossed over your right), or dangling from a strap when you're standing up. But the classical guitar is played only in a sitting position, supported by the left leg — either with the left foot elevated or with a special support device (a cushion or frame) between the inner thigh and the guitar's body.

### ***Hand positions***

In other styles, you can position the right hand in a number of ways, and no one will correct you (as long as you sound good and aren't doing anything wrong). But in classical guitar, you must hold your right-hand fingers perpendicular to the strings, without touching any other part of the guitar (the top, the bridge). You must also position the left hand so that the hand knuckles (the ones farthest from the fingertips) are parallel to the strings, not sloped away from the strings at the little finger, which some styles allow. And in classical guitar, the left-hand thumb stays braced at the center of the back of the neck or can move toward the high strings, if necessary. But it should never be seen coming up from the bass-string side of the instrument, as you can do in some fingerpicking styles.

### ***Playing style: No picks allowed***

To produce sounds on the guitar, you pluck the strings with the fingers of the right hand at a position over the sound hole (actually, the ideal position is not directly over the hole, but a little closer to the bridge than the fingerboard). With the left-hand fingers, you change the pitches of the notes by pressing the strings to the fretboard — a process known as *fretting* — which shortens the strings' vibrating length at a particular fret. (Violinists and other bowed string players don't have frets, so they refer to pressing fingers to the fingerboard as *stopping* the string, a term guitarists sometimes use, too.)

Unlike other forms of guitar playing, in classical guitar, you don't use a pick, or plectrum. (If you play with a pick in another guitar life, leave it at the door when you come into the world of classical guitar!) All the sounds produced by the right hand are created by the unadorned fingers, using the tips with a combination of the fleshy pad and a bit of fingernail (except in the rare cases where you strum downward, "brushing" the strings). The fingernail must extend slightly over the fingertip, and the guitarist must therefore maintain

longer nails on the right hand than guitarists who play with a pick, or those who choose to fingerpick with just the flesh of the fingers.



Though classical guitar is played by “picking with the fingers,” the term *fingerpicking* isn’t used, as it sometimes is with other styles. And don’t ever call a serious classical guitarist a “fingerpicker” — unless you want to get a rise out of him!

## *Musical knowledge and skills*

Beyond perfecting the techniques necessary to execute classical music flawlessly (or getting ever nearer to that goal), classical guitarists develop their music-reading skills to cover more repertoire. And having more and more pieces under your belt means you can perform for longer periods of time and with more variety when entertaining listeners. The best classical guitarists are also technically superior to players of lesser abilities (a quality that’s not necessarily true in, say, pop music). The following sections outline why classical guitarists focus on improving their reading, mastering repertoire, and honing their technical skills.

### *The importance of reading music*

You can play many types of music without reading a single note of music. Certainly some of the best rock, blues, and folk players don’t read music well or even at all, and it doesn’t hamper their creative or technical abilities. But classical guitar relies on learning pieces, and the fastest, most efficient way to play through and memorize written music is, obviously, to be able to read music well. That doesn’t mean you have to sight read at a level where you can play the music perfectly and up to tempo the first time, but you should be able to read well enough to get a sense of the piece.

### *The value of mastering repertoire*

If you play the classical guitar, you play *pieces* — classical compositions or arrangements written out from start to finish, with the exact notes you’re to play and often the way to play them (with indications for articulations, dynamics, and expression). You have to know written, composed music from start to finish, and most of the time you have to play it from memory.

### *The focus on technical skill, virtuosity, and musicianship*

Other styles of music may focus on aspects such as the originality of the material or the inspired results of an improvisation. But in classical guitar, the primary focus is on technical mastery of the instrument. You work and work at improving your skill constantly your whole musical life, and your

proWess is measured by how well you play standard pieces of repertoire. Simply put, classical guitarists are measured in the same way athletes are: The best classical guitarists are the most demonstrably technically proficient over their rivals.

One measure of technical proficiency is virtuosity — the ability to play extraordinarily difficult pieces with complete confidence, ease, and mastery. Along with technical prowess comes the not-so-showy quality called musicianship, which is understanding and executing the music with great accuracy, authority, and expression. In this way, the classical guitar has more in common with other classical instruments than it does with other styles of guitar music.

Now, if all this sounds like a lot of rules and that these rules may somehow restrict you in some way, take heart. The opposite is true. You find that the differences between classical technique and other techniques (or no discernible approach to technique at all!) actually enable you to play notes more comfortably, easily, and with greater speed, accuracy, control, and range of expression. It may seem like a lot of do's and don'ts at first, but just as in ballet, architecture, and other art forms, you need to master the basic skills to open up a world of possibilities. To achieve total freedom of expression in playing classical guitar music, you first need to gain total control.