



PHOTOGRAPHY: JOBY SESSIONS

Walden G630CE, Applause Deluxe AE147, Tanglewood TW145-ASC & Freshman FA200CE

£269, £319, £329 & £339

The rivals

WALDEN G630CE
 Crafter GAE12 £299
 Turner 44CE £309
 Dean Exotica BB £369

The Crafter features daowood back and sides and an LR Baggs system with three-band EQ plus mid scoop. Turner's grand auditorium has ovankol back/sides and carries a B-Band A3.2 system. The Dean, with distinctive shark-tooth bridge, opts for bubinga back/sides and a four-band Dean preamp. All are cutaways with solid spruce tops

The China syndrome – at a shop near you! We assess the merits of four affordable electros from that burgeoning giant of the orient by [Jim Chapman](#)

Up until not so many years ago, no self-respecting player would buy an acoustic made in China. The instruments might have been super-cheap, but quality was at best iffy, at worst diabolical. Little wonder that the country's manufacturing niche was restricted to the sub-£100 category. Times change, however, and in the competitive pursuit of lower costs the initial trickle of companies moving production to China from other far east countries – particularly former budget

bastion Korea – has become a flood. Thanks to supervised operations by major brand names, and the factories there generally surmounting a steep learning curve, quality and materials have improved immeasurably, in some cases now rivalling Japanese and American build standards but at significantly friendlier prices.

With Chinese factories today competing strongly across the low-to-mid market, we thought it timely to see how they fare around the popular £300

mark – an outlay where you should expect a decent bang for your buck. Our four cutaway electro-acoustics, covering mainstream body styles, come from brands that are better and lesser known. Applause, the budget arm of the Ovation catalogue, moved production from Korea three or so years ago; Tanglewood began a similar transfer somewhat earlier than that, and today the vast majority of its extensive acoustic catalogue hails from China. Walden, a US-based operation



The Walden has a Taylor-influenced body profile

launched in 2003, chose Chinese sourcing from the word go. Freshman, introduced in 2002, is a brand exclusive to, and developed by, UK distribution company Access All Areas who, likewise, made China its favoured port of call. Sweet or sour? Let's find out...

Walden G630CE

Like many grand auditoriums, this Walden has a Taylor-influenced body profile, though with a flatter Venetian cutaway. The close-grained solid cedar top looks good quality and has dapples of cross-silking, while the outer veneers of the laminated rosewood back and sides are visually well chosen. Cost saving is indicated by the back's four-piece veneer, but cosmetics aren't stinted on and include coachlined multi-ply body binding, an abalone-inlaid soundhole rosette and white fingerboard binding that

Acoustically the TW145-ASC is fine, but Walden's G630CE definitely needs more warmth and presently belies its cedar/rosewood specification

continues around the rosewood-faced headstock. Detailing throughout is very clean, topped by a smooth if slightly dry-feeling satin lacquer which is, as on all Waldens, specified as nitrocellulose.

The Walden's scarf-jointed mahogany neck scores highly for playability. Regular in width with a 'C' profile of moderate depth, it has a snug, easy grip, enhanced by a lowish buzz-free action and the rosewood fingerboard's modest camber. The fretting is well dressed too.

SOUNDS:

Helped no doubt by its capacious soundbox, the G630CE has a buoyant acoustic punch, with a fetching low-end snap and good definition and dynamics. Tonally, however, it lacks much of the warmth and richness we'd expect of a cedar/rosewood instrument, and the bright delivery veers towards a papery texture from the treble strings.

Fishman's dependable four-band Classic 4 system requires tweaking to disguise these traits. Treble and brilliance both need backing off, while bass merits slight boosting to generally round out the sound. All of which would be tickety-boo if it weren't for output imbalances from the under-saddle pickup – namely a heavily dominant bottom E and a slightly weak G and top E. This is a vexingly common problem with piezo-based systems, and though easily rectifiable by a guitar tech, it doesn't do first impressions of the Walden's powered prowess any favours.

Applause Deluxe AE147

The AE147 occupies top slot in Ovation's Applause series, the 'Deluxe' tag denoting Elite-style multi-hole epaulettes rather than a centre soundhole. The raised, wood epaulettes sit on a multi-ply-bound, black-lacquered top of X-braced laminated spruce, with the bridge rear-strung in the usual Ovation manner. The fibreglass bowl is the medium-depth variety – by far the company's most

WALDEN G630CE

PRICE: £269
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Cutaway grand auditorium electro
TOP: Solid cedar
BACK/SIDES: Laminated rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 117mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 400mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 650mm
TUNERS: Gold diecast
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/43mm
FINGERBOARD: White-bound rosewood
FRETS: 20, thin
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood with synthetic saddle/54.5mm
ELECTRICS: Fishman under-saddle pickup; Fishman Classic 4 preamp with volume, bass, middle, treble, brilliance, low-battery LED, clip-out 9V battery holder
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.04/4.5
OPTIONS: Spruce/mahogany G740CE (£299) with solid top and back and Fishman Classic 4
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Satin natural
FCN
01892 603730
www.fcnmusic.co.uk

APPLAUSE DELUXE AE147

PRICE: £319
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Cutaway bowlback electro-acoustic
TOP: Laminated spruce
BACK/SIDES: Fibreglass
MAX BOWL DEPTH: 135mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 401mm
NECK: Nato
SCALE LENGTH: 641mm
TUNERS: Chrome diecast
NUT/WIDTH: Plastic/42mm
FINGERBOARD: White-bound rosewood
FRETS: 23, thin
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood with plastic saddle/53.5mm
ELECTRICS: Ovation Slimline under-saddle pickup; OP4B preamp with gain, bass, middle, treble, battery status LED, quick-release holder for 9V battery
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.16/4.75
OPTIONS: Mid-depth, round-soundhole AE127 with OP4B (£239)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Black (gloss top, satin neck). Natural also available
JHS
0113 286 5381
www.jhs.co.uk



Top: Walden G630CE
Below: Applause Deluxe AE147

The rivals

APPLAUSE DELUXE AE147
Stagg A2006 £143
Kimbara KS750EQCS £199
Tanglewood TM07NC Odyssey £259
The Stagg and Kimbara are Elite-styles with laminated spruce tops, the Stagg adding a figured ash outer veneer. The preamps offer three- and four-band EQ respectively. Tanglewood's Odyssey is a centre-soundhole design with abalone-trimmed flame maple top and three-band EQ. All have shallow-bowls

The rivals

TANGLEWOOD TW145-ASC
Adam Black 07CE £225
Ozark 3389C £275
Fender GDC100SCE £299
The Fender and Ozark sport solid spruce tops, the former using laminated ash back and sides, the latter rosewood-faced plies. Both preamps provide four-band EQ. The Adam Black is maple-bound solid cedar and laminated rosewood and has a Fishman Classic 4

popular option these days – though that still means a pretty portly body, some 135mm deep at the apex of the bowl. Alone among our four instruments the guitar comes with two strap buttons, which is good to find. The intermediate-scale neck – sprayed up in a matching black lacquer – is an ideal strumming companion. It's slim and shallow, allowing slick, compact chord work, made even more effortless by our sample's slinky action. The black vibe is contrasted by white fretboard binding, while the cutaway provides decent access to the full 23-fret range.

SOUNDS: Ovation has made impressive strides in giving its pricier models more versatile sounds in recent years, but we have to say that this Applause harks back to an archetypal bowlback personality. Though well balanced and sustainful, the acoustic texture is on the light side and underlaid with that telltale faintly wiry, metallic edge. Within that caveat, the guitar's OP4B system does a surefooted job. It's a cinch to work with – three centre-notched EQ sliders and a rotary volume – and delivers a healthy dollop of clear-voiced gain, while pickup output was spot-on. The preamp is effective for accentuating or veiling the

WALDEN G630CE	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ WE LIKED Very tidy presentation; impressive neck; good acoustic dynamics</p> <p>■ WE DISLIKED Topy, un-cedar-like tone; badly uneven cross-string pickup output</p>	

APPLAUSE DELUXE	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ WE LIKED Slick, slim neck; simple yet effective preamp; two strap buttons</p> <p>■ WE DISLIKED This is a bowlback that sounds like a bowlback</p>	



The Applause's slim and shallow neck allows for some slick chord work



TANGLEWOOD TW145	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ WE LIKED Smart build with solid top and back; lively acoustic sound for folk</p> <p>■ WE DISLIKED Action on the high side; uneven pickup output</p>	

guitar's unplugged characteristics, though if you prefer to do the latter, some bowlback chiffiness is pretty much ever-present, short of killing the treble band altogether. Very much a horses for courses sound, we feel.

Tanglewood TW145-ASC

A variation on Tanglewood's long-running TW45 cutaway folk electro, the cedar/mahogany TW145 is part of the Sundance Premier Series, the AS in the suffix suggesting all-solid-wood construction. In fact the sides are laminated, but instead of using any old timber for the inner veneers, the factory claims that the rims' three plies are sliced from the same sheet of mahogany. Hence they're derived from solid origins, the laminating being done for reasons of strength.

Treated to a baby-smooth satin lacquering, the guitar has a tasteful, very tidy cosmetic presentation. The body and fingerboard are both bound in maple – which is also used for the neck's heel cap – and the fretboard carries decorative abalone position markers. Unusually on a guitar at this price, the mahogany neck is one-piece (plus heel). The regular-width profile is shallow with smoothly radiused binding, while generous string spacing at the bridge lends picker appeal. Playability was slightly compromised by a high-ish action, but a decent set-up would rectify that.

SOUNDS: There are no complaints with the Tanglewood acoustically. The

The Tanglewood has some issues with its plugged-in output balance despite a quality EQ system



guitar's volume and projection are certainly commendable for the medium-size body, and the bright-ish tone is clear, ringing and well articulated, with a pleasant, balancing vein of warmth in the bottom end. Fired up, however, the under-saddle gremlins, as on the Walden, strike again. The top E and B are noticeably stronger in gain, skewing the whole delivery. This is a great shame, because B-Band's A3.2 system – with its all-rotary controls laid out in a five-on-a-dice pattern – is a generally excellent affair. Indeed the system's natural-sounding quality and the smooth versatility of its four-band EQ can still be appreciated, despite the Tanglewood's iffy output balance. Sort that out and the guitar becomes a lot more desirable.

Freshman FA200CE

The basic FA200 is the cheapest solid-top dreadnought available in Freshman's Cedar Creek Series, and our CE version adds a Venetian cutaway and Fishman Classic 4 system. The guitar doesn't set out to be flash, concentrating instead on quality-looking essentials like a richly cross-silked, close-grained Sitka spruce top, sapele-like laminated mahogany back and sides and, as on the Tanglewood, a silky-smooth all-over satin lacquering. The bridge and fingerboard are nice examples of unstained rosewood, the latter's black binding echoing similar edging around the body.

The three-piece scarf-jointed neck, faced with rosewood on the peghead, is of standard width with a shallow, easy-grip, and feels instantly obliging thanks →

TANGLEWOOD TW145-ASC

PRICE: £329

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Cutaway folk electro-acoustic

TOP: Solid cedar

BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany/'bonded' mahogany

MAX RIM DEPTH: 100mm

MAX BODY WIDTH: 376mm

NECK: Mahogany

SCALE LENGTH: 650mm

TUNERS: Chrome diecast Grovers

NUT/WIDTH: Tusq/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple-bound rosewood

FRETS: 20, thin

BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood with Tusq saddle/56mm

ELECTRICS: B-Band under-saddle pickup; B-Band A3.2 preamp with rotary volume, bass, mid, treble, presence and low-battery LED. Separate quick-release holder for 9V battery

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.0/4.4

OPTIONS: Solid cedar/laminated mahogany TW145-SC (£249); 12-string TW145/12-SC is £299. Both with B-Band A3.2 system

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Satin natural

EMC

01959 571600

www.tanglewoodguitars.co.uk



FRESHMAN FA200CE

PRICE: £339
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Cutaway dreadnought electro-acoustic
TOP: Solid sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Laminated mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 121mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 395mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 650mm
TUNERS: Chrome diecast Grovers
NUT/WIDTH: Micarta/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Black-bound rosewood
FRETS: 20, medium-thin
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood with micarta saddle/53mm
ELECTRICS: Fishman under-saddle pickup; Fishman Classic 4 preamp, low-battery LED, clip-out 9V battery holder
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.18/4.8
OPTIONS: Non-cutaway FA200E (£269), 12-string FA200E-12 (£379) – both with Belcat system. Acoustic FA200D is £199
LEFT-HANDERS: FA200CE-LH (£379), FA200D-LH (£229)
FINISH: Satin natural
Access All Areas
01355 228028
www.aaa-d.co.uk

FRESHMAN FA200CE	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** Tip-top workmanship; all-round mature-toned performance
 ■ **WE DISLIKED** Slightly uneven pickup output but not enough to spoil enjoyment

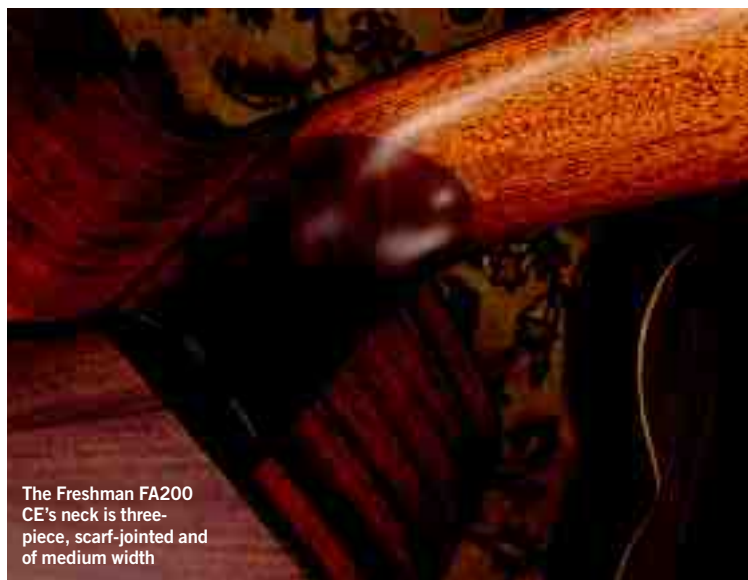
→ not least to a well-judged action and the slick touch of both the fingerboard and the satin finish. The well-polished medium-thin frets have a slightly higher profile than our other guitars, which is good for digging in on bends even if they do feel a little steppy for runs up the board. String spacing at the bridge is a tad tighter than on your average dreadnought, but it doesn't cramp picking styles.

SOUNDS: The guitar acquits itself well. There's a mild sense of more dynamic headroom waiting to be unlocked through playing in, but acoustic punch is nonetheless up to par for a dreadnought, and best of all is the instrument's fluidness – even sweetness – of tone which is appealingly poised between brightness and warmth. In this respect, there's that elusive hint of maturity present that the other test guitars lack.

It's largely good news amplified too. The top E is slightly shy in output, but not enough to mar a sound that retains all the positive acoustic properties, and which the Classic 4 system is easily capable of exploiting. A praiseworthy performance all round.

Verdict

Let's make it clear straightaway that all four instruments deserve pretty-much equal plaudits for build quality and



The Freshman FA200 CE's neck is three-piece, scarf-jointed and of medium width

No complaints with the Tanglewood acoustically – volume and projection are commendable for the medium-size body, and the bright-ish tone is clear

value. There is virtually nothing to bitch about as far as materials, construction and cosmetic detailing are concerned, and the standards of presentation are something that, even as little as five or six years ago, Chinese factories by and large simply wouldn't have been capable of. This quality isn't skin-deep either. Look inside these guitars and

generally they're as clean as a whistle – a far cry from the crudely fashioned, glue-spattered internals we used to be confronted with. Performance capabilities are less clear cut. The

Walden and Tanglewood get marked down here because, as electros, their pickup balance should have been checked and sorted prior to despatch, whether for review or to the shops. Acoustically the TW145-ASC is fine, but Walden's G630CE definitely needs more warmth and presently belies its cedar/

rosewood specification, as a result undermining its cheapest-on-test advantage over the other three. Among a trio of all-wood rivals the Applause perhaps has a tough task, and frankly doesn't deceive that it's anything other than a bowlback. That said, it performs well within its own genre, and if that's your kind of sound, go for it with confidence. It's the Freshman, though, that wins the day. A cosmetic plainer-Jane it might be (and it doesn't entirely escape censure for its pickup set-up), but it just gets on and does a good job, whether for playability, sound or all-round satisfaction. ■

- Walden G630CE**
Guitarist RATING ★★★★★
- Applause Deluxe AE147**
Guitarist RATING ★★★★★
- Tanglewood TW145-ASC**
Guitarist RATING ★★★★★
- Freshman FA200CE**
Guitarist RATING ★★★★★