

ELECTRO-ACOUSTIC BASS ROUND-UP £249-£499

BASS





## Round-up Acoustic basses under £499

With the electro-acoustic bass no longer the lesser-spotted beast it once was, we take a look at what the market has to offer by **Roger Newell**

**Garrison AG/AB,  
Dean Performer Dao,  
Vintage VCB 430,  
Takamine EG512C,  
Tanglewood TW15 Baby Bass CE  
& Ovation Celebrity CC074**  
**£349, £449, £249, £435, £499 & £449**

When it comes to acoustics and electro-acoustics guitarists have it easy; there are hundreds of instruments to choose from at virtually any price you want to pay. If you want an acoustic bass, however, you get the short straw. Although acoustic-bodied bass guitars like the Framus Star Bass and Hofner's Violin Bass have been around for a long time, they are essentially standard electric bass guitars. They may have thinner, semi-hollow bodies, but they rely totally on the pickups for their sound. They don't bridge the gap between electric bass guitars and the traditional, cumbersome upright bass. In recent years, however, the choice has got broader and here we evaluate six electro-acoustic basses ideal for pure acoustic or on-stage use.

Despite the relatively small size of the electro-acoustic bass market there's enough variety of models and prices to appeal to anyone looking for an alternative instrument. Few bass players would rely solely on one of these but they do provide a practical route to small ensemble playing, home rehearsal and some studio work. And although they get much closer to the sound of an upright bass (particularly when amplified) they offer a much more compact option.

However they sound acoustically, the sophistication of today's onboard pickup systems and preamps means that the range of amplified sounds available is staggering. Primarily the idea is to enhance the natural acoustic qualities of the instrument, but in reality most circuits go way beyond that and can provide a purely electronic sound that is totally different to that of a solid-bodied bass.

However, getting the right sort of amplifier is essential. Don't assume that your current combo or stack will suffice as in most cases it won't. The keyword with acoustic instruments is convenience, so it makes perfect sense to use a smaller, purpose-built or adaptable combo, with enough tonal adjustment to help bring out the best of the instrument. Devices such as the AER Cube or Line 6 Lowdown Studio are ideal. Think small, comprehensive, ultra clean sounding and with DI output facility – all essential elements for successful acoustic amplification.

Buying a purely acoustic instrument with the idea of having electronics fitted later is obviously possible but it's a skilled job and could be cost-prohibitive. It's much better, in our opinion, to get one ready-loaded with a pickup and onboard preamp with a good natural sound, and then choose whether to use the electronics or not.

There are other more practical considerations to take on board. Single →

BASS



Garrison: boasts a full and warm sound



Dean: strong tonal qualities are guaranteed

**GARRISON AG/AB**  
**FOUR-STRING**  
**PRICE:** £349  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**TYPE:** Electro-acoustic hollowbody bass  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 864mm (34-inches)  
**WOODS:** Select spruce top, mahogany back & sides  
**ELECTRICS:** Pro Elo-Acou ATE-4 – four-band EQ, volume  
**Aria**  
**0208 572 0033**  
[www.garrisonguitars.com](http://www.garrisonguitars.com)

**DEAN PERFORMER DAO**  
**FOUR-STRING**  
**PRICE:** £449  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**TYPE:** Electro-acoustic hollowbody bass  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 813mm (32-inches)  
**WOODS:** Dao top, back & sides, mahogany neck, rosewood fingerboard  
**ELECTRICS:** Fishman Classic 4 Preamp – volume, four-band EQ  
**Bill Lewington**  
**01268 413366**  
[www.deanguitars.com](http://www.deanguitars.com)

→ saddle bridges always mean a degree of compromise for intonation accuracy, and the shorter the scale length the more noticeable this becomes. Although much lighter than solid-bodied basses they are also bigger so the playing position is very different. Onboard preamps mean they are powerful when amplified and because of their vibrant acoustic nature this can easily lead to uncontrollable feedback. Let's take a look at what's available...

**Garrison AG/AB £349**

Built in Canada with a super deep, cutaway body and classic looks this is one very classy design. It has a high-gloss natural finish, and is fully bound to the body and neck, with rosewood fingerboard and bridge. The bridge pins are black with mother-of-pearl insets and the simple coach lines and rosette help to give this a very clean appearance.

What you can't see is the glass-fibre Griffiths Active Top Brace system that combines all the top braces together. This allows the top to vibrate as a single unit to improve resonance. Strong and yet light in weight it proves a fine choice.

| GARRISON AG/AB  | TEST RESULTS |
|---|--------------|
| Build quality   | ★★★★★        |
| Playability   | ★★★★★        |
| Sound   | ★★★★★        |
| Value for money   | ★★★★★        |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>WE LIKED</b> Classy presentation; great natural voice; powerful electronics</li> <li>■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> Comes with only one strap button</li> </ul> |              |

It's difficult to fully evaluate the instrument balance as it sadly only comes with the jack socket/strap button provided. Fitting an extra button at the heel of the neck is no problem, but it's an unwanted job for the purchaser in our opinion. Being full scale it's bound to be neck heavy but this gives the best possible intonation when using a traditional single-saddle bridge.

**SOUNDS:** Thanks to the overall size of the Garrison, the natural acoustic voice of this bass is full and warm and that sound can be reproduced pretty accurately when using the onboard electronics. The ATE-4 unit provides an expansive four-band equaliser as well as a volume control and has easy power pack access.



| DEAN PERFORMER DAO   | TEST RESULTS |
|--|--------------|
| Build quality  | ★★★★★        |
| Playability  | ★★★★★        |
| Sound  | ★★★★★        |
| Value for money  | ★★★★★        |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>WE LIKED</b> Striking looks and sound</li> <li>■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> Only one strap button</li> </ul> |              |

**Verdict**

Despite the lacking strap-button, at this price the Garrison offers excellent value for money. The sound is huge and powerful so this is very gig friendly. But, of course, with that power comes the feedback Achilles heel that, as with all the models in this round-up, needs to be kept well in check.

**Guitarist RATING** ★★★★★

**Dean Performer Dao £449**

Although the Dean Performer bass has been around for about eight years and follows the traditional lines of a fully bound cutaway acoustic bass, this particular model positively screams with visual originality. The use of highly figured dao wood for the top, back and sides of the body, suitably adorned with an asymmetric (and quirky) rosewood bridge and Celtic rosette, elevates it into a whole new dimension. It's true that the rosette actually gets a bit lost in the vibrancy of this stunning top but close inspection reveals that it is all rather beautifully done. With multi-ply binding, die-cast tuners and downsized dot inlays this is one very tasty looking instrument.

A jumbo body with slightly more depth ensures a good natural voice, and with a slightly shorter scale length of just a tad over 32-inches this is an accurately intonated bass. The reduction in scale also provides this with a better balance potential. That said, however, we are yet again presented with the jack socket/end pin as the only means of applying a strap, so a second button will need to be

fitted if you ever want to stand up and play this bass.

**SOUNDS:** Although not as sophisticated as some, having the benefit of a Fishman preamp system is a huge advantage when it comes to amplified sound. Strong tonal qualities are guaranteed throughout the spectrum and naturally there's loads of power at hand. It is one of the neatest preamp modules currently available and very effective.

**Verdict**

This is a really good-looking bass, with a more compact scale length, that gets both acoustic and electro jobs done very efficiently.

**Guitarist RATING****Vintage VCB 430 £249**

If you fancy an acoustic bass but are forced to work on a low budget then you really should take a look at the VCB 430. It's way cheaper than the rest of our selection but it has a lot more going for it than just a modest price. The moody translucent black finish to

the body and neck gives a velvety appearance and offers huge visual impact. The rosewood bridge, with the string ends neatly hidden beneath the surface, and the unassuming dot inlays on the fingerboard, also play a part in giving this bass a superior overall look. With the multiply binding kept purely to the body and the use of a diminutive headstock size and shape this is neatly elevated into a class way above its price point. However, if this rather distinctive presentation is not to your liking then a natural finish with a satin flame maple top is also available at the same price.

**VINTAGE VCB 430****PRICE:** £249**ORIGIN:** Korea**TYPE:** Electro-acoustic

hollowbody bass

**SCALE LENGTH:**

864mm (34-inches)

**WOODS:** Flame maple

top, mahogany laminate

back and sides and

nato neck

**ELECTRICS:** Vintage

Bass EQ – four-band

EQ, rotary volume,

battery check

**John Hornby Skewes****01132 865381****www.jhs.co.uk**→ **TAKAMINE EG512C FOUR-STRING****PRICE:** £435**ORIGIN:** Korea**TYPE:** Electro-acoustic

hollowbody bass

**SCALE LENGTH:**

864mm (34-inches)

**WOODS:** Spruce top,

mahogany back &amp; sides

**ELECTRICS:** TK-40B

preamp – three-band EQ,

mid-shift, bass boost,

volume, EQ bypass, tuner

and battery check

**Korg UK****01908 857101****www.takamine.com**

Vintage: a lot going for it for such a modest price



★★★★★  
**Guitarist CHOICE**

Takamine: gig-friendly practicality and a balanced sound



**Tanglewood: compact but it packs a sonic punch too**

#### TANGLEWOOD TW15 BABY BASS CE

**PRICE:** £499

**ORIGIN:** Far East

**TYPE:** Electro-acoustic hollowbody bass

**SCALE LENGTH:** 680mm (26.75-inches)

**WOODS:** Canadian spruce top, African mahogany back, sides & neck

**ELECTRICS:** B-Band EQ – four-band EQ, volume, low battery indicator

**European Music Company**

**01959 571600**

**www.tanglewoodguitars.co.uk**

#### VINTAGE VCB 430 TEST RESULTS

|                 |       |
|-----------------|-------|
| Build quality   | ★★★★★ |
| Playability     | ★★★★★ |
| Sound           | ★★★★★ |
| Value for money | ★★★★★ |

■ **WE LIKED** Price; moody finish; simplicity of design

■ **WE DISLIKED** Single strap button again!

→ Again the VCB 430 has just the endpin/jack socket as the only means of using a strap so a second button will be required if you don't want to sit and play all the time.

**SOUNDS:** Standing or sitting, this is certainly a big bass to handle with its full-scale neck and deep cutaway body, but this all helps to give the natural acoustic sound a forceful and robust delivery. When amplified the preamp will happily reproduce this natural delivery, or substantially enhance or transform it, but whatever you prefer the results remain pleasing.

#### Verdict

Big and bold, this Vintage really does seem to offer excellent value for money as it looks, sounds and handles like a more expensive instrument – definitely a good place to start.

**Guitarist RATING** ★★★★★

#### Takamine EG512C £435

Takamine has a great track record as far as electro-acoustic guitars are concerned. They are extremely gig-friendly, well-built, comfortable to play and produce the kind of focused sound that PA engineers love. So it should come as no surprise that we get the same qualities in this tasty-looking bass version. The unadorned rosewood fingerboard and bridge give this a very clean look that is brought to life by the abalone rosette and multi-line beading. Essentially a classic looking instrument with cutaway provided for higher fret access and (thankfully!) it comes with two strap

## Unplugged

### The history of the acoustic bass

The idea of an acoustic bass guitar-like instrument is not a new one. Mexican mariachi bands have been using the guitarron for years, but although it has a similar shape to a regular bass guitar it has a bigger body, a curved back (like a lute) and a short fingerboard that ends at the body joint. It also has six strings and is tuned A-D-G-C-E-A. But in the early 1970s Ernie Ball started work on an instrument, thinking that if you had acoustic guitars you really should have acoustic basses to go with them.

With the help of George Fullerton, Ball produced the Earthwood acoustic bass guitar in 1972. Production was short-lived (and ceased in 1974) but by the late seventies it was back. Being large bodied and deep it was cumbersome and, although it produced plenty of

volume, it was phased out by 1985. That said, the popularity of the MTV Unplugged show saw the Earthwood experience a brief resurgence.

The eighties also saw the introduction of an Italian acoustic bass guitar. Made by Eko (sometimes branded as Easton) it was a lined fretless and more manageable than the Earthwood. Size was still a problem, but in order to get the low E string to speak clearly it was deemed necessary. The compromise was obvious; fit electronics to handle the low frequencies and reduce the size.

Initial magnetic pickups were soon coupled to piezo-electric transducers and the results were positive. The bass playing populous reacted with enthusiasm and the electro-acoustic bass, as we now know it, finally mushroomed from the eighties onwards. More recently we've seen the introduction of the bass resonator guitar... but that's another story.

buttons. It is also available in a flame finish at the slightly higher cost of \$475.

The EG512C is loaded with a TK-40B preamp that is more comprehensive than most. The three-band EQ has the benefit of a rotary mid-shift control and there's also a bass boost provided to aid that focused sound principle. Along with the volume control comes an EQ bypass that is very useful to kill any of those nasty runaway feedback problems instantaneously, giving you time to adjust the settings. There's also an onboard tuner and a battery check switch, as well as easy access to the power pack itself.

**SOUNDS:** This Takamine is not as deep in the body as some electro acoustic basses out there so is comfortable to play but with a loud natural voice. The power is plentiful

#### TAKAMINE EG512C TEST RESULTS

|                 |       |
|-----------------|-------|
| Build quality   | ★★★★★ |
| Playability     | ★★★★★ |
| Sound           | ★★★★★ |
| Value for money | ★★★★★ |

■ **WE LIKED** Very gig friendly; easy to control; great amplified tones

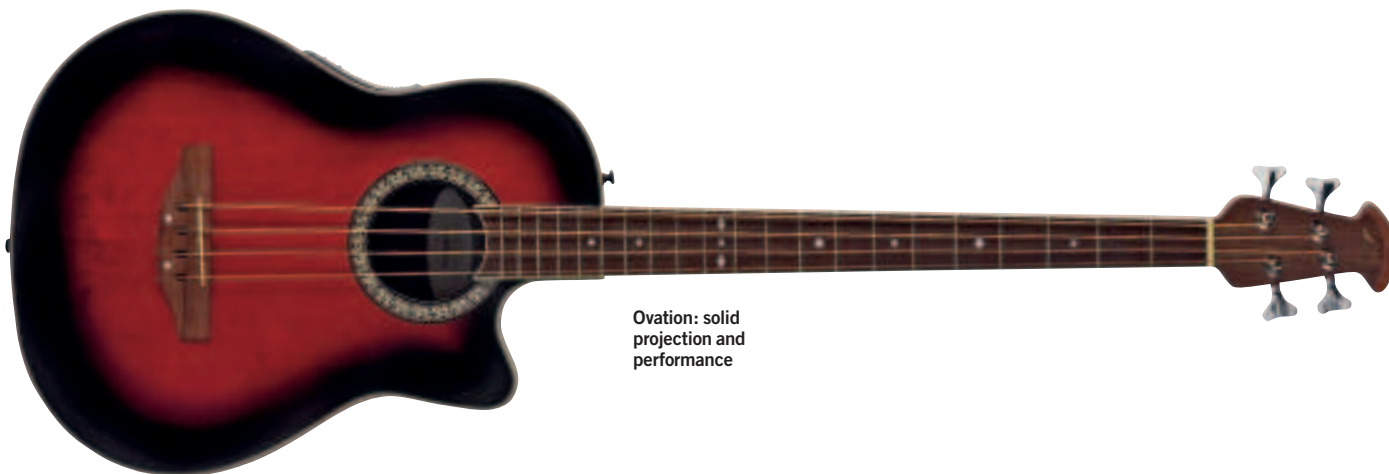
■ **WE DISLIKED** Lack of fingerboard inlays will unsettle some players

when you engage the preamp and the degree of sound adjustment is extremely impressive. The lack of fingerboard dots will deter some players but edge markers are included.

#### Verdict

What we like most about this is the gig-ready practicality and balanced sound characteristics – as a result it's a professional instrument for a sensible financial outlay.

**Guitarist RATING** ★★★★★



Ovation: solid projection and performance

#### OVATION CELEBRITY CC074

PRICE: £449

ORIGIN: Korea

TYPE: Electro-acoustic hollowbody bass

SCALE LENGTH: 864mm (34-inches)

WOODS: Spruce top, Lyrachord GS bowl

ELECTRICS: Ovation OP20 Preamp - three-band EQ, volume, EQ in/out, pre-shape, battery indicator, tuner

John Hornby Skewes

01132 865381

www.ovationguitars.com

### The rivals

Other models to audition under £1,000...

Ibanez AEB 10E £299

Fender BG 29 £385

Washburn AB10 £429

Tanglewood TW55 £499

Tacoma CB10C £700

Stonebridge B40-CM

£839

| TANGLEWOOD TW15   | TEST RESULTS |
|---|--------------|
| Build quality   | ★★★★★        |
| Playability   | ★★★★★        |
| Sound   | ★★★★★        |
| Value for money   | ★★★★★        |
| <p>■ <b>WE LIKED</b> Dinky size; warm tones; good looks</p> <p>■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> Intonation slightly compromised</p> |              |

#### → Tanglewood TW15 Baby Bass CE £499

Just when you thought you'd seen it all something pops up out of the blue and takes you completely by surprise.

Tanglewood's Baby Bass is a neat little performer from the Sundance range.

It's certainly aptly named, being several sizes down from a regular acoustic guitar let alone an acoustic bass, but in spite of the diminutive size this is a serious bass and is well put together.

The satin finish and construction materials alone put this alongside some esteemed competition.

The maple bound body makes use of Canadian spruce and African mahogany and the neck is mahogany too.

Ebony is used for the fingerboard and bridge surrounds and bone for the bridge saddle and top nut. The die-cast machine heads are gold plated and the use of green abalone around the soundhole and for the inlays is a touch of class. It's also fitted with two strap buttons.

**SOUNDS:** Perhaps the crowning glory here is the inclusion of a B-Band EQ system that more than makes up for any lack of physical size. This is a great system with a gutsy delivery, the rotary controls enabling you to explore the tonal potential to the full. The battery compartment is separate, in the side of the body underneath the endpin.

Because of the conventional single saddle bridge and the reluctance of the thick E-string to go over the bridge – it being so close to the endpin retainer – the break angle is compromised here and the intonation suffers as a result. However, this is not overly noticeable

until you reach the upper frets so is not a major problem.

| OVATION CC074   | TEST RESULTS |
|---|--------------|
| Build quality   | ★★★★★        |
| Playability   | ★★★★★        |
| Sound   | ★★★★★        |
| Value for money   | ★★★★★        |
| <p>■ <b>WE LIKED</b> Slim neck; two strap buttons; crisp tonality</p> <p>■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> Bowlback won't be to everyone's taste</p> |              |

#### Verdict

A compact choice, for sure, but one that packs a very good sonic punch. Where it scores over all the other basses here is that the price includes a soft gig bag.

Guitarist RATING



#### Ovation Celebrity CC074 £449

Ovation's curved bowlback, by design, aids both sound projection and comfort but also lends a unique playing position that can take a while to get used to.

However, in this glorious red sunburst finish with a super slim neck, dot and diamond inlays, oak leaf rosette, distinctive headstock and attractive binding, the Celebrity offers a strong visual statement. Even the walnut bridge neatly absorbs the ball ends of the strings and helps to keep the things simple and clean.

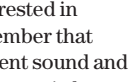
The bowlback body makes this feel much less bulky than the majority of basses here but it still possesses a warm and significant voice. The preamp is a modular design that pops out of the body at the press of a button in order to change the battery.

It is endowed with sliders for the three-band EQ and volume, plus switches for EQ in/out and for the pre-shape feature. There's also a useful battery indicator to help prevent any awkward live incidents, but what dominates this unit is the sophisticated multi-LED tuner that gives wider options than just the standard tuning.

**SOUNDS:** The Ovation has a tightly focused natural voice and this continues when plugging in. It has good sound qualities from the EQ but we were particularly impressed with the solid projection when engaging the pre-shape. This is an unusual feature on an electro-acoustic bass, yet it proves extremely effective. Two strap buttons are provided but this is the only instrument here not to make use of an endpin jack socket, instead the socket is located on the lower curve of the bowl.

**Verdict**  
Like Takamine, Ovation has its history steeped in the electro-acoustic realm. This is a solid performer and comes gig-ready with onboard tuner.

**Verdict**  
Guitarist RATING



#### Closing thoughts

This pleasing collection offers just a taster of what is currently available in music shops up and down the UK. It's surprising to find just how many are now available and the vast price range that they represent. For beginners an acoustic bass can offer a cheaper way of starting, but generally it makes an ideal additional instrument for working players. We've stuck to four-string instruments but several five-string models are also available, and although the basses here are moderately priced it's possible to spend a lot more. Remember each bass has a feel, balance and playing position all its own so it's important to try a few before buying.

If this has got you interested in branching out then remember that with the distinctly different sound and playing experience the acoustic bass presents there also come a load of idiosyncrasies like the runaway feedback, the need for specialist amplification and finding a case to put it in. But all in all it is a worthwhile addition to your bass armoury. 🎸