



Hofner's Violin (left) and Club basses are sure to provoke feelings of nostalgia

Hofner 500/1 Violin & 500/2 Club Basses £1,285 & £1,310

The rivals

HOFNER 500/1 VIOLIN
Tanglewood Violin Bass
from £249
Epiphone Viola Bass
£399
Duesenberg Starplayer
Violin Bass £865
Tanglewood provides the cheapest alternative, and for less than £250 this is a good version; twin humbuckers, of course, but it's also available in a left-handed version for not much more outlay. Epiphone has a habit of ceasing production of its Viola Bass every now and again so it's not always the easiest thing to find. It's great, though: value-for-money, with dotted neck and mini humbuckers which look authentic. Duesenberg's Starplayer Violin Bass is the modern-day equivalent, abandoning authenticity for efficiency. It sports surface-mounted controls, 33.25-inch scale length, single pickup and, like the others here, a more sophisticated bridge

A new distributor in the UK is putting Hofner back on the bass map by Roger Newell

Back in the early 1960s bass guitars were as rare as hen's teeth in the UK, but if you could find one then the chances were it was a Framus or a Hofner. Both served players well enough but, as soon as the trade embargo between Britain and America was lifted, Fender basses became top of the popularity tree and the German manufacturers were destined to become only 'good starter' basses.

However, a certain Paul McCartney changed all that for Hofner, and the 'violin bass' in particular has become one of the most cherished designs ever. What's more, since the era of the 'tribute band' began, it's become highly sought after – so much so that finding an original one from the early days is not only becoming difficult but also unbelievably expensive.

Hofner has not been slow to react in providing new product and, while the Violin Bass is their bestseller, there is also renewed interest in another of their bass models – the Club Bass. Earlier this year Hofner changed ownership, moving back to a smaller, more focused operation. And with a

new distributor in Britain, fully equipped for great after-sales service with spares and strings, now is a good time to realise your dream of owning one of these classic instruments.

Violin Bass

One of the most distinctive designs ever conceived, the Hofner 500/1 Violin Bass still looks as good today as it did when it was first produced in 1956. It's a shape that's been used on stringed instruments for centuries, so it's no wonder that there's a rightness about these visual elements. One of the smallest and lightest basses ever designed, yet with a full-fat sound, it's an ideal companion for the bass player on the move.

Although many of the appointments seem a little crude by today's standards – particularly the bridge and the guitar-sized tuning keys – they perform their respective tasks well enough, even if the tuners sometimes seem a little abrupt in operation. The bridge saddles are actually small strips of fret wire and each is embedded into one of the four slots cut into the wooden surface of the

bridge block. This authentic design is functional, to say the least, and could be questioned if the tuning properties were compromised or if the natural sound of the instrument was lacking in delivery – but on both counts this bass performs particularly well.

The authenticity of this model has to be applauded. The neck proportions are meatier in depth than on the Club Bass and, although the body and headstock are edge-bound, the fretboard remains plain. The tuners are ganged in pairs, sharing the same metal base strip, and only one strap button is included at the tail end (and that's made of plastic). In the early days of The Beatles, McCartney had his strap looped around the headstock, and later under the fretboard, but most players just fit an extra button at the heel of the neck. The distinctive nut is also the same as ever and has a black stripe running through it, while the fretboard is fitted with a zero fret to ensure consistent string height.

SOUNDS: If you're a regular solid-bodied bass player, the lack of overall



★★★★★
**Guitarist
CHOICE**

Quirky it may be, but Hofner has retained the original Violin Bass's control panel



If you're looking for a bass with that 'wow' factor then the Violin Bass is one of the best options out there: with its distinctive looks, feel, sound and delivery, it's got the lot

weight is a little disconcerting at first, but once you get used to it, you appreciate just how much it adds to the comfort. Also, both of these models come fitted with flatwound strings and if you're used to round-wounds, the smoothness is going to seem strange. But it is only right, as flatwounds were always an important factor in the sound of these unique basses.

There's a degree of logic to the control panel but it's slightly bizarre. For example, turning on the bass pickup automatically turns the treble pickup off, and vice versa. Therefore whatever action you take you get an unexpected reaction – not quite Newtonian physics, but close. Hofner did once alter the panel so it was more logical, but users didn't appreciate the changes and the traditional wiring was reinstated in spite of the quirkiness.

Sound-wise, this is a little less dynamic than the Club due to the

slightly keener body dimensions, but as far as getting a good sound is concerned you really can't go wrong. Although the tonal range is far from expansive, there are loads of subtle changes available within the parameters. What's particularly pleasing is discovering how many of these sounds were used by the likes of McCartney and, of course, if you happen to be in a Beatles covers band, then this is absolutely essential.

Club Bass

The more conventional look of the Club Bass with its single cutaway may be less dramatic than the Violin, but it still holds tremendous appeal. And if you love the sound of the Violin Bass but are anxious not to be considered a McCartney copycat, then the Club would be an excellent alternative. It supports all the typical Hofner features: hollow archtop body with

500/1 VIOLIN BASS	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

WE LIKED Classic design; balanced sound over entire board; general 'wow' factor

WE DISLIKED The lack of decent strap buttons will be annoying to some

twin pickups, floating scratchplate and separate plastic control plate, while the single cutaway design has more in common with a Les Paul than any other Hofner bass. But while Gibson's own Les Paul bass looks a little disproportionate in terms of the size of its neck in relation to its body mass, the Club somehow manages to avoid this completely and really is an elegant-looking instrument.

The choice of gold fittings on a fully bound all-black body and neck gives this bass a particularly stylish air; although a sunburst/nickel model is available should you prefer. The pickups are of the 'staple' design – so called because of the four rectangular pole pieces used in conjunction with the regular screw tops. They possess a very solid response, and combining these with the flatwound strings it's easy to see where the overall robust sound quality comes from.

SOUNDS: The Club possesses slightly more weight than the Violin and although the general sound is similar, it has a louder and more dynamic delivery – probably due to its larger internal body capacity. Many will find this body shape more comfortable and easier to accept; and along with the light weight and down-sized scale length, this offers a sense of freedom of movement across the fretboard. The neck profile is much less 'broom-like' than on some of the early models, in fact there's a slenderness here that is exceptionally good to handle.

With the same basic Hofner electronics, you really have to master the control panel before playing in public. The individual volume controls are logical enough but, like we said earlier, using the switches correctly is ➔

HOFNER 500/1-62 REISSUE VIOLIN BASS

PRICE: £1,285

(inc case)

ORIGIN: Germany

TYPE: Set-neck, hollow bodied archtop four-string

BODY: Spruce top, maple back and sides

NECK: Maple

SCALE LENGTH:

768mm (30.25-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: 41.5mm

FINGERBOARD:

Rosewood

FRETS: 22, jumbo plus zero fret

HARDWARE: Traditional Hofner floating wooden bridge with fret wire saddles, separate chrome-plated tailpiece, twin-strip open gear tuners with pearloid buttons

STRING SPACING,

BRIDGE: 14mm average (centres)

ELECTRICS: Two 'staple' design pickups, two volume controls, lead/rhythm switch, treble and bass switches

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.8/4.0

LEFT-HAND: Yes, the

500/1-62 Reissue Left

Handed Violin Bass

(£1,285)

RANGE OPTIONS:

Include the 500/1-63

Reissue Violin Bass

(£1,230) available left-

handed at the same

price. The 500/1-63

Reissue Fretless Violin

Bass with ebony

fingerboard costs

(£1,310)

FINISH: Sunburst

Hofner UK

01442 270338

(not available as yet)

HOFNER 500/1 VIOLIN & 500/2 CLUB BASSES £1,285 & £1,310

BASS  GUITARIST INTERACTIVE



HOFNER 500/2 CLUB BASS

PRICE: £1,310 (inc case)

ORIGIN: Germany

TYPE: Set-neck, hollow bodied archtop, four-string

BODY: Spruce top, maple back & sides, fully bound

NECK: Fully bound and painted maple

SCALE LENGTH:

768mm (30.25-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: 41mm

FINGERBOARD: Fully bound rosewood

FRETS: 22 Jumbo plus zero fret

HARDWARE: Ebony adjustable bridge with fret wire saddles, separate trapezoid tailpiece. Gold-plated, open-gear tuners with pearloid buttons

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 14mm average (centres)

ELECTRICS: Two 'staple' design pickups, two volume controls, lead/rhythm switch, treble & bass switches

WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 2/4.4

LEFT-HAND: No

OPTIONS: None

FINISH: Black, sunburst (with nickel hardware)

WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 2/4.4

LEFT-HAND: No

OPTIONS: None

FINISH: Black, sunburst (with nickel hardware)

WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 2/4.4

LEFT-HAND: No

OPTIONS: None

FINISH: Black, sunburst (with nickel hardware)

WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 2/4.4

LEFT-HAND: No

OPTIONS: None

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FINISH: Black, sunburst (with nickel hardware)

WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 2/4.4

LEFT-HAND: No

OPTIONS: None

FINISH: Black, sunburst (with nickel hardware)

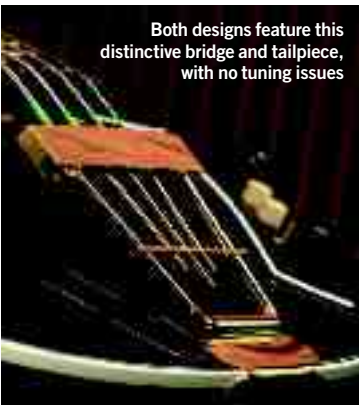
WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 2/4.4

LEFT-HAND: No

OPTIONS: None

FINISH: Black, sunburst (with nickel hardware)

500/2 CLUB BASS	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
WE LIKED Light weight; general proportions; solid sounds WE DISLIKED Turning the bass off accidentally	



Both designs feature this distinctive bridge and tailpiece, with no tuning issues

→ much less obvious. The bass and treble switches activate the appropriate pickups but, because of the way they're wired, when only one volume is active things get decidedly confusing and there are various ways you can actually kill your sound completely! The rhythm/solo switch merely adds a little definition to the notes, so don't start thinking 'boost' here. Yet in spite of these authentic shortcomings and, again, a somewhat limited overall tonal range, there are loads of subtle variations within the confines and it's just about impossible to get a thin or ugly sound – providing you don't turn yourself off!

So if you fancy a completely different feel and less weight from a bass guitar, the Club has a lot to offer. It will never have the mystique surrounding the Violin Bass, but it does have a really great sound and with such a well-proportioned design it stands out in its own right. While it may be wired to provide traditional sounds, there's a fullness to the bottom end that would be the envy of a five-string player.

Origins of the species

Hofner was probably the first company to ship bass guitars in quantity to Britain when they introduced the violin-shaped 500/1 in 1956. Framus, another German brand, didn't produce their popular 5/150 Star Bass until 1959 but, with a more regular, guitar-like design, it was also met with great enthusiasm. For a short while both companies dominated the British bass market until the post-war Anglo-American trade embargo ceased.

The 500/1 may have been a distinctive design but it was Gibson who made the first violin-shaped bass in the USA, back in 1953. Called the Gibson Electric Bass, it was a conscious ploy to lure upright bass players into taking up the bass guitar by producing a downsized version of the double bass. Short-scaled, with a single pickup and solid body, it was adorned with a floating scratchplate and

had a fake f-hole painted on to the natural-finished arched top. It also possessed a telescopic spike that could be extended to provide a similar upright playing position to the traditional bass, while the tuners were guitar-sized and rear facing in the same way as used on a banjo. It was a striking bass but not particularly popular, and production of it ceased in 1959. It was virtually unheard of in Britain, but during the sixties a few found their way over here, and sufficient interest was subsequently created to spur Gibson into re-introducing the bass in 1969. Renamed the EB-1, and fitted with more efficient horizontal tuners, its return unfortunately failed to attract the expected interest and the production run only lasted for a couple of years. Now, of course, they're highly prized by collectors and their value continues to escalate due to their scarcity. Now where have we heard that before?


While the Club may be wired to provide traditional sounds, there's a fullness to the bottom end that would actually be the envy of many a five-string player

Verdict

If you're looking for a bass with that 'wow' factor then the Violin Bass is one of the best out there: distinctive looks, feel, sound and delivery, it really has got the lot. The fact that it retains all of its early idiosyncrasies is a real plus, as it offers a unique playing experience as well as that nostalgia value. Providing you have the money, this has to be the violin bass to buy. Of course, not everyone wants that Beatles connotation, so the Club provides similar tones with its less identifiable, but still very retro, look.

In today's market of high-tech basses it would be easy just to dismiss these models as mere relics from a bygone age. But not only do these Hofners offer a very pleasurable playing experience – born of their proportions and overall lightness in weight – they also have a particularly full bodied and

well-balanced sound, and it's exactly this combination that gives them such wide appeal.

We cannot stress the point too much that it really is essential to understand the control panel intimately before you gig these basses: making tonal alterations during a song should be considered a complete no-no. With such a big fat sound at your fingertips, the sudden silence caused by the careless flick of a switch would be devastating. But these Hofners are such a pair of bass gems – retaining both their beauty and solid delivery – who would want them to change? 

Hofner 500/1 Violin Bass

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

Hofner 500/2 Club Bass

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★