

# A Breed Apart

Bundle together some of the world's best new guitar talents with one of the giants of the electric guitar and what do you get? The Ibanez AZ, a multi-input design that pares down the pointy and centres on sound and playability

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Neil Godwin







## IBANEZ PRESTIGE AZ2204-ICM £1,779 (inc case)

CONTACT **Headstock Distribution** PHONE **0121 508 6666** WEB **www.ibanez.com**

### What You Need To Know

#### 1 What's the deal here?

The result of extensive four-year R&D, the AZ range are coined "players' player" guitars. Instead of entertaining the whims of hoary ol' rock stars, Ibanez looked to the growing number of internet guitar gods, not least Tom Quayle and Martin Miller (both who have their own signature models based on the AZ platform), Marco Sfogli, Feodor Desumov, Ignazio Di Salvo, not to mention Andy Timmons and Jan Cryka. Some of these might be new names but with considerable online presence and followers, Ibanez, like Suhr and Chapman, recognise the considerable sales potential of this new breed of player.

#### 2 They're not that pointy..

Yup, part of the concept is for a more pared down, less overtly 'rock', instrument that offers all the up-to-the-minute design flourishes – stainless steel frets, roasted maple necks, non-locking but wide-travel vibratos, etc – and enough sounds to cover everything from jazz to shred.

#### 3 What's the difference between Prestige and Premium? ?

Prestige are made in Japan; Premium in Indonesia and along with slightly down-spec'd parts (pickups, electronics, vibrato) the Premiums use basswood, as opposed to alder, bodies and a slightly different roasting method for the necks.

**B**y design, the AZ series is all about function: a tool to do a job. That said, both the body and neck adopt a more vintage bolt-on guise that's less pointy, more classic than we're used to from Ibanez. The body contours here, especially the rib-cage cut, is very deep and although the edge radius is pretty tight these are comfortable, familiar guitars. The weights are good too – the Japanese-made Prestige's alder bodies slightly weightier than the basswood (with a thin figured maple or bocote topped three-ply facing, see Spec Check) of the Indonesian-made Premium models.

All the AZs, as you'd expect, are based around the classic 648mm (25.5-inch) bolt-on scale length. There are both 22- and 24-fret models in both Prestige and Premium lines: the 22-fret models have an HSS pickup configuration and a Strat-meets-RG-style scratchplate; the 24-fret models have dual direct-mount humbuckers with no scratchplate and rear-mounted electronics. Bridge positions are the same on both 22/24-fret platforms, the 24-fret neck therefore sits slightly deeper into the body and as a result the treble cutaway is slightly deeper, too.

All use the same heavily rounded 'All Access' body heel with four recessed screws that sit into inset washers; the heel area is slightly thinner in depth than the rest of the body and both cutaways have quite considerable scooping on the back, not the front. High fret access is easy.

Roasted maple is becoming the neck wood of choice for those serious about their bolt-ons. The Prestige models use something called S-Tech wood – a

patented torrefaction process created by Sendai Technologies in Japan that "decreases the density and improves the wood's dimensional stability. It also gives the wood a more uniformly dark appearance". The Premium models use roasted maple, which has a lighter colour (and on the AZ224F a very vivid grain) that's still darker than untorrefied wood. Material aside, the necks are spec'd with a similar 'oval C' profile, a standard 305mm (12-inch) Gibson-like radius and jumbo stainless steel frets – those on the Prestige models being very slightly wider and taller. Nuts are oil-impregnated bone on the Prestige models and Graph Tech Tusq XL on the Premium models. Position markers are black dots on the face which do lack a little contrast on the darker Prestige 'boards but side dots are the modern must-have glow-in-the-dark types. Oh, and that headstock is far from pointy and employs a 'vintage' logo. It all helps to move the AZ away from Ibanez's overly rock image.

Hardware too is very similar. Tuners are Gotoh's SG381 with both height adjustable posts (HAP) and Magnum Locks. The former allow you set the post heights to maximize the string angle behind the nut although Ibanez still uses a string tree on the top two strings while the locking element self-locks as you wind on the string

As well as different woods and pickups the Prestige models clearly have an extra level of detail, too



With sleek styling aimed at player comfort, these guitars' looks are a strong indicator of the new ground the company is trying to break



1

and unlocks – usually with a little help from a blade or coin in the top notched tip – as you unwind it. Once you get used to 'em they're fine but both the locking element and setting the post heights can be, well, fiddly at first.

The vibrato bridge is essentially the same design on both ranges, based on Gotoh's 'modern classic' 510 with two height adjustable and lockable pivot posts, plus a new-design knurled collar to tension the push-fit vibrato arm. The Prestige's T1802 version uses nicely-shaped titanium saddles and a full steel block without deep drilled anchor holes; the Premium's T1502 uses plated steel saddles and a tapered die-cast FST block, which has deep drilled anchor holes. Spacing is quoted on both as 10.5mm – which should mean an E-to-E string spread of 52.5mm when in fact on all four it measures bang on 52mm at the saddle's break point. The vibratos sit virtually flush with the guitars' top face but a recess underneath means travel, especially upbend, is enhanced without having to tilt the unit.

### Pickups and Control

Having gone to so much detail it's little surprise we have a completely new set of AZ-exclusive pickups: Seymour Duncan Hyperion designed collaboratively, we're

told, with Duncan's Maricela 'MJ' Juarez. While we're told the pickups on both series are the same our Prestige HSS pickups are clearly marked as originating from Duncan's Custom Shop; those on the Premium appear to be standard production – an easy ID are the copper foil wraps around the Premium's humbucking coils; the Prestige's are black. They're classed as 'moderate' output (the Premium units have a slightly lower DCR) with Alnico 5 magnets. However, it's the switching system that provides yet another twist.

The HSS guitars have the dyna-MIX 9 system introduced by a two-way mini-toggle 'Alter' switch placed between the master volume and tone controls. In position 1 (towards the tone control) we get the usual selections from the five-way: neck, neck and middle, middle, middle and slug coil of the bridge humbucker and, lastly, the full bridge humbucker. Flip the Alter switch towards the volume control, however, and we get four additional sounds: neck and middle in series, neck and screw coil of the bridge humbucker in parallel, neck and middle in series plus the bridge humbucker added in parallel, the slug coil of the bridge humbucker and, once again, the bridge humbucker.

The HH guitars go one sound further with the dyna-MIX 10 system. Here with

1. The brand-new, Custom Shop-made Seymour Duncan Hyperion pickups are what sets the Prestiges apart from the Premiums

2. The oil-finished S-Tech Roasted maple neck of the Prestige AZ2204-ICM puts it among the elite of the densely-populated bolt-on market



2



## IBANEZ PRESTIGE AZ2402-TFF £1,779 (inc case)

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3. Playing with Gotoh's SG381 and the post heights can be a bit fiddly but it'll be worth it when it's bang on

4. You'll need to practise a lot to uncover all the different nuances of the Ibanez/Seymour Duncan Hyperion HH pickups on the AZ2402-TFF



the Alter switch heading south we have: neck humbucker, inner slug coils of both in parallel, both humbuckers, outer screw coils of both in parallel and, lastly, bridge humbucker. In the upper position the Alter switch offers us 'tap' mode. Here 'Power Taps' are used on the humbucker selections (neck, both and bridge). Ibanez tells us that the "Power Tap uses one single coil plus a low signal from the other single coil." However, the DCR measurement doesn't change in this mode so it's not a coil-split, partial-tap or parallel linkage of the two coils: the more 'single coil-like' sound appears to be achieved with a passive RC (resistor and capacitor) filter on one single coil that uses small surface mount components placed on a PCB that's fixed to the five-way switch. The in-between positions in this 'tap' mode voice the neck's slug coil and then the bridge's screw coil.

Components differ too: the Premium guitars use the smaller body Alpha 500k pots; the Prestige's are full-size plus we get a full foil screen on the HSS scratchplate, the Premium's foil is just around the control area. All have conductive paint in the cavities, however, and switches appear identical on both. The volume controls have a treble bleed capacitor (330picofarad); the tone capacitor is 0.022microfarad.

One final performance consideration is the placement of the output jack – on the guitar's side, by the lower wide flange strap button, and angled so you thread your lead through your strap to secure it more easily.

There's a considerable price difference between the Prestige and Premium models and that's not just the construction costs of the different countries. There's also the different woods and pickups and as





## IBANEZ PREMIUM AZ224F-BIG £1,069 (inc soft shell case)

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you examine the two ranges the Prestige models clearly have an extra level of detail – from the fret-end finishing, slightly better fingerboard edge rounding, that nut material. It's all about these details and then, of course, there's the sound...

### Feel and Sounds

Ibanez's RG might rightly be one of the relatively few modern classic designs but its thin-depthed, wide and flat neck isn't for everyone, not least those of us that like more traditional bolt-ons. While the spec, for example, on the Super Wizard HP – “the neck for shredders,” states Ibanez – offers a 17mm depth at the first fret, 19mm by the 12th with a nut with of 43mm and a 'board radius of 430mm (16.9”), the AZ's neck is much more conventional measuring between 41.84mm to 42.38mm at the nut, 20.5 to 21mm at the 1st fret and between 23mm and 23.2mm at the 12th. The 'board radius is rounder too and puts the AZ much more in line with modern Fender or Suhr. Neck relief, as supplied, is minimal (the Premium AZ242F is dead flat), action heights are super low (0.9-1.2mm on the treble side at the 12th fret, 1.2-1.3mm on the bass side). As we've said there's a slight difference in the gauge of stainless steel frets on the Prestige and Premium models and although the neck back is more vintage-y, the 'board radius, low action and the relatively big, high, frets of both give the guitars a very modern feel.

The Prestige necks have an oil finish, while the Premium have a light sealer coat. They don't feel quite as slinky as, for example, Music Man, and the Prestige necks will certainly need a little maintenance the more you play. A quick rub with a fine



5. The Gotoh-made T1502 vibrato gives a nice degree of upbend

6. Despite being one of the cheaper Premium guitars, the AZ224F-BIG has plenty of aesthetic and aural style



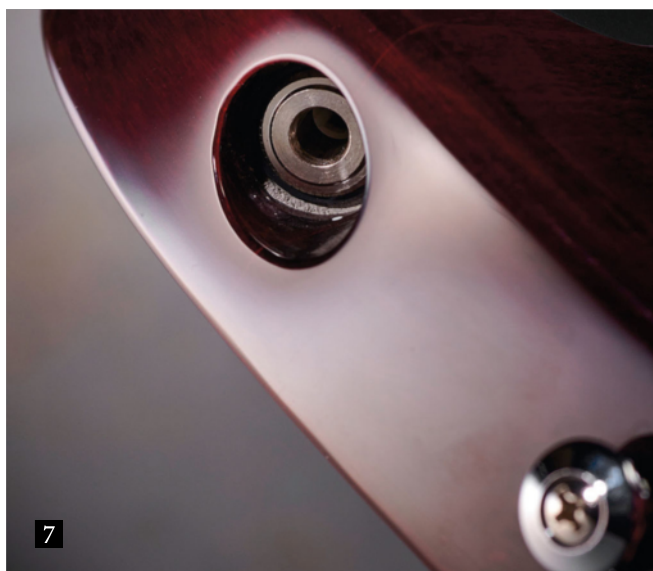


## IBANEZ PREMIUM AZ242F-TSG £1,069 (inc soft shell case)

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7. The placement of the jack nicely out of the way of all the action will give Ibanez's new breed of player plenty of unobtrusive playability

8. The five-way lever pickup selector switch, two-way mini toggle Alter switch open up a lost world of sounds you wouldn't necessarily associate with Ibanez



Scotch-Brite pad made them feel very satin-smooth, especially those Prestige necks.

The modern/vintage vibe certainly continues to the actual sound. None of the guitars have an overly resonant response: it's quite firm but with oodles of zingy sustaining ring that's a noticeable contrast to the woodier unplugged response of the more traditional vintage-y bolt-ons we have for comparison.

Getting your head around the sound options takes a little practice. As we said, the 'standard' mode is with that two-way Alter switch pointing down towards the tone control and with the bridge humbuckers measuring around 14.8k ohms (the neck 'bucker measures approximately 9k ohms), the single coils just over 10k ohms, these are far from vintage spec. The humbuckers impart a thick but not overly dark voice; the single coils, despite that overwound reading, sound full but nicely contrasting and well-balanced in context.

A little time spent with the HSS Prestige reveals a beautiful hard rock platform that retains quite a woody, percussive bolt-on character while it certainly doesn't wimp out in bridge position. As ever the single coils provide the more textural contrast and through a clean Fender amp voice, with a little volume reduction, produce more than credible Stratty funk rhythm, Texas Blues sizzle and a lot more.

Accessing the other four sounds, with the two-way switch pointing up towards the volume expands the core sounds (and retains the go-to bridge humbucker voice) with some reasonably complex series links and, in this mode, the only true single coil voice (the slug coil of the bridge humbucker). Any switching system like



While Ibanez has been keen to prove these guitars are more than just flash tools, the garish tequila sunrise finish on the TSG is none more 80s shred

this is ultimately a compromise and the key lies in learning to navigate it. About the only thing not covered here is a proper neck humbucking voice – it is an HSS, of course! But that said the neck and middle in series certainly goes in that direction with quite a wide and thick voice. No, it ain't a classic PAF-alike but with a lot more gain there's a vocal character that's near perfect for your Beck-esque emotive instrumental leads. Switch to clean and it'll get you through a more muted jazz/blues tune with absolutely no problem.

With no proper single coils, the 24-fret dual humbucker format models would seem to move away from Fender-like voicings. If we're honest, a three-way switch for just the humbuckers would make this a hugely valid rock machine but there are another seven sounds to explore from the inner or outer single coils, to the solo slug and screw coils of the neck and bridge respectively. These sound a little thinner and brighter than the 22-fretters' proper single coils but again, in context, they add huge stylistic versatility.

And then there are the 'Power Tap' voicings of either humbucker or both together. Now these don't capture a 'true' single coil voice – we already have those. No, these PT voicings sit somewhere between a single coil and humbucker. There's slightly more single coil-like hollowness compared to the full 'bucker's direct power yet still

## The breadth of sounds on these AZ models might surprise those who've pigeon-holed Ibanez as shred guitars for the masses

with considerable humbucker depth. Clean they benefit from a little volume roll-off – there's even a hint of a Rickenbacker's unique growl – while gained they provide another texture, especially so at the bridge. Indeed, in this secondary mode a different guitar emerges and having the solo single coils in the mix positions – then simply switching the Alter switch to introduce the inner or outer single coil mixes – gives immense Fendery flavour that's far from the clichéd image of the none-more-rock RG.

The more affordable Premium guitars have all of the above although do sound a little softer, slightly less percussive and bold especially on those more single coil-y voices. For high gain settings, basswood has its credentials and if that's your sole sonic aim then you could save yourself a large wedge of cash. But the AZ design is about covering more bases and the alder-bodied Prestige models, to our ears at least, sound more 'grown-up'.

## THE RIVALS

As our Reach for the Sky feature in the previous issue of *Guitarist* illustrated, there's no lack of credible bolt-ons at virtually every price-point. Suhr is the most obvious brand working on the 'performance bolt-on' and their most vintage-y platform, the Classic kicks off around £2.2k. Of course, the 'daddy' of this genre is perhaps Guthrie Govan's Charvel signature the HSH Caramelised Ash (around £3k). There are plenty more bolt-on options in the £2k-plus price from Music Man, Vigier and PRS, to name but three and don't forget Fender's multi-voiced American Elite Strat HSS Shawbucker (£1,769).

Chapman, founded by internet wiz Rob Chapman, is the epitome of the modern guitar company often using their online followers to help in creating new designs. Instruments like the ML1 Pro Traditional (from £769), or the newly refreshed ML1 CAP10 Lee Anderton Signature (£719), take a Strat-y platform with sharp build and stainless steel frets.

The vibrato systems are all slightly differently set but, with strings stretched, tuning stability – not least with the huge up/down pitch range – is impressive. Sure, you can't deck the vibrato as many prefer but then that falls into more traditional bolt-on territory: don't forget, these are still Ibanez guitars through and through.

## Verdict

Hugely interesting, these AZ models might well surprise many players who've pigeon-holed Ibanez as shred guitars for the masses. They certainly do that with plenty of potential for Floyd Rose-style whammy tricks (without the hassle of locks) but the Prestige models in particular would get you through a more conservative covers gig, no problem. In fact, with the expansive switching systems on both the HH and HSS platforms there are plenty of credible sounds for players never intending to hit the high-gain channel. If Ibanez had added a proper tap – perhaps via a pull/push switch on the tone – to pull down the heat of the 'buckers for a more vintage spec voice, they'd have created the near perfect hybrid.

But, as is, for the player wanting to cover virtually everything from jazz to shred, well, they've pretty much done it. These are seriously versatile, good-sounding, tidily-made instruments that deserve to put Ibanez squarely back into the mainstream. **G**





**IBANEZ PRESTIGE**  
AZ2204-ICM

**PRICE:** £1,779 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** Japan  
**TYPE:** 22-fret offset double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Oil-finished S-Tech roasted maple, oval C profile, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/41.84mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** S-Tech roasted maple, black face dots, 305mm (12") radius, luminescent side dots  
**FRETS:** 22, jumbo stainless steel  
**HARDWARE:** Ibanez (by Gotoh) T1802 vibrato with titanium saddles, Gotoh Magnum Lock HAP tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Ibanez/Seymour Duncan Hyperion HSS pickups, five-way lever pickup selector switch, two-way mini toggle Alter switch, master volume, master tone  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.36/7.4  
**OPTIONS:** No  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The other 22-fret AZ Prestige model is the AZ2204F-TAB with added flame maple cap (£2,299)  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Ice blue Metallic (as reviewed) – gloss body

**Guitarist CHOICE** 9/10

**PROS:** Good-looking, smart build, great playability, hugely versatile sounds. What's not to like?

**CONS:** Lack of colours, no lefties, rosewood fingerboard options



**IBANEZ PRESTIGE**  
AZ2402-TFF

**PRICE:** £1,779 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** Japan  
**TYPE:** 24-fret offset double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Oil-finished S-Tech roasted maple, oval C profile, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/42.47mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** S-Tech roasted maple, black face dots, 305mm (10") radius, luminescent side dots  
**FRETS:** 22, jumbo stainless steel  
**HARDWARE:** Ibanez (by Gotoh) T1802 vibrato with titanium saddles, Gotoh Magnum Lock HAP tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Ibanez/Seymour Duncan Hyperion HH pickups, five-way lever pickup selector switch, two-way mini toggle Alter switch, master volume, master tone  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.3/7.26  
**OPTIONS:** No  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** See Premium  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Tri Fade Burst Flat (matt finish, as reviewed), Ice Blue Metallic gloss body

**Guitarist CHOICE** 9/10

**PROS:** Same smart Prestige build as the AZ2204 but with different voicings. If we're honest, it's a hard choice as to which we like best

**CONS:** Same as the AZ2204



**IBANEZ PREMIUM**  
AZ224F-BIG

**PRICE:** £1,069 (inc soft shell case)  
**ORIGIN:** Indonesia  
**TYPE:** 22-fret offset double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** American basswood with flame maple veneer facing  
**NECK:** Roasted maple, oval C profile, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Graph Tech Tusq XL/42mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Roasted maple, black face dots, 305mm (10") radius, luminescent side dots  
**FRETS:** 22, jumbo stainless steel  
**HARDWARE:** Ibanez (by Gotoh) T1502 vibrato with steel saddles, Gotoh Magnum Lock HAP tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Ibanez/Seymour Duncan Hyperion HSS pickups, five-way lever pickup selector switch, two-way mini toggle Alter switch, master volume, master tone  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.1/6.82  
**OPTIONS:** No, colour only  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** See AZ242F  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Blue Iceberg Graduation (as reviewed), Brown Topaz Burst – gloss body

8/10

**PROS:** Similar quality to Prestige, lighter in weight with effectively the same engine and sounds

**CONS:** The fancier colour choice won't please us traditionalists. Again no rosewood or lefties



**IBANEZ PREMIUM**  
AZ242F-TSG

**PRICE:** £1,069 (inc soft shell case)  
**ORIGIN:** Indonesia  
**TYPE:** 24-fret offset double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** American basswood with flame maple veneer facing  
**NECK:** Roasted maple, oval C profile, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Graph Tech Tusq XL/42.47mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Roasted maple, black face dots, 305mm (10") radius, luminescent side dots  
**FRETS:** 22, jumbo stainless steel  
**HARDWARE:** Ibanez (by Gotoh) T1502 vibrato with steel saddles, Gotoh Magnum Lock HAP tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Ibanez/Seymour Duncan Hyperion HH pickups, five-way lever pickup selector switch, two-way mini toggle Alter switch, master volume, master tone  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.1/6.82  
**OPTIONS:** No  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The other 24-fret Premium model is the AZ242BC-DET (£1,069) with same spec but bocote top instead of flame maple  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Tequila Sunrise Graduation (as reviewed) – gloss body

8/10

**PROS:** Close cousin to the Prestige, slightly lighter with effectively the same engine and sounds

**CONS:** In this colour? Really? Give us some simple classic hues please. No rosewood or lefties