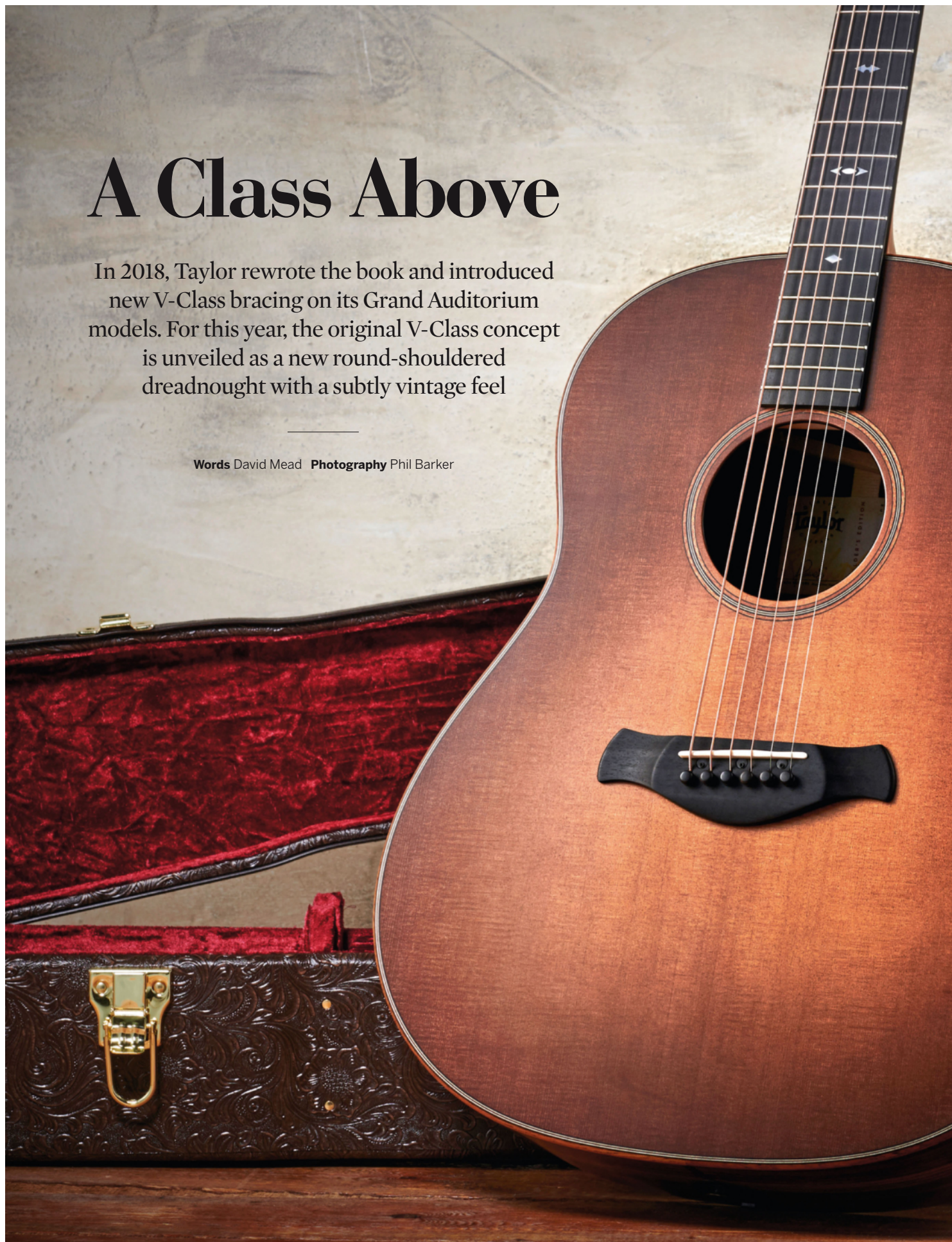


A Class Above

In 2018, Taylor rewrote the book and introduced new V-Class bracing on its Grand Auditorium models. For this year, the original V-Class concept is unveiled as a new round-shouldered dreadnought with a subtly vintage feel

Words David Mead Photography Phil Barker







TAYLOR BUILDER'S EDITION 717E & 517E GRAND PACIFIC £3,539 & £3,359

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What We Want To Know

1 So, it's *another* dreadnought, then?

Well, yes, but this round-shouldered Dreadnought range is quite a departure for Taylor. Andy Powers told us that it was inspired by the early country music his father listened to and it does have a slightly softer, more vintage vibe than Taylors to date.

2 But doesn't Taylor already have a dreadnought?

Yes, but aside from the entry-level 110, it's now a discontinued model.

3 So, are these just more high-end guitars we can't afford?

Our two Builder's Edition models are serious investments, but Taylor has also launched the standard 317 and 317e at £1,919 and £2,099 respectively with sapele back and sides, and Sitka spruce top. No doubt more standard models will follow during the year.

As far as Taylor's V-Class bracing is concerned, the jury has given its verdict and found it to be a decisive step forward for the acoustic manufacturer, adding subtle nuancing to the models that have presented themselves to these ears so far, at least. Far from being an evolutionary leap from the more established X-bracing developed by Martin, V-Class seems to be taking its place alongside its forebears on equal terms and thriving accordingly. Prejudicial ears will always favour the familiar, of course, but open-mindedness is often rewarded.

Having started as a tentative experiment in Taylor's high-end range of instruments, V-Class bracing is now starting to filter throughout the catalogue and, judging from what we have before us today, inspiring new models in the line. Dreadnoughts without X-bracing? Well, why not? But enough about what lurks under the bonnet of this russet-hued duo, let's line 'em up and see how they sing.

At first glance, it's hard to tell our two guitars apart thanks to the deep-brown Wild Honey Burst finish (Natural is optional) over the torrefied spruce tops.





1. Taylor's Expression System 2 preamp has its volume and tone controls on the guitar's upper bout
2. The major difference between the two models here is the timber used for the back and sides: the 717e bearing rosewood (shown here), the 517e mahogany
3. Both guitars benefit from graphite nuts, which help keep tuning stable and smooth
4. Fingerboards on both instruments are made from West African ebony with distinctive 'arrowhead' inlays

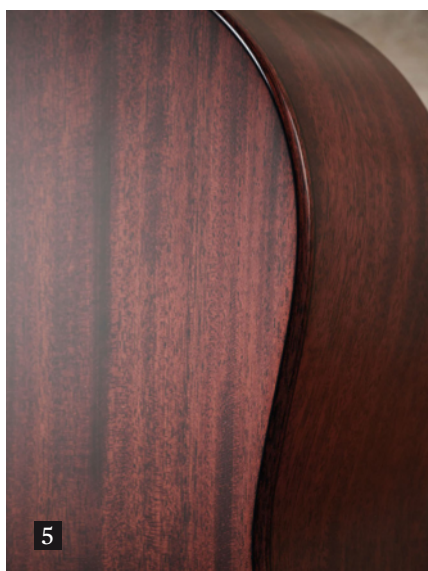
If the rounded-shoulder design harks back to a more vintage-y aesthetic, then so does the finish using Taylor's 'silent' satin on the body (again, introduced last year) to prevent the 'squeak' you often get from a high gloss. The whole package seems to dig back into a bygone era – at least for the hugely contemporary Taylor.

Obviously, back and sides wood differs – the 717e is rosewood, the 517 mahogany – but even those, along with the mahogany necks, are toned in to match the deep brown of the tops. As ever, fingerboards and bridges are a deep dark ebony but inlays are minimal; binding is of the same colour with subtle purfling and minimal soundhole decoration. It appears the intention is not to offer a cutaway, either.

Dimensionally, the Grand Pacific follows Taylor's previous dreadnought: the body is 508mm (20 inches) long, 406.4mm (16 inches) wide with a slightly shallower depth of 117.5mm at the base tapering to 95mm by the heel. Likewise, the scale length is 648mm (25.5 inches) with a 'wide' nut width quoted as 44.45mm (1.75 inches).

The whole package seems to dig back into a bygone era – at least for the hugely contemporary Taylor





As with any of the new V-Class models, you'll see a new Taylor label along with a black graphite loaded nut. Peer through the soundhole and you'll also see the angled back braces and, as ever, Taylor's exemplary craft is hard to fault, but there are numerous changes to the recipe beyond its internal voicing. Its neck shape, for example, is classed as having a "compound carve neck profile, which subtly transitions from a slight V at the nut to a rounded C, and features a rounded ridge-less heel".

There appears to be a little more heft to the neck with a front-to-back width of approximately 22mm at the 1st fret and 24.3mm by the 10th. The fingerboard edges are lightly rounded, too, which gives the neck a less pristine feel, while fretting from Taylor's standard medium/small gauge and the new 'arrowheads' inlays (grained ivoroid on the 517 and mother-of-pearl on the 717) are typically sharply done.

There's a new 'curve wing' bridge design that rounds the sharp points of the bridge

endpoints giving a little more comfort, like the noticeably chamfered edge of the binding along with a more rounded nose to the heel (which, incidentally, has no strap button). Subtle, yes, but both help with making the design feel more comfortable and more hand-tooled.

While pure acoustic models are offered, our electro versions feature the Taylor ES-2 with its trio of discrete controls – volume, bass and treble – on the upper shoulder. The output doubles as the only strap button on the base of the guitar where you also change the battery to power the preamp.

Taylor's craft is hard to fault, but there are numerous changes to the recipe beyond its internal voicing

Feel & Sounds

Picking up the 517e, the first thing you notice is the satin finish, which feels smooth and has a very old-world quality to it. We put the 'silent satin' through its paces and, sure enough, it didn't squeak once!

The neck feels comfortable, the advances here – the transition from V to C – are subtle and certainly don't throw anything unexpected under the wheels of your playing style. Just like most compound radius fingerboards we've tried in the past, if you didn't actually know they were there, you wouldn't immediately detect any change of feel while casually polishing up your ditty repertoire. Once informed, you might conclude that Taylor's Compound Carve is aiding your transit from low positions to high, but many, we suspect, will be content to remain in blissful ignorance, so subtle is its effect.

The 517e is well balanced on the lap when playing in a sitting position. The lack of a second heel-mounted strap peg prevents us



5. The 'silent satin' finish on both Taylors is reputedly squeak-free, unlike some gloss finishes. We put the theory to the test and didn't hear a peep out of either of them!
6. Despite the preamp controls being unlabelled, it doesn't take the player long to learn which is which
7. The Taylor headstock is the epitome of understated elegance
8. The tuners are nickel-plated and Taylor-branded and, in our tests, they were as stable as a rock

from commenting on how the guitar would fare when standing, but there's nothing here that would lead us to suspect you'd experience anything untoward.

As to its voice, maybe it's that change of bracing, but that ripe ol' dreadnought thickness in the midrange has all but disappeared. Let's not forget, though, that this is a modern dread, with a contemporary pickup system and not something that relies on an enhanced lower middle response to be heard via a microphone in live performance, as was once the case. Then it was down to the more boom the better, but today we live in a more technologically enlightened world. Instead, here we are treated to a smooth equality across the frequency range, and while it might not be the loudest dread we've encountered, it certainly has charm.

Moving on to the 717e, we're struck once again by how similar both these models are, to the extent that we had to keep checking the internal labels to tell them apart.

Naturally, the rosewood's presence here on back and sides has a different cosmetic appearance to the mahogany, but in a low light, you'd be hard pushed to tell them apart. Of course, with semi-identical twins like this – in terms of body size and general build at least – you'd expect a similar playing experience, the sound coloured by the different timber, and that's almost exactly what you get. The mahogany-backed 517e is a little glassier sounding, the rosewood 717e more earthy, with a smidge more bass and lower midrange presence. Always a case of personal preference, the choice would be yours, depending on what your ears tell you.

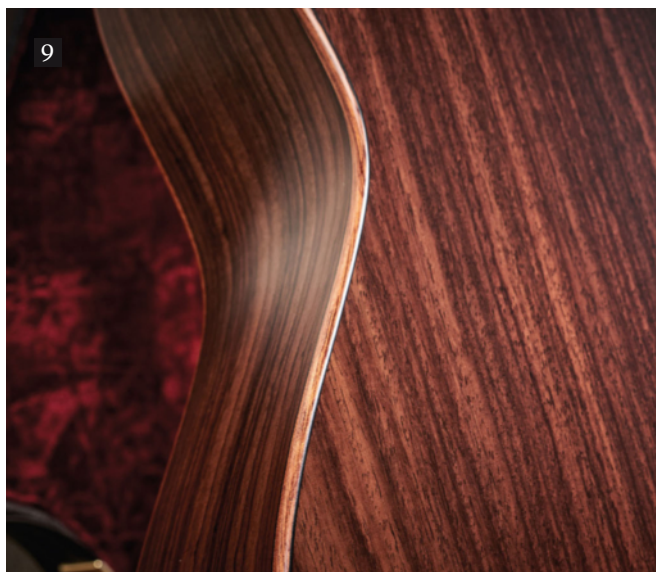
Through our standard issue AER Compact 60, the twins' slight difference in sonic personality is delivered faithfully, the 717e just having the edge to our ears, but that could be down to a personal bias to the charms of rosewood on behalf of your humble scribe. Taylor's tried-and-tested Expression System 2 offers optimum

THE RIVALS

At this price point, you're probably going to be looking over Martin's fence first when making a purchasing decision, with the redoubtable D-28 reimagined at around £2.4k or the D-18 at £2.6k being the main challengers. Collings' D2H puts another grand on the price tag at £4.3k with the option of an Adirondack top at £4.8k.

Yamaha's prestige dreadnoughts are worthy of note here, such as the LL26 ARE at just over £3k, and Takamine's Pro Series 7 range (prices vary) is definitely worth checking out, too.

You could even swerve into the hand-built world with an Atkin Essential dreadnought at £2.6k or a D37 at £2.8k, and Roger Bucknall at Fylde Guitars in Penrith will build you a dreadnought-sized Falstaff for £3.6k. The field is wide open, just bring your ears!



9. Both these new models benefit from Taylor's V-Class bracing system, which has the effect of reducing the typical dreadnought midrange mud to a minimum

10. The torrefied Sitka spruce tops are finished in Taylor's distinctive Wild Honey Burst

control over electronic voicing and it confirms that both dreads are performance-ready and raring to go.

Verdict

It would be tempting to judge these Grand Pacific models on the difference that V-Class bracing has brought to the party, but it would be wrong to do so. We've already seen how the new system has proved itself, so the real question is 'do they satisfy as vintage-informed dreadnoughts?' And we're happy to say that they do.

The slightly cleaner and less muddy lower midrange means they don't quite fit the established thumbprint, but is that really such a bad thing? We don't think so. The point should be that Taylor has succeeded once again in building a pair of stage-ready, tonally adept instruments that will provide the goods reliably for years into the future. And when you think about it, you can't really ask for more. **G**



TAYLOR BUILDER'S EDITION 717E GRAND PACIFIC

PRICE: £3,539 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: 14-fret Grand Pacific-size electro-acoustic
TOP: Solid torrefied Sitka spruce with V-Class bracing
BACK/SIDES: Solid Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 114mm (tapering to 95.5mm)
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406.5mm (16")
NECK: Neo-tropical mahogany w/ Compound Carve neck profile
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Individual Taylor logo'd – nickel-plated
NUT/WIDTH: Black Graphite/44.9mm
FINGERBOARD: West African ebony, mother-of-pearl 'Arrowheads' inlays, 381mm (15") radius
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: West African ebony with compensated Micarta saddle/56mm
ELECTRICS: Taylor Expression System 2 with volume, treble and bass rotary controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.18/4.8
OPTIONS: With Natural top (see below), the 717e costs £3,359
RANGE OPTIONS: Without pickup system, the 717 (Natural) costs £3,179; in Wild Honey Burst at £3,359
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISH: Wild Honey Burst (as reviewed) or Natural top, Blackwood stain back/sides ('silent' satin), satin finish neck and headstock

8/10

PROS Expertly built dreadnought electro with its own character and a fine set of lungs

CONS Traditionalists looking for midrange boom may be disappointed



TAYLOR BUILDER'S EDITION 517E GRAND PACIFIC

PRICE: £3,359 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: 14-fret Grand Pacific-size electro-acoustic
TOP: Solid torrefied Sitka spruce with V-Class bracing
BACK/SIDES: Solid neo-tropical mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 114mm (tapering to 95.5mm)
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406.5mm (16")
NECK: Neo-tropical mahogany w/ Compound Carve neck profile
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Individual Taylor logo'd – nickel-plated
NUT/WIDTH: Black Graphite/44.7mm
FINGERBOARD: West African ebony, grained ivoroid 'Arrowheads' inlays, 381mm (15") radius
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: West African ebony with compensated Micarta saddle/56mm
ELECTRICS: Taylor Expression System 2 with volume, treble and bass rotary controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.22/4.88
OPTIONS: With Natural top (see below), the 517e costs £3,179
RANGE OPTIONS: Without pickup system, the 517 (Natural) costs £2,999; in Wild Honey Burst at £3,179
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISH: Wild Honey Burst (as reviewed) or Natural top, Blackwood stain back/sides ('silent' satin), satin finish neck and headstock

8/10

PROS An honest 21st-century dread with bags of tonal colour

CONS Once again, traditionalists may whinge a bit about the drop in low-end oomph