

GEAR TANGLEWOOD JAVA SERIES £299 - £379

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TANGLEWOOD JAVA SERIES

Tanglewood's Java series are sumptuous looking cedar-topped guitars on a budget. Is a change as good as a rest?

Let's face facts here; in the acoustic guitar world, spruce is king. It comes in many flavours: sitka, Engelmann, German... The list goes on but, ultimately, almost all guitarists end up with a spruce-topped guitar. Ok, sure, if you're buying a boutique custom job, it might be made of Himalayan swamp ebony, but for the denizens of the mid-priced guitar, as soon as you get out of the laminate top market, it's a spruce strewn wasteland, or it was until recently. In an attempt to find a bit of differentiation in a crowded marketplace, some of the mid-market players have introduced slightly more exotic models.

BUILD QUALITY

In this case, as the lengthy preamble suggests, it's the top that's exotic; both the models in the Java series employ cedar, a wood that's famous for having more sympathetic harmonics, and less fundamental than spruce, or in layman's terms: it sounds warmer and a little more complex. Tanglewood hasn't stopped at the top in differentiating these, either; the whole look of the guitars echo the warmth that we are to expect from their tone, and is reminiscent of the exotic island that they are named after.

The range consists of an Orchestra and a Parlour (£299),

plus their pickup equipped sisters (£379), but leaving aside the obvious differences, they have a great deal in common. The laminate back and sides is one similarity, but credit should go to Tanglewood for going all out on the veneer; it's a sumptuous ebony-like wood called amara, with a wonderful triangular slice of spalted mango let into the back. Tanglewood says it's a three-piece back, and the bracing inside suggests that it might be, but it seems an unnecessary complexity given that underneath the veneer, it could be a single piece of laminate. Regardless, the top and back are bound with

mahogany, which is the same wood that borders the back pieces where it looks particularly delightful against the other woods. Fingerboards, also bound in mahogany, are of sonokeling, also known as East Indian Rosewood, and are unencumbered with position markers, barring a Tanglewood logo at the 12th fret. This wonderful combination of woods

gives a really rich, warm look to the guitars, and despite their relative lack of decoration, we found ourselves wanting to pick them up instantly.

Hardware wise, there's a sonokeling bridge plate cut into an Tanglewood's standard shape, a plastic nut and saddle, and vintage-style open back nickel tuners add a touch of the old world on the headstocks. That's a good place to start with the differences, because the Parlour model features a slotted headstock with three-a-side tuners in a classical style, compared to the Orchestra's standard headstock. The Parlour also has a shorter scale length; 630mm to the Orchestra's 650mm, but with the same nut-width and string-spacing. Finally, both guitars can come equipped with Fishman's Sonitone pickup system.

SOUND QUALITY

Much as it dwarfs its diminutive sister, the Orchestra sized TWJF E is a very approachable guitar, compared to a dreadnought. The slim body's bouts are not obstructive, and the neck is a particularly pleasant modern C section. As you start to play, the solid cedar top immediately makes its presence felt; laminate back and sides tend to provide a very direct and simple tone, so the cedar has extra work to do to deliver that harmonic complexity, and it does. Start with a little strumming,



TANGLEWOOD TWJF E TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Manufacturer: Tanglewood
Model: TWJF E
Retail Price: £379
Body Size: Orchestra
Made In: Indonesia
Top: Solid Cedar
Back and Sides: Amara/Spalt Mango
Neck: Nato
Fingerboard: Sonokeling
Frets: 20
Tuners: Open-g geared Vintage
Nut Width: 43mm
Scale Length: 650mm
Onboard Electronics: Fishman Sonitone
Strings Fitted: D'Addario EXP
Left Handers: No
Gig Bag/Case Included: No

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Great prices, lovely tone, sumptuous looks.
Cons: Pickup competent, rather than really good.
Overall: Superb value, strongly recommended

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality ★★★★★
Sound Quality ★★★★★
Value for Money ★★★★★

TANGLEWOOD TWJP TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Manufacturer: Tanglewood
Model: TWJP
Retail Price: £299
Body Size: Parlour
Made In: Indonesia
Top: Solid Cedar
Back and Sides: Amara/Spalt Mango
Neck: Nato
Fingerboard: Sonokeling
Frets: 18
Tuners: Open-g geared Vintage
Nut Width: 43mm
Scale Length: 630mm
Onboard Electronics: Optional
Strings Fitted: D'Addario EXP
Left Handers: No
Gig Bag/Case Included: No

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Great prices, sumptuous looks.
Cons: Tone might be too strident for some.
Overall: Great value if the tone suits you.

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality ★★★★★
Sound Quality ★★★★★
Value for Money ★★★★★

5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless.
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat.
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well.
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor.



These are good looking and will undoubtedly stand out in a crowded retail space



Both the TWJP and TWJF offer excellent value for money with or without pickups

and you'll feel a warm richness swelling from the mids, while the highs ring through clearly enough. Driven hard, cedar doesn't have the headroom of spruce, so the tone will tend to muddy at lower volumes but, in reality, unless you're really leathering it, this won't be an issue. Settle back and start to pick a bit, and you marvel at how the mids and lows blossom and cascade; very impressive for a relatively cheap guitar. The balance, too, is superb. There's a lyrical beauty to the top end, which shows none of the muting that can occasionally be a feature of cedar tops; you know it doesn't quite have the same sparkle as spruce at the top end, but you'd be hard-pressed to tell without a spruce guitar to compare.



The complexity of the mids, though, really pays the bills, and you're left under no illusions as to what you are playing.

Turning to the diminutive TWJP Parlour, we were hoping for an equally sweet but quieter, even more polite version of the Orchestra, but that was not what we found. If anything, the Parlour is in fact punchier, but that punch is combined with a boxiness in the bass that is



sometimes a feature of small bodies; it's as though you can hear the low frequencies bouncing off the sides a little before they really want to. Cedar is commonly used on Parlour guitars to offset the loss of mid and bass from the smaller soundboard, so as to end up with more of a big guitar sound, but here it has a voice all its own. You might consider the Parlour as a particularly warm

sounding blues guitar, like a teddy-bear Gibson Blues King, but in its natural environment as a late night front room fingerstyler, it is significantly outperformed by the larger instrument, even at low volumes. The pickups perform well, but are unremarkable.

CONCLUSION

These are great looking guitars that will undoubtedly bring in the sales and, more importantly, will stand out on the guitar racks in the crowded retail space. The test will be how many players warm to the tone of the cedar tops and take them home. In our eyes, the Orchestra model on review here, at £379, is the bargain of the century, and a fingerstyle player couldn't ask for more at the price point. The Parlour is a little too unique to gain an undiluted recommendation, but if you want a little guitar with an unexpected bark, it will no doubt make your shortlist, even if the lack of sweetness puts it behind the Orchestra as a picker. If you're looking for a different tone, and feel like trying alternative wood tops, try Java – you won't be disappointed.

Sam Wise

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