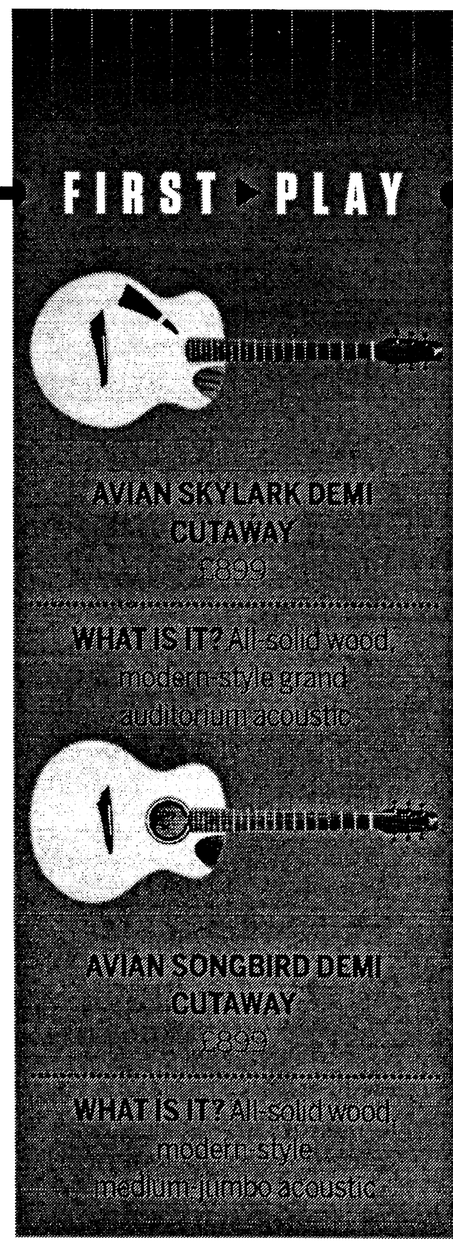
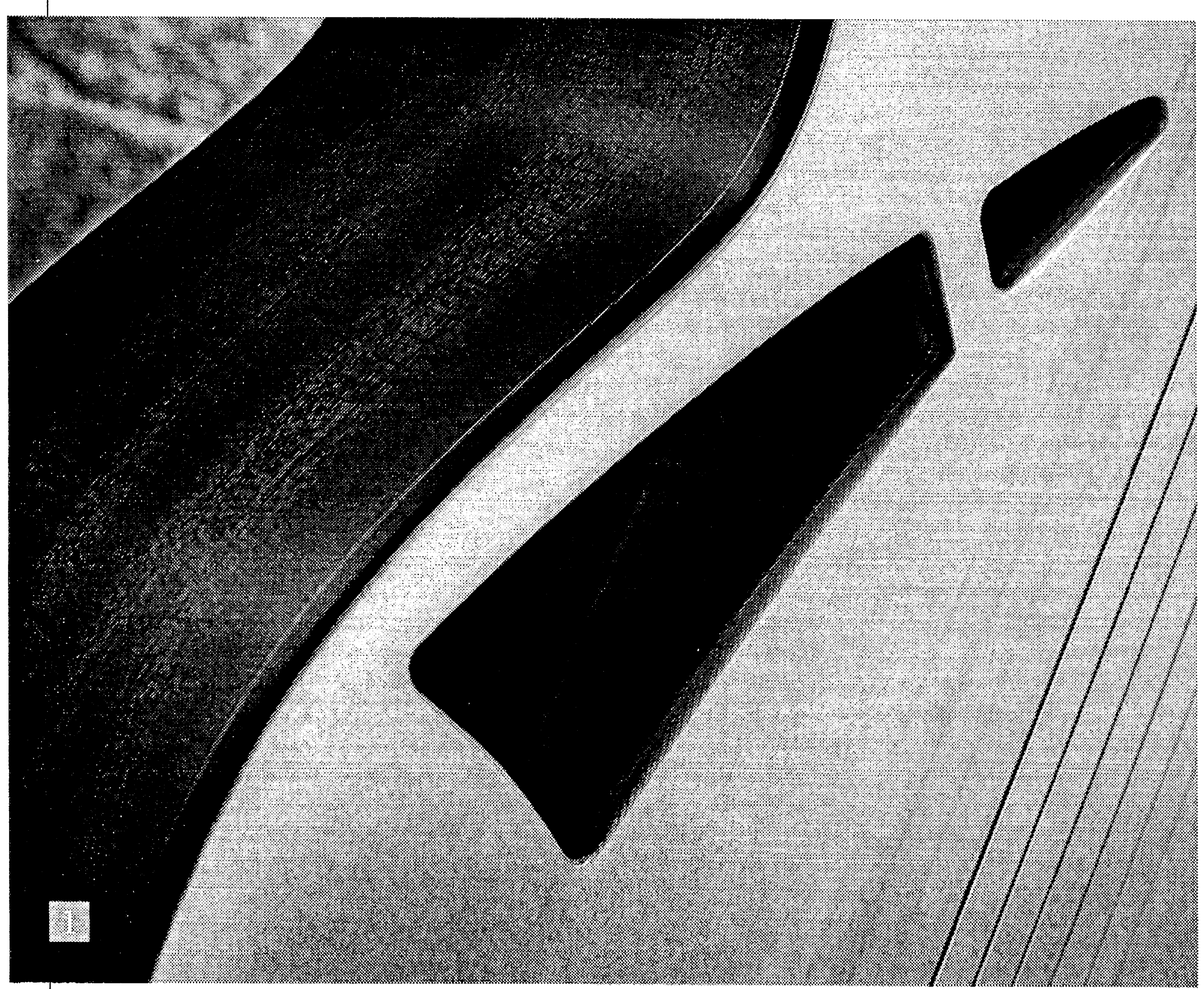


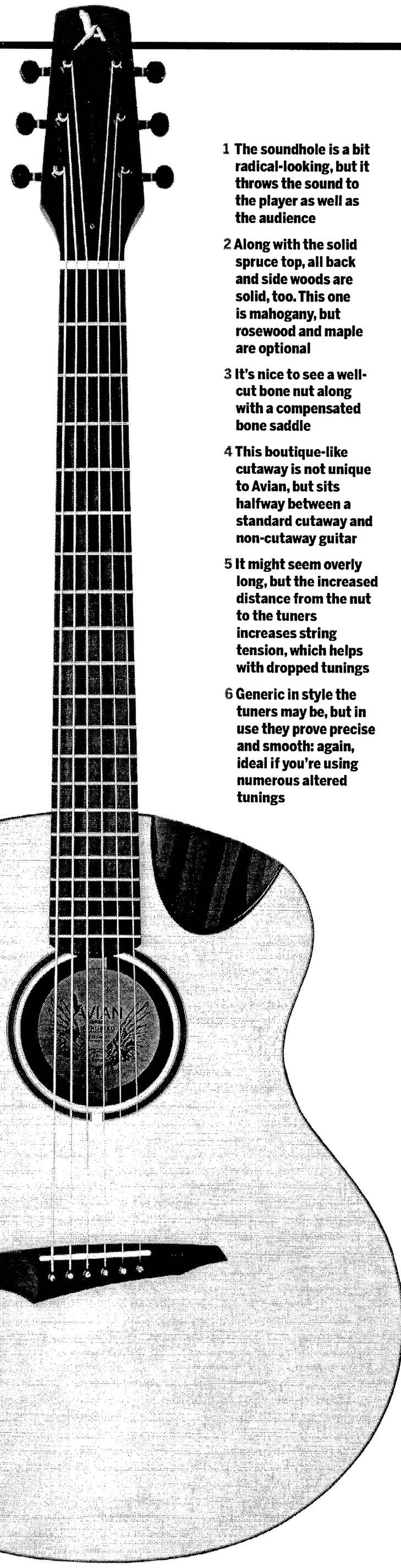
HIGH FLIERS

We train our eagle eyes and ears on a pair of stylish, medium-sized acoustics that are new to the UK

WORDS **ISOBEL MORRIS AND JIM KIMBERLEY**
PHOTOGRAPHY **ADAM GASSON**

Avian is a brand that's pretty new to the UK, so what's the story? Owned by Brits Tim Oulton and Roger Kimp, the company has its head office in Hong Kong, while manufacturing takes place in a workshop near Guangzhou, China. Oulton and Kimp maintain a continuous presence in the area to ensure that both quality and the workshop environment are maintained to their required standard. The guitars themselves are designed by highly regarded American luthiers Michael Bashkin and Harry Fleishman, and Bashkin travels regularly to China to make sure all is well from his perspective. In short, a thoroughly modern guitar company and some modern designs, too, with quite daring aesthetics complemented by beautifully figured solid woods, subtle points of detail and decoration, and stunning attention to build quality and finish. Nice.





1 The soundhole is a bit radical-looking, but it throws the sound to the player as well as the audience

2 Along with the solid spruce top, all back and side woods are solid, too. This one is mahogany, but rosewood and maple are optional

3 It's nice to see a well-cut bone nut along with a compensated bone saddle

4 This boutique-like cutaway is not unique to Avian, but sits halfway between a standard cutaway and non-cutaway guitar

5 It might seem overly long, but the increased distance from the nut to the tuners increases string tension, which helps with dropped tunings

6 Generic in style the tuners may be, but in use they prove precise and smooth: again, ideal if you're using numerous altered tunings

Fine Details

Classed as a grand auditorium, the Skylark is the most radical-looking of our pair. Like all the Avian guitars, it's made from all-solid wood with a fastidious attention to detail – it's a really crisp Taylor-esque build. Our Skylark has solid mahogany back and sides, the slightly more conservative medium-jumbo Songbird uses Indian rosewood; but both woods, along with maple, are available on each model.

Michael Bashkin and Harry Fleishman's innovations in the design have created stylish and idiosyncratic looks. The concept behind the Skylark's appearance is this: reshape and shift the soundhole closer to the edge of the top, while placing the bridge in the centre of the rounded lower bout. This stiffens the top and creates a larger uninterrupted soundboard, leading to a relatively bigger sound for an instrument of this size.

The so-called 'demi' cutaway aims to give comfortable access to the upper frets without losing air volume inside the guitar, which some say compromises resonance. So, instead of a standard cutaway, it's more like a scoop has been taken out of a non-cutaway guitar. It certainly works and is very comfortable, giving the heel of the hand a nicely engineered support when playing up at the body end.

The overall build quality and detail here is hard to fault – these are very nicely made guitars. Yes, we expect Chinese-origin instruments to be more affordable than, for example, a USA-built guitar, but the specification is nonetheless impressive. We have Alaskan Sitka spruce tops with scalloped X-bracing, nicely cut and shaped bone nuts and saddles, and ebony bridges. All the binding

and purfling is solid wood and immaculately cut, particularly impressive around the demi-cutaway. We have simple abalone dots on the bridge pins and the strap button, a transparent pickguard on the Songbird and, as an option, you can order a slotted headstock on either. Internally, things are spick and span, too, with reinforcing bars for the solid sides and very crisp craft. Our only gripe is the immaculate finish seems a little thick.

Both necks are from two quartersawn pieces of mahogany separated by a 6mm strip of maple – no stacked heels here, either. With a relatively shallow, slightly U-shaped profile, combined with the light camber of the matching-wood-bound rosewood 'board, we have an action that is low and fast and is the key to the subtle, precise feel of these instruments.

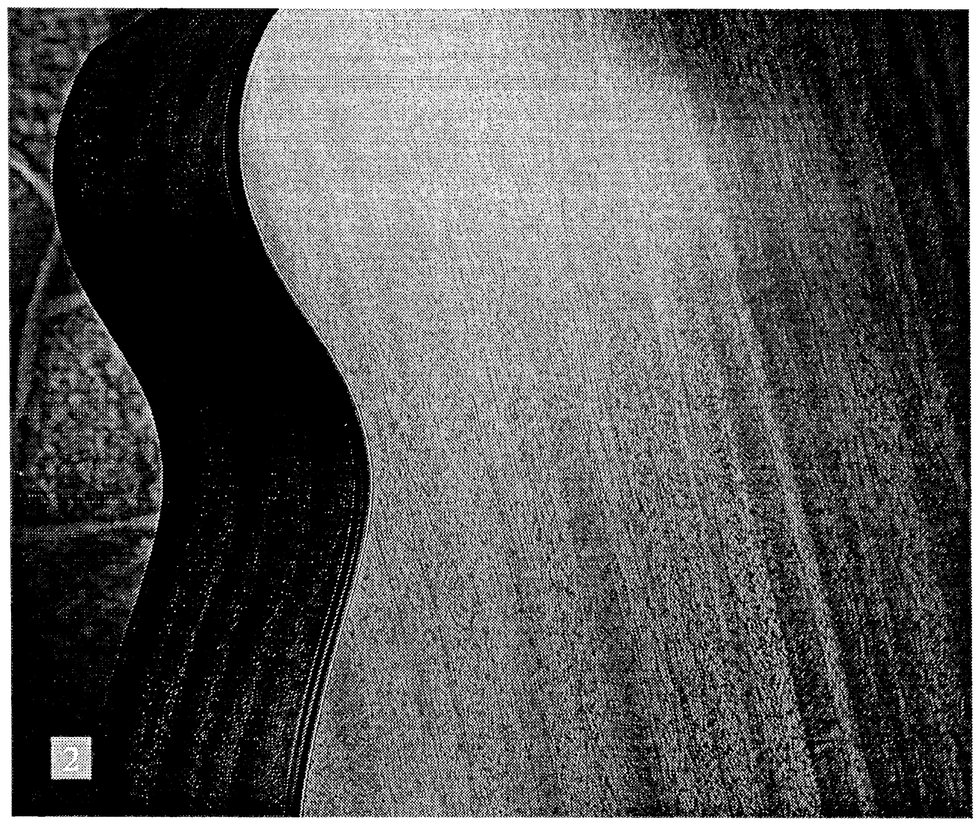
Feel & Sounds

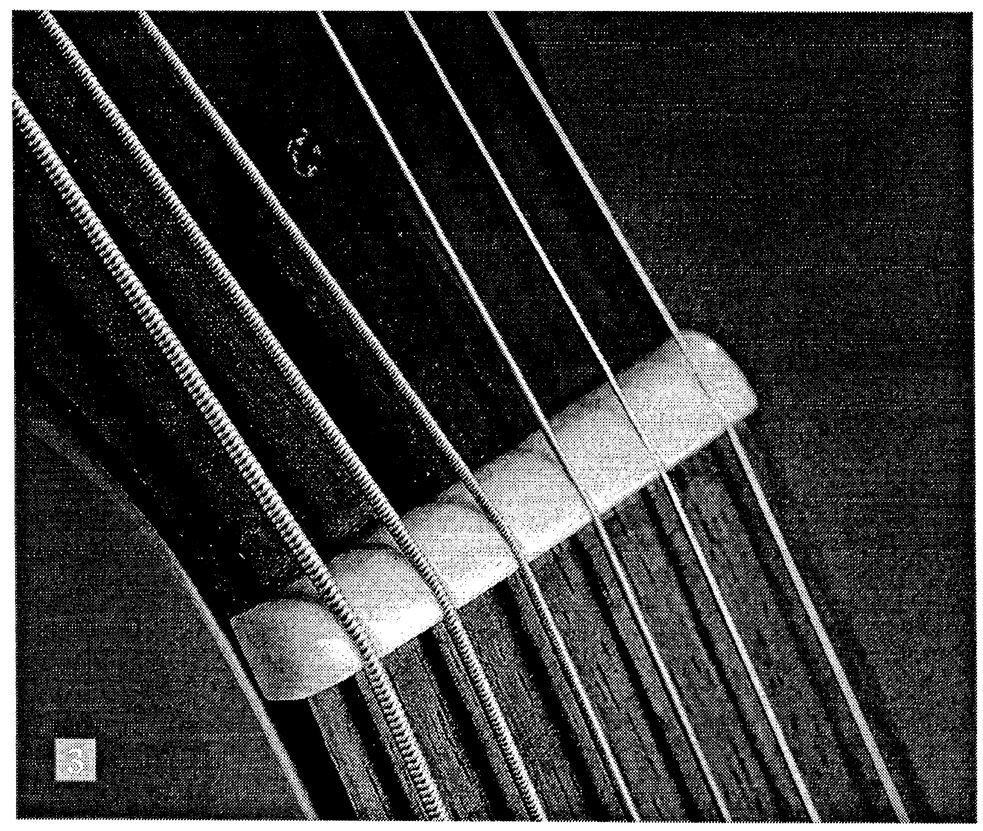
The shape and placement of the Skylark's soundhole directs the sound more immediately to the player's ear. We love this. If you want to play the guitar and have an audience's perspective on your sound, this will get you very close. It's an intimate experience, even a confidence boost if you need it.

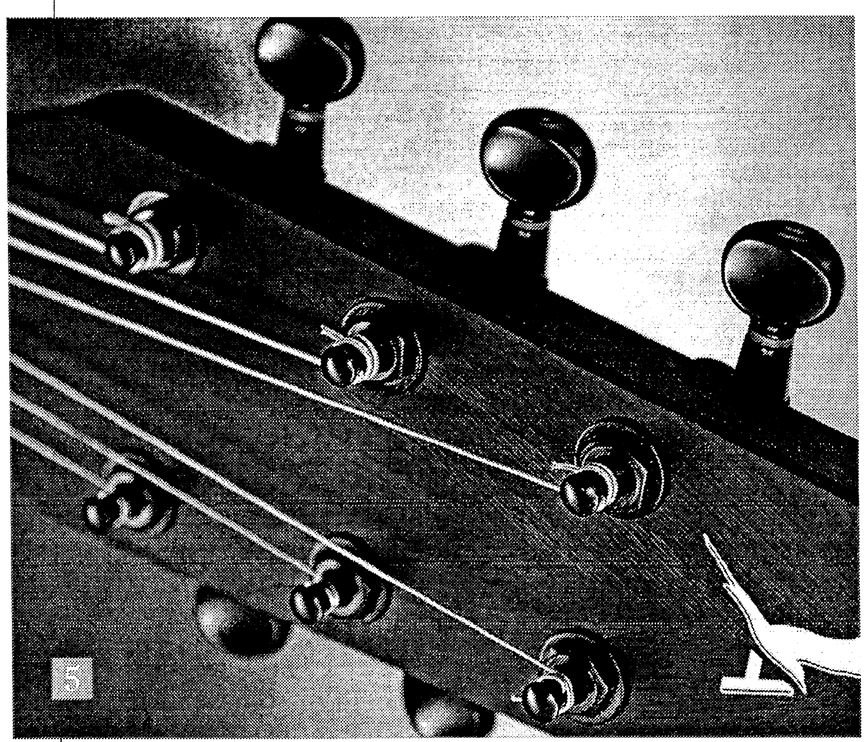
It also means, from the player's perspective, the two guitars are tonally quite distinct. But from the perspective of a listener, or when recorded, the differences are understandably less marked. They both have a modern, piano-like sound: lots of air and bags of sustain with a pristine delicacy and clarity as the note decays. Actually, the names work well in conjuring an atmosphere of delicate musicality, which the guitars absolutely live up to. Maybe the Songbird, with its traditional soundhole and shallower body, has a subtly narrower frequency spectrum and is a tad boxier, but in a good way. The subtle honk has character without losing the distinctive super clarity of the overall sound.

With Taylor dreadnoughts being the default choice for these writers' live performances, it's easy to get accustomed to some pretty boisterous playing. Yet these Avians feel like thoroughbreds – busker boxes they ain't. In the heat of our early enthusiasm, we did experience a little fret buzz, but our attitude was wrong. All the dynamics and tonal variety are here if you approach them with respect. And the elongated headstocks are not simply about style, either: they allow a longer string length, from the nut to the tuners, and with it

These Avians feel like thoroughbreds. All the dynamics and tonal variety are here if you approach them with respect







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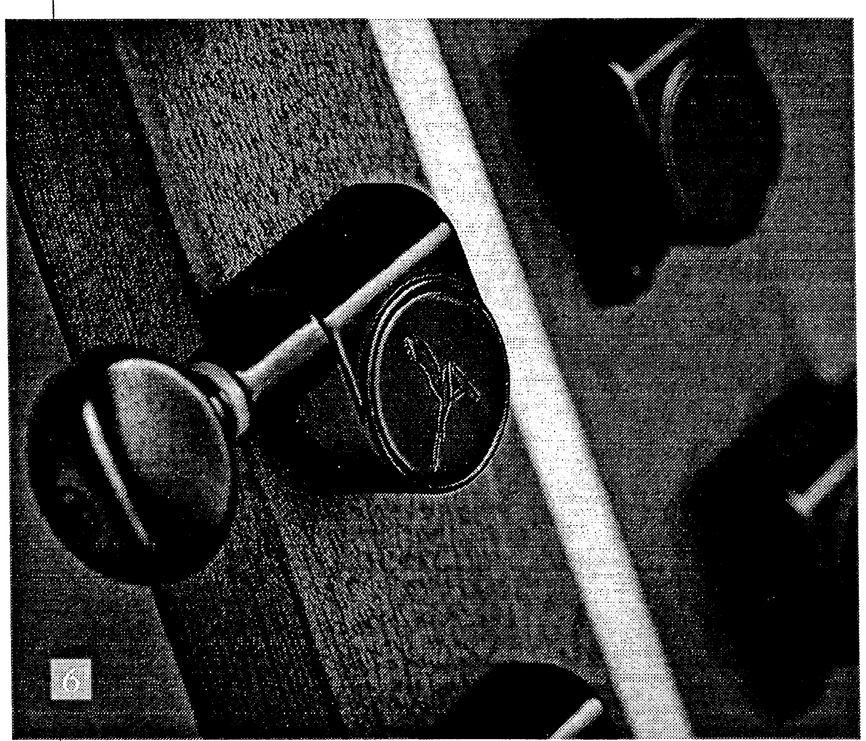

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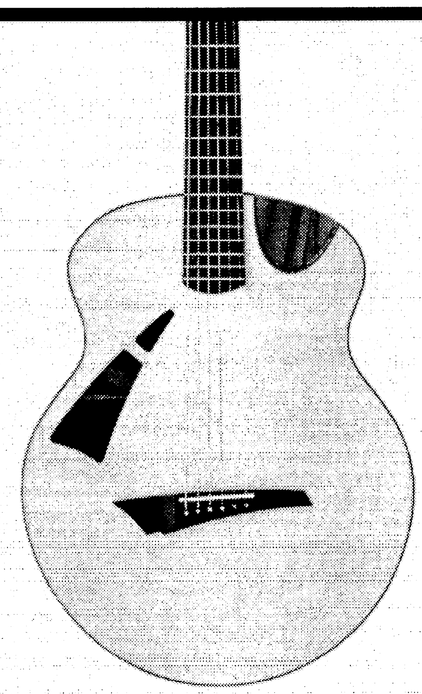
higher string tension. So, detuning works extremely well and there's sweet intonation between open strings and higher-fretted notes, so long as your apply a little accuracy. We really are impressed by how manfully these refined guitars handle demanding tunings. Even when the bottom E is tuned to C, they deliver perfectly balanced chords – even with lightweight strings.

Verdict

If your idea of playing an acoustic is all about heartily strumming on a big ol' dreadnought, you probably won't be drawn to these 'birds. But if you care to adjust your approach to suit the refined build of these innovative instruments, then like us, you might be very impressed and become highly attached. They sound contemporary and exciting and have proved a pleasure to play. Sure, the aesthetics will not be to everyone's taste, but they look sharp, and to those who complain that guitar design has ossified, the Skylark and Songbird could be just the evolution you crave. Find fault if you can, but at this price we really can't. G

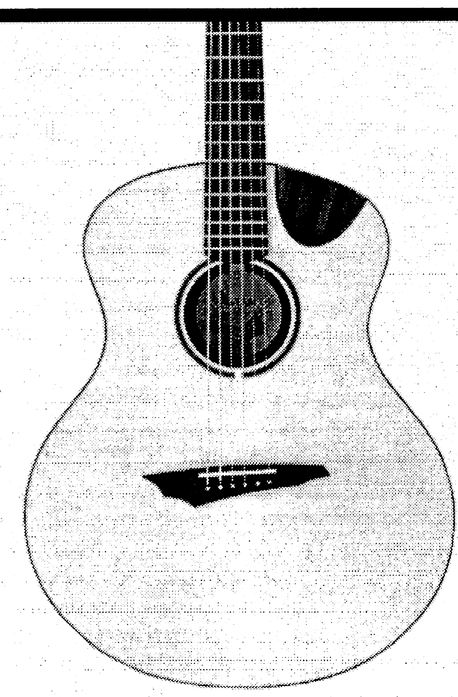


Avian Skylark Demi Cutaway

PRICE: £899 (inc case)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Grand auditorium
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 120mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 376mm
NECK: Mahogany with maple centre stripe
SCALE LENGTH: 642mm (25.275")
TUNERS: Enclosed Avian-logo'd tuners, black enamel finish
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/44.29mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20, medium
STRING SPACING/ BRIDGE: 56.7mm/ebony
ELECTRICS: None
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 2/4.5
OPTIONS: The Skylark is available with or without demi-cutaway and slotted headstock, and with either Indian rosewood or maple back and sides. B-band T55 pickup system (adds £100) or LR Baggs Anthem SL pickup system (adds £250) both include factory fitting
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, same price
FINISH: Natural high gloss (as reviewed)
North American Guitar
0207 835 5597
www.avianguitars.com

GUITARIST RATING	★★★★½
Build quality	★★★★½
Playability	★★★★
Sound	★★★★½
Value for money	★★★★½

Guitarist says: *It might be radical, but the soundhole placement is a revelation. Great for modern fingerstyle players*



Avian Songbird Demi Cutaway

PRICE: £899 (inc case)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Medium jumbo
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 116mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 398mm
NECK: Mahogany with maple centre stripe
SCALE LENGTH: 642mm (25.275")
TUNERS: Enclosed Avian-logo'd tuners, black enamel finish
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.9mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20, medium
STRING SPACING/BRIDGE: 57.1mm/ebony
ELECTRICS: None
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 2.2/4.7
OPTIONS: Also available with mahogany and maple back and sides. Other options, see Skylark
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISH: Natural high gloss

GUITARIST RATING	★★★★½
Build quality	★★★★½
Playability	★★★★
Sound	★★★★
Value for money	★★★★

Guitarist says: *A thoroughly contemporary guitar with a highly musical sound. Yup, there is life beyond the dreadnought!*