



Alhambra A-1, CS-3 Crossover, 3F

\$1,490, \$2,920, \$960

Spain's best-known guitar maker serves up three new steel strings *by Steve Henderson*

Spain has always had a special allure for guitar players. The home of some of the guitar world's finest instruments, players and music, Spain is also a serious contender in any discussion on the origins of the instrument. The guitar is considered Spain's national instrument, and Spanish music and dance is very much guitar-based. It's hard to imagine any Spanish social gathering being devoid of guitars and guitar-related instruments like the charanga and the guitarron. The nylon string guitar is, of course, the core of Spanish guitar tradition but steel string guitars, while an American variant, are also produced by Spanish luthiers who recognize the market share that these instruments represent.

Alhambra has been making classical, flamenco, and other guitar-related instruments for over four decades, and the range is comprehensive to say the least. They are hand-crafted by a small group of luthiers using time-honoured methods and materials – traditional tone wood, hide

glue, etc. Their “Spanish Heel” construction makes the neck an integral part of the instruments structural and tonal integrity. They sent us five guitars and choosing three to review was not easy – this is a tough gig but, sooner or later, you just have to bite the bullet...

Alhambra A-1

The A-1 has all the smooth balance you'd expect from this body shape. The bass frequencies are clear and defined and not boomy like a dreadnought, while the treble is smooth (really smooth) and doesn't thin out up the neck. The mids...ah, the mids...have that sweet roundness that mahogany provides and they blend beautifully with the highs and lows. This is a real finger-style guitar, with an articulate voice across the spectrum. It strums okay but finger picking really brings out its voice, and the string spacing is perfect for this style of playing.

The neck has a definite D-shape but the shoulders aren't too pronounced. At first glance the volute seems over-

engineered and physically a bit obtrusive, like it will get in the way for some chords. But as soon as we started playing, we found it to be positioned perfectly - adding strength to the neck's potentially weak point and allowing easy access to those really cool first-position jazz chords. Alhambra have used a lovely piece of rosewood for the fingerboard: it's smooth and solid but with plenty of feel under the finger tips. All-in-all, this is a very playable neck that clearly adds to the sonic character of the whole.

The A-1 has a couple of features that, while not unique, are a little out of the ordinary. Alhambra has used their Spanish heel construction, and the pinless rosewood bridge (similar to the type made popular by Ovation) is a great idea. You either love it or hate it, and the type of down pressure on the saddle is a little different without the sandwiching effect, but it sounds just fine here and palm muting is completely unimpeded. Also, the dual bone saddles (split for compensation)

are tilted back a little, so that the lateral tension isn't pulling the saddle forward (towards the neck) but adding to that down pressure we were just talking about.

German Spruce and mahogany are great choices for this body shape, which tends to accentuate the midrange. The quality of the timbers is first class and the high gloss finish shows this off nicely. The maple binding is a nice touch – it's so easy for companies to default to plastic, so it's great to see someone go to a bit of effort and do it so beautifully. The more we looked at the A-1, the more we saw the attention to detail. This is a fine guitar from a company not known for steel string instruments. But Alhambra have demonstrated a genuine affinity for the needs of their less-classically inclined cousins and have produced a guitar that accommodates those players, but with a little of Alhambra's traditional vibe snuck in where you don't notice. Very cool!

The result is a lovely instrument with a fine tone that's sooo nice to play. It's hard to put it down, once you start. Isn't that what we all want from a guitar? The A-1 is a 000-style instrument with it's own character, both in sound and appearance, that doesn't try to do everything. But, what it does, it does REALLY well.

Alhambra CS-3 Crossover

The Crossover is a mighty guitar, purpose-built for steel string players who need to



satisfy their classical jones or maybe just want to add another “colour” without having to re-think their technique too much. To accommodate, Alhambra have produced an instrument that addresses the middle ground between steel and nylon strings, with a neck that is not too wide and not too narrow but just right. 48mm at the nut is a little narrower than the average classical, and they’ve radiused the rich ebony fingerboard so that it, too, feels somewhat familiar. It even has dots along the side of the fretboard, which steel string players just can’t seem to do without. The neck shape, too, is part of the grand scheme – it’s not particularly deep and it has a definite D-shaped profile. Very comfortable along the entire length.

Everything about the CS-3’s construction and appearance is pleasing to the eye. The top is a lovely piece of red cedar with a beautifully consistent grain, and it’s married to an Indian Rosewood body and trimmed with maple bindings front and back. Inside, the bracing and kerfing are clean and neat with nothing extraneous to criticize. The mahogany neck is marvelously sculptured into the cutaway and allowing even more access to the upper frets. The headstock has an Indian Rosewood overlay (probably from the same batch as the body) with a nicely detailed maple insert, which carries the logo. Likewise, the rosewood bridge has matching maple insets and is very, VERY stylish. It’s nice to see someone produce

a classical bridge that has some uniqueness while still doing the business in a traditional manner. The radiused bone saddle leans back a little to increase the down pressure and, therefore, wastes none of the energy.

The tone is rich and balanced, with a spritely attack that isn’t thin and doesn’t compress too early. The bass fundamentals are tight and clear – there’s not even a hint of muddiness – and the mids are smooth and even. Voicing complex chords is a dream: each note can be clearly identified and yet not any particular string (or chord tone) is heard as a dominant voice. Unless you want it to be, that is: accenting a note here and there is a snack with the kind of volume the Crossover produces. It’s a big, clear tone that is very articulate and reactive to the touch.

Plugged in, the Fishman PRO blend offers LOADS of control and reproduces the guitar’s character authentically. It has a piezo pickup and a microphone, and any balance of these two can be achieved. We plugged into a portable Behringer PA (like a solo or duo act would use), an old Crate CA-125D, an SR Technology Jam 150 Plus, and a tweed Bassman (just ‘cause it was there). Each system had its own flavour but the guitar’s on-board preamp could be tweaked to sound pretty much the same each time...except for the Bassman – it didn’t have the top end of the others but it DID have some extra midrange warmth that was quite infectious and



The Alhambra A-1 headstock

The mids have that sweet roundness that mahogany provides and they blend beautifully with the highs and lows. This is a real fingerstyle guitar





The fancy CS-3 Crossover headstock

➤ absolutely gig-friendly. Playing with a full band, the Bassman might just be the go-to amp because those mids just seemed to cut through the mix without changing the Crossover's inherent nylon string character and, more importantly, without us wanting to change it.

The Crossover is a mighty guitar (did I mention that already?) and it has features that make it great for the gig, for the studio and, best of all, for sitting around at home...just chillin'.

Alhambra 3F

The Alhambra 3F is a flamenco in the oldest of "blanca flamenco" traditions, but with a couple of twists. It's lightweight, has a low-profile set-up, a spruce top, dual (clear) scratch plates, and the body is a touch shallower than a standard classical. The spruce top, tight-grained with plenty of silking, provides the bright, snappy tone and you can drive it hard before it compresses (whereas cedar reaches its max out much earlier). Sycamore has been used rather than the traditional Spanish Cypress, and it's been laminated for strength and stiffness. This

contributes nicely to the short sustain and punchy delivery.

Mahogany, instead of the traditional Spanish Cedar, has been used for the neck, making it supremely stable and contributing some warmth to the tone. The lovely rosewood board isn't as slick as ebony (with which many classical guitarists will be more familiar) but offers a lot of feel to the fretting hand. Rather than traditional friction pegs, the 3F is (thankfully) fitted with geared tuners. Fanatics take note: yes, it might change the tone but we're talking about an organic instrument with a whole lot of contributing factors. With these tuners we can tune up quickly and STAY there (it's the 21st century, deal with it!). At the other end, the rosewood bridge is a very traditional type with some nice detail. However, on this example, the bone saddle has been lowered a little too far on the bass side and the 4th, 5th and 6th strings actually touch the rosewood behind the saddle. Having said that, the tone and string balance are fine, and there's no "soft string" when amplified.

The 3F has the classic



Mahogany, instead of Spanish Cedar, has been used for the neck, making it supremely stable and contributing some warmth to the tone.

flamenco character – bright and immediate, loud and insistent (but not as brash as some), with a short-ish decay and a dynamic range that accommodates the player's every whim. The bass has no boomy-ness – just a really definite note with a narrow Q. The mids and trebles speak loud and clear, with a bit more

richness that other flamencos we've tried – very nice – making it a little more versatile. The 3F could be described as a treble-focused guitar (which makes sense for a flamenco) but it's not super-bright. It actually has a very sweet tone for finger style, with full, six-note chord clusters displaying plenty of tightness, never becoming

harmonic mush. Plugged into the same gear we used for the Crossover, it displays LOADS of sonic character and the same dynamic range as it does acoustically – if you can't get the audience to take notice of you with this guitar, find another hobby.

The 3F is an elegant guitar, nicely built and finished. The simple, classy binding balances out the ornate but subdued rosette – which we love – and the rosewood bridge completes the “blanca” theme. Even the rosewood heel cap speaks volumes for Alhambra's attention to detail. Negatives? Other than the saddle issue, there's some polish residue along the fretboard/body join (most we could remove, some we could not) and why is there a join in the top binding (at the end strip) but not on the back binding? Frankly, why is there a join at all? We nit-pick (er, that's our job!) but these issues aren't deal breakers in any way. This is a fine guitar, and for a Spanish-made instrument in the Torres tradition it is a bargain. This instrument plays and sounds great, and you don't have to wait for the voice to open up... it's already there. **G**

The Bottom Line

Alhambra A-1

We like: Solid tone and very playable

We dislike: ?

Guitarist says: It has its own high-quality vibe and tone.

Alhambra CS-3 Crossover

We like: Great tone – plugged or unplugged.

We dislike: ?

Guitarist says: A REALLY usable nylon string gigging guitar.

Alhambra A-1

We like: Loud and snappy without being too aggressive.

We dislike: The saddle and binding issues.

Guitarist says: This flamenco will work in a wide range of styles.



Alhambra A-1

PRICE: \$1,490
ORIGIN: Spain
TYPE: OM-style
TOP: Solid German Spruce
BODY: Solid Mahogany, maple binding
NECK: Mahogany
FINISH: Gloss
FINGERBOARD: Indian Rosewood
FRETS: 20 small/medium
SCALE LENGTH: 25.5"/647.7mm
WIDTH AT THE NUT: 1.74"/44.4mm
WIDTH AT THE 14TH FRET: 2.18"/55.5mm
TUNERS: Alhambra
HARDWARE: Nickel
BRIDGE/SPACING: Indian Rosewood, 2.15"/54.6mm (bone saddle and nut)
ELECTRONICS: N/A
TOTAL LENGTH: 40.25"/1022.35mm
BODY: (L) 19.75"/501.65mm (W) 15.75"/400mm (D) 3.74"/95mm – 4.33"/110mm

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Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★☆
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Alhambra CS-3 Crossover

PRICE: \$2,920
ORIGIN: Spain
TYPE: Acoustic/Electric Classical
TOP: Solid Red Cedar
BODY: Solid Indian Rosewood, maple binding
NECK: Mahogany
FINISH: Gloss
FINGERBOARD: Ebony
FRETS: 19 small/medium
SCALE LENGTH: 25.5"/647.7mm
WIDTH AT THE NUT: 1.89"/48.2mm
WIDTH AT THE 12TH FRET: 2.37"/60.4mm
TUNERS: Deluxe, ebony buttons
HARDWARE: Gold
BRIDGE/SPACING: Indian Rosewood, 2.32"/59mm (bone saddle and nut)
ELECTRONICS: Fishman Prefix PRO Blend
TOTAL LENGTH: 39"/990.6mm
BODY: (L) 19"/482.6mm (W) 14.75"/374.65mm (D) 3.74"/95mm – 4.33"/110mm

Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★☆

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Alhambra 3F

PRICE: \$960
ORIGIN: Spain
TYPE: Acoustic/Electric Flamenco
TOP: Solid German Spruce
BODY: Laminated Sycamore
NECK: Mahogany
FINISH: Gloss
FINGERBOARD: Indian Rosewood
FRETS: 19 small/medium
SCALE LENGTH: 25.5"/647.7mm
WIDTH AT THE NUT: 2.06"/52.4mm
WIDTH AT THE 12TH FRET: 2.53"/64.3mm
TUNERS: Deluxe, pearloid buttons
HARDWARE: Nickel
BRIDGE/SPACING: Indian Rosewood, 2.32"/58.9mm (bone saddle and nut)
ELECTRONICS: Fishman Prefix PRO Blend
TOTAL LENGTH: 39.4"/1000.76mm
BODY: (L) 19.25"/488.95mm (W) 15"/381mm (D) 3.74"/95mm – 3.93"/100mm

Test results

Build quality	★★★★☆
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★