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TAYLOR BUILDER'S EDITION K14CE

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

LAST DECEMBER, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE part of a group of editors from several music magazines based here and abroad, who were invited by Taylor Guitars to get an early look at a guitar with an entirely new bracing system that chief designer Andy Powers had developed with the goals of enhancing the expressive range of an acoustic, while also improving intonation. What we witnessed in the guitar being demonstrated was a revolutionary system called V-Class bracing, which had resulted from Powers finding himself at the limit of what he could do to further refine the traditional X-bracing (invented by Martin in the early 1900s) that most steel-string acoustic makers, including Taylor, have been using for decades.

To celebrate the V-Class launch, Powers created the Builder's Edition K14ce on review here, featuring a Grand Auditorium body style with Hawaiian koa back and sides and a torrefied (or roasted) spruce top. "I like the way those woods work together, and the V-Class design actually intensifies the flavors of what you build with," says Powers. The guitar also boasts other ergonomic body features to create an armrest—including beveled edges that widen on the lower bout and cut-away (which has a reshaped curve to flow more cleanly into the neck heel)—designed to make it Taylor's most player-friendly offering yet. All Taylor V-Class guitars will further be distinguished by new interior label bearing Andy Powers' signature (Bob Taylor's name is a graphic element now), and a new black synthetic nut that contains more graphite to help the strings glide smoothly through the slots.

The K14ce is beautifully adorned with abalone inlay, including the rosette, headstock, and the perimeter of the top and back. Powers designed the "Spring Vine" inlay on the fretboard especially for this guitar. "We had planted some grapevines behind the barn at my





Andy Powers on V-Class Bracing

V-CLASS BRACING IS A RADICAL departure from the traditional X-style bracing that has been the standard for most steel-string acoustic guitars ever since Martin invented it in the early 1900s. The genesis of V-Class actually resulted from Taylor's chief designer Andy Powers finding himself at the limits of what could be done to further refine the X-style bracing that Taylor was using, and one day while watching ocean waves at one of his favorite surfing spots, inspiration struck.

"The waves were so chaotic that it wasn't possible to do any surfing, so I sat on a bluff overlooking the water, and I started sketching how the waves were breaking at the jetty," Powers explains. "I drew the outline of an upside-down guitar top around the scene, framing it so the jetty became the rigid vertical centerline."

This rough sketch inspired Power's first design of what would eventually become the V-Class bracing pattern. Instead of arranging the main support braces as a crisscrossed X, he positioned two longitudinal braces in a V formation with the top of the V splayed along either side of the soundhole. The initial prototypes confirmed his hunch—the V pattern added stiffness length-wise along the top, in the direction of the strings, while fan braces extending out from the lower part of the V controlled the flexibility across both sides of the lower bout, creating

a more orderly, side-to-side rocking motion. The result was a guitar that was not only capable of being louder and producing more sustain, it also provided a more orderly way of controlling a top's movement, fundamentally improving how in-tune notes sounded all over the fretboard.

"V-Class bracing enhances the foundational characteristics of each guitar's voice," says Powers. "Players will hear the 'in-tuneness' of the notes in relationship to each other, along with greater clarity, power, uniformity, and of course, more dynamic range and sustain."

Did Powers also do something else to the K14's bridge or nut to make it play more in-tune?

"Nothing about the string compensation or anything like that has changed," Powers says. "As guitar players, we take the word 'intonation,' and we automatically equate it to 'compensation.' By definition, however, what intonation means is the 'in-tuneness' of something. For example, to a singer who can sing any pitch, intonation means producing an accurate pitch. The same is true for a violinist or a sax player. The compensation of the K14—the scale length, the saddle, and all of that—is exactly what we have been doing for the last couple of years, which is real accurate. However, the top of a guitar has to speak two languages. It's functioning like a translator—it's taking in a message from the strings, and it has to translate

that to a language we can hear. What has happened in the past is that a lot of guitar tops don't have a very complete vocabulary, and when they translate string language into auditory language, some stuff gets left out, or is miscommunicated.

"Essentially, V-Class bracing gives the K14 a more complete vocabulary. It replicates exactly what the string is doing—so when you play natural harmonics on a string, you can go way up that harmonic sequence where you normally couldn't. And when you change to a different pick, it makes a much bigger change than it normally would. If you play back by the saddle, it's super bright, and if you move farther up the fingerboard, it's really warm. All of those different flavors get intensified because you get to hear them the way they were trying to be heard. I just got back from Blackbird studios in Nashville where we were playing the K14 in front of some different condenser mics, and it was so fun to hear. The house engineer recorded me playing it, and, when he played it back, I said, 'Wow, I used to have to try really hard to make a guitar sound like that. What did you do?' He said, 'All I did was put the microphone on it.' I was pretty thrilled with that.

"Ultimately, though, the players will decide. If they discover the same fun things that I've found with this guitar I think they'll really enjoy it." —AT

FRETS

{ TAYLOR K14CE }

house, and, as we were putting the guitars together, I was seeing them out the shop window. The tendrils looked so spring-like, and I thought that was fitting for the new guitar. The inlay pattern was the most minimalistic form of a vine I could draw.”

Aside from its V-Class bracing and distinctive ornamentation, the balance of the K14ce is essentially standard Taylor fare, which means the ergonomics and playability are excellent. The mahogany neck has a super comfy feel, the heel is very accommodating when fingering in the cutaway zone, and the fretwork is spotless. At 4.4 lbs, the guitar is very nimble, and it balances nicely whether sitting or standing.

Strung with Elixir Standard Light phosphor-bronze strings, the K14ce is a great-playing guitar that sounds complex and expressive. It sustains really well and has a lively resonance that makes notes feel like they're blossoming under your fingers. All good stuff, but the guitar's tunefulness is really something to behold. Every guitarist who tried this review sample K14 noticed right away how consistently in-tune it sounded when chording in different positions, and this harmonic cohesion is a big part of what makes this guitar so enjoyable to play.

The K14ce comes with ES2 electronics (with Volume, Bass, and Treble controls) that facilitate plugging into amps or P.A. systems, however, one of the coolest things about this guitar is how good it sounds when miked. At a recording-studio demo, the K14ce sounded so natural on the other side of the glass it was almost like hearing it being played in the same room. The woods, the construction, and the V-Class bracing obviously all work together to make the K14ce sonically accurate, and, for this reason alone, it's something every acoustic player should try.

In a nutshell, the K14ce represents possibly the most significant evolution of steel-string design since the change from ladder-style to X bracing. In tandem with all the other refinements that Andy Powers has brought to this guitar (as well as numerous other Taylor models over the past few years), the K14ce is an exciting debut and a harbinger of things to come from this forward-thinking company. ■

CONTACT taylorguitars.com

Builder's Edition K14ce Grand Auditorium

PRICE	\$4,999 street
NUT WIDTH	1.75" graphite impregnated
NECK	Mahogany
FRETBOARD	Ebony, 25.5" scale
FRETS	20 medium-jumbo
TUNERS	Gotoh 510, gold plated (21:1 ratio)
BODY	Hawaiian koa back and sides with torrefied spruce top. Inlay design is Spring Vine
BRIDGE	Taylor ebony
PICKUPS	Taylor Expression System 2
CONTROLS	Volume, Bass, Treble
FACTORY STRINGS	Elixir Standard Light .012-.053
WEIGHT	4.40 lbs
BUILT	USA
KUDOS	Remarkably in-tune sounding. Stellar playability and ergonomics.
CONCERNS	None.