

## HOW TO SELECT A GUITAR

By Steve Glickstein

It's that time of year when everyone is looking to buy gifts or things for themselves. For those of you who are considering buying a guitar but are not very knowledgeable, this article will give you some guidance.

For most people, the first consideration is cost. Decide how much you can afford to spend as that will determine the range of instruments you should be looking at. You can often pick up a better quality used guitar for the same amount of money as a lesser quality new one. However, this does not hold true in the case of "vintage" or collector's instruments. You should try to buy as high a quality guitar as you can safely afford since a well made instrument, if properly cared for, can be expected to last 50 years or more and your investment will be well worth it. Further, a properly constructed instrument is less likely to warp and become difficult to play. If you have a guitar which is hard to play it tends to discourage you from playing it.

To begin with, you should determine if the instrument you're looking at is constructed of solid wood or of laminated wood. Laminates are layers of different pieces of wood which have been glued together to form one thicker piece. The layers are put together with the grain from each piece of wood running perpendicular to the other. While this arrangement is excellent for strength, it does not favor the needs of a musical instrument in terms of its ability to vibrate and produce clear and beautiful sound. The laminated instruments are usually covered by a thin veneer of better grade wood to give the appearance of solid wood. Instruments made of laminate are cheaper than those constructed with solid wood. Solid wood instruments are superior in many ways to those made of laminated wood for a number of reasons but primarily because the resonance and tonal quality of a single piece of solid wood is better than that of laminate.

Typically, well known name brand guitars and the myriad handmade instruments of the individual builders are made of solid wood. There are, however, name brand builders who have a line of lower grade models made of laminated wood which are either constructed outside the U.S. or put together here with parts made overseas. These laminated models have been improving over the years and often provide a very fine product for the money. Also, if you are primarily intending to use the guitar for performances where you will be plugging in directly, such an instrument may be the optimum choice for you as you are not so concerned about the purely acoustic sound. However, if you want an instrument that has an outstanding acoustic sound, you will need to look for one that, at the very least, has a solid wood top.

Naturally, as you get into the solid wood models, you also get into the higher price ranges. The types of wood used in making a particular guitar, as well as the grade or quality of that wood, will significantly affect the sound it produces. The most popular wood for the top of a guitar is spruce and this is generally accepted as the best wood for that application. Cedar and other types of wood can also be found but they are far less common. Whatever type of wood is used for the top, it should be straight grained and the best quality tops have grain that is very close together.

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Both the top and back of the guitar should be made out of “book-matched” wood. This means that one piece of wood was split in two and opened up like the pages of a book and used to make the top or back and the grain will appear identical on either side of the center line of the instrument. The acoustic qualities of a single piece of wood used to make the top or back of a guitar will be more consistent to each other, and vibrate more compatibly, than one made from either two different pieces of wood or from laminate.

So how do you tell if a guitar is constructed from solid wood? While it is simple to determine if a top is made of solid wood, it is not easy to do the same with the back and sides of a guitar. For the top, simply follow the grain of the top towards the sound hole and look at the edge of the wood at the sound hole. If the grain continues from the top down through the edge at the hole, it is solid. If you see the grain stop or detect a horizontal intersecting the grain, it is laminated.

As for the back and sides, a note of caution is advisable here. The manufacturers of laminated wood guitars have become much better at the cosmetic aspects of guitar building and have now begun to use “book-matched” veneers for the top layer of the laminate. Since there is no exposed edge to the back or side you cannot visually determine if laminate has been used. The best you can do is to compare the grain on the outside of the back or sides with that on the inside. Few builders take the trouble to match them up and if you see significant differences between them you know that a laminate has been used.

The type of wood you choose for the back and sides is a question of taste and is best left to the individual. Rosewood is the most preferred and produces a deep, rich bass and overall warmer sound. Mahogany is a bit less warm and produces more treble. There are many other types of wood being used but those are the two most common. Ultimately your ear will tell you which you prefer but it is the quality of the wood and craftsmanship which is most important.

Whether buying a new or used guitar, check to see that the neck is straight and not warped. To do this, press down the sixth or first string at the first and 12<sup>th</sup> fret and sight down the length of the neck from the peg head to the body. There should be a very small, almost uniform space between the string and the fretboard all the way down... about the width of a thick piece of paper. If there is a larger gap, the guitar may be hard to play and may be out of tune when you fret the string farther up the neck. Also, if the strings are too high, it will be hard and discouraging to play.

Used guitars must be carefully scrutinized for cracks in the wood and other structural defects such as loose braces. Cracks in the finish of the guitar will not affect the structural integrity or sound of the guitar but they may be an indication that the instrument was not well cared for and alert you to look it over carefully before buying. Check the back end of the bridge to make sure it is not lifting off the top of the guitar. Look at the top of the guitar immediately behind the bridge to see if it is bulging upward. If it is, you will want to pass it by as every repair adds to your ultimate cost.

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Look at the frets to see if they are excessively worn and may need to be replaced. Similarly, the fretboard itself should be free of excessive wear and gouges. Make sure the tuning pegs work smoothly and are not bent, broken, or slipping. Cracks, holes and other structural damage can be repaired but, unless the instrument is a rare model or has great collector's value, the cost of doing so is not worth the return you'll get for your money.

Listen next to the tone the instrument produces. Do you like the sound of it? Does it produce clear notes on each fret of each string? Check this by fretting each string at each fret and playing that single note to hear if there are buzzes or missed notes. A buzz or missed note usually indicates that there are some high frets that need to be filed down. However, this can also be caused by a warped neck. Have an expert look at it first before buying it.

Finally, listen to the balance of the tone. Does the bass overpower the treble or vice versa? Ideally, you want a nice balance between them. If either of them sound especially muffled, there isn't much you can do about it and you should pass on that one if you don't like the sound. Bear in mind that the sound of a new guitar is about 90 percent of the sound it will ultimately achieve. So don't let a salesman convince you it will significantly improve with age. If the sound you like isn't there at the outset, don't buy it. Also, make sure you buy a good hardshell case to protect your investment.

In sum, get the best instrument you can reasonably afford and you can expect many years of use and enjoyment from it. I'll be happy to assist anyone who has questions about a guitar they are thinking of buying. Just give me a call or send me an email. Happy Holidays and keep practicing.