

How To Buy A Guitar

By John Amato

Over the years many parents of students ask me the same type of question: “what should I look for in buying a guitar?”

Below I address more the issue of what to look for in buying a guitar, but not so much for a beginner, but for a professional aspect in sound production and reliability.

Here’s my rating first, followed by brief description of each category:

1. Sound Balance
2. Responsiveness
3. Playability & Comfort
4. Attractiveness
5. Affordability

Before I proceed, #5 “Affordability” may be your #1 choice in shopping for a guitar if you have a limited budget, but I’ll proceed if it is not.

#1 is Balance – this is the first thing I look for as a musician in a guitar -- “Balance” -- what I mean in “Balance” is does every note on every string and on every fret up and down the neck have a balanced volume, tone, and timbre. Do the notes on every fret ring out? Is there a thorough and overall ‘evenness’ of sound up and down the neck? This is a true sign of a well-made and well-playable instrument. Is the instrument bright when you want brightness and dark when you want darkness on every fret? And does it deliver those ranges fully balanced up and down the neck (some guitars are balanced in only certain spots of the fret board - and in other spots you find “dead” spots)?

#2 is Responsiveness -- Does the guitar “play you” or do you “play the guitar”? What I mean is does the guitar automatically, at first picking it up, fit right under your fingers to play each fretted note without ‘a fight’? If you have to adjust yourself to play the guitar I call this a guitar that is ‘playing’ you. If you have to adjust how you sit or position your body to conform to its neck, body, design, etc., etc, then this guitar as a purchase will forever ‘fight’ you and demand to ‘play’ you. This is definitely not a good trait. But if the guitar immediately feels good in your hands, arm, and upper body, and it demands nothing to be played; and if it in fact, welcomes more playing up and down the neck – this is a ‘responsive’ guitar – and possesses that quite welcomed trait of “responsive” playability.

Does the guitar invite you to play? In other words does the guitar offer that much attractiveness in playability to spend your time on? Does it invite you to play more? If so, this type of instrument is superlative and would last you for years. This is the type of instrument that even when you do not want to play or practice

at any time and kind of force yourself to do a practice of playing session, once you pick it up, you never regret it, and wind up really enjoying every moment you spend (either by will or not) on it.

Also, how the instrument responds to attacks and dynamics either by finger style or plectrum response in addition to the complimentary balance – if present-- makes for a superlative guitar.

#3 is Playability & Comfort. Does the guitar feel good and comfortable with or without a strap? Does it balance well in your lap? Use it while standing up with a strap. Does it also feel as good or not as sitting down? Does the guitar welcome more playing not only in one position but everywhere on the neck? Does the guitar seem to sing out in every position or only in some? A superior guitar will sound well in every position. Does the contour of the neck fit well in your hand as your traverse up and down the neck? How's the width of the neck? Can you easily play chords with or w/out a buzz or dampened string on certain notes because the neck is not as wide as your hand can accommodate? I have large hands, so I look for a wider neck to compensate for buzzed or damped notes in chords due to hand and neck width size compatibility. With Electrics I would also look out for the way the 'cut-out' companies like Epiphone, et. al. use inexpensive (or less quality control) in their installments of pots, inputs, knobs, and toggle switches, pups, etc, -- which are generally inferior to the major brands.

Scale length is also an issue when you consider the size of your hand in relation to the size and length of the neck from fret 1 to fret 12 and onward. For example, if you have large hands like myself, anywhere from 24.5 to 25.5 inches from the nut to the 12th fret is a comfortable layout for positioning chords and single lines. The size of your hands has much to do with the proper scale you'll feel comfortable and able to play easily without and buzzing or damped strings or notes anywhere on the fret board.

#4 is Attractiveness. Guitar Player magazine did a survey asking guitar players how sensitive they were to the 'look' of a guitar, and among mostly Rock and Pop players, they would not want to be seen on stage with a certain guitar 'look'. I believe this 'syndrome' is not present among more serious-minded musicians (but it may still exist in some players).

The guitar should have an 'eye appeal.' Many times an inexperienced player (I've been there) will pass a shop on go on-line and be taken in by 'eye candy' – how well a guitar looks, etc. This can be the worst trait in buying a guitar – and we can all attest to the fact of being burned in the past by the attractiveness of the multitude of overseas 'cut-outs' that look super but play like garbage. So, don't be fooled by looks, but at the same time, definitely have in mind the look you desire – and most important in this trait, does the guitar, when you look at it, get your respect for craftsmanship and beauty in design (much like looking at a beautiful woman or piece of art)? The guitar should never fall out of grace in terms of your admiration for its charismatic 'looks' appeal. I mean when I look at

my Jim Hall model, after 5 years, I still admire its lines and contours, color, finish, ebony appointments, etc. The same goes for my Gibson L5 and Taylor 814CE, Martin D28, etc., etc.

#5 is Affordability. Like I said in the beginning, if your budget is limited, I would try to find all of the above to suit the best of each category as far as well as my budget would allow. Many of the “Cut-Outs” (major company copies) from abroad (Besides China Korea, and Mexico, Indonesia is now also making some great cut-outs) do make some great guitars – but again, play the instrument and use the traits in #1 - #4 to assess the qualities, benefits, and characteristics of the guitar you like, can feel good with, and can afford.