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What Kind of Guitar is Right for Me?

I bought my first guitar in February of 2006. I always wanted to learn to play, but never had time for lessons. Along with the guitar, I bought a 'learn-it-yourself' book and started playing. It was slow-going at first, and that guitar suited my ability well. After months of practice, my ability had increased tremendously and I'd found that the guitar didn't handle the more experienced playing very well. I felt that an upgrade was necessary, but I didn't know what guitar was right for me.

Buying a guitar may seem like a simple task, but it is more complicated than it may seem. After asking several people what type of guitar they recommended, I got a unanimous response: "What is your price range?" I'd respond that I hadn't thought about price, and they'd advise me to go to a few shops and find something that I like without looking at the price tag. I took their advice and was shocked to find that the average price of the instruments was around \$1,000. I decided this was going to be more difficult than expected.

While shopping, I found three brands that I became particularly fond of: Taylor, Martin, and Larrivee. Keith Yoder, an experienced musician from my hometown, solidified my choices by telling me that Martin, Taylor, and Larrivee all made quality guitars. They are all hand-made from hand-selected woods. He also said that all makers will have inconsistencies from one guitar to another, but these particular makers are well-known for their consistency. Even though I had narrowed my search to three brands, I was far from making a purchase.

The most crucial part of the guitar is the material it is made of. There are many “tonewoods” used in making guitars, and they can be solid or laminate. Laminate guitars are less expensive, but they often sound muffled compared to solid-wood models. Laminates sound muffled because they consist of layers of wood glued together, which absorbs sound. On the other hand, solid wood is denser and reverberates more sound than it absorbs. Solid-wood guitars also have the benefit of “maturing” with time, whereas the glue may weaken between the layers of laminates with time, which is detrimental to sound quality (Acoustic). Since I plan on having this guitar for a long time, I decided to look for a solid-wood guitar. On the Martin, Taylor, and Larrivee Websites, most models were advertised as being constructed with solid woods. (Larrivee, Martin, Taylor online) The next major step was to determine which wood would best suit my needs.

Woods used in guitars, or “tonewoods,” are generally very hard and dense so they project sound rather than absorbing it. The most common tonewoods used in guitars are maple, mahogany, rosewood, and spruce. Maple, mahogany, and rosewood are most often used for the back and sides of guitars, whereas spruce is most commonly used for the top, also known as the soundboard (Sweetwater online). I asked Garrett Hufford, a student musician at Wartburg, what wood he recommended. He said that it was a personal preference because each type of wood has a unique sound that some may like, while others may not. He recommended a visit to Bob’s Guitar in Cedar Falls to play guitars made of different woods.

Before visiting Bob’s Guitar, I conducted some research to get an idea of what to expect from each wood. “Sweetwater.com” was very helpful in comparing and contrasting different woods. Mahogany is one of the hardest woods used, and, when used for the back and sides, produces a very bright sound. It is also known for accented lows and clear highs. Maple is softer than mahogany, so theoretically, it should dampen the sound and play softer when used for the back and sides. The third

most common wood is rosewood. Like mahogany, rosewood is hard and produces a bright sound. (Sweetwater online) Armed with this information, I took to the streets.

At Bob's Guitar, I forgot brands and focused on woods. I played five or so guitars of each wood, making sure that the models were the same and the only difference was the wood. I found that mahogany did in fact produce a much brighter sound than maple. I liked the warm, soft tone of the maple for finger-picking, but it did not produce the sound I was looking for when played hard and loud. Mahogany handled soft finger-picking as well as hard, fast chording. The only thing I didn't like about mahogany was the lack of midrange sound; the lows and highs were too overpowering. The last wood I played was rosewood. There were only three rosewood models at Bob's Guitar and they were more expensive than mahogany for the same model. The rosewood sounded similar to mahogany, but, after playing them side-by-side, I determined that the rosewood produced a more balanced tone. Bass, midrange, and treble stood out equally and none overpowered another. I decided I wanted a rosewood guitar, but there were still many decisions to be made.

There are many different body styles of guitars that accent different playing styles and can bring out the best sounds of a given wood. The three most popular shapes are dreadnought, jumbo, and classic. The dreadnought body is the shape people generally picture when thinking about guitars. This body style is a favorite among country and bluegrass players, who do a lot of strumming. Jumbo guitars are the same general shape as dreadnoughts, but are slightly larger. The larger body helps project the sound, which is ideal when playing in large areas or with a band (Harmony online). Dreadnought and jumbo guitars can be cumbersome and generally do not sound well when recording because they are so loud. (Is online) Classical shaped guitars have a smaller body and sound best when finger-picked, but can handle strumming as well. The classical shape is most commonly used among recording artists because they are not as overpowering as larger bodied instruments (Harmony online). Every body shape

can be made as a “cutaway” version, which is a concavity in the body allowing for easy access to higher frets. This is an expensive option, but the style of music I play uses the upper frets frequently.

This information was very helpful in making my decision. I knew that I did not want to record anything, but I also did not need the loudness that comes with a dreadnought or a jumbo. Mobility was not a key issue, so a small body was not imperative. Quality sound and playability were the only deciding factors. I like to play rock and alternative music, which requires access to higher frets, so a cutaway is a necessity. The pieces were starting to come together for me; I just needed to get out and play some different body styles with cutaways. I was off to Bob’s Guitar once again.

At this point in time, I knew I wanted a solid, rosewood guitar with a cutaway. The jumbos produced a very loud, clear sound when strummed, but individual notes were indiscernible when playing hard. The loudness overpowered any subtle techniques. Dreadnoughts were similar to jumbos. They were fantastic for strumming or slow finger-picking, but, when played hard, the chords also overpowered individual notes. The smaller-bodied guitars seemed to have a fine balance between volume and accenting subtleties. They also felt the most comfortable because they were small enough to allow a more natural arm position, which allows for more accurate playing. A small-bodied guitar was right for me. With most major decisions made, it was time to do brand-to-brand comparisons.

To compare the different brands, it was necessary to visit multiple stores because no single store carried all three. My search took me to Dubuque, where I visited Uncle Ike’s Music and Rondinelli’s Music. My first stop, Uncle Ike’s, carried Martin and Taylor guitars. After three hours of playing, Martins were eliminated due to a high price-to-performance ratio and they were difficult to play because they required a lot of pressure on the strings. The frets were also less forgiving than other guitars. Taylors were much more comfortable and easy to play, and were somewhat less expensive. I went to the next store to play Larrivees.

Rondinelli Music is the only Larrivee dealer in the Dubuque area. They only had two models in stock on the day I arrived and both were full bodied, not cutaway, and mahogany. After playing for fifteen minutes, however, I was in love. My hand moved freely up and down the narrow neck, my fingers danced across the strings with ease, and every note was heard clearly, even when played hard. When the price tag said \$699, I knew a Larrivee was right for me. The man at Rondinelli's said they were getting a new shipment of Larrivees in soon and there were a few cutaway rosewood models in the order. Not wanting to rush into things, I waited for the shipment to come in so it was possible to play a mahogany and a rosewood model side-by-side. In the meantime, I did as much research on Larrivee as I could.

Larrivee's Summer-Fall 2006 catalogue had a small-bodied, rosewood guitar with a cutaway listed for \$1,799. There are many online dealers, however, and the lowest advertised price for a new instrument was at Guitar Adoptions for \$1,349. There were also many product reviews online and almost every musician praised Larrivee and recommended their guitars. One Larrivee owner, also an experienced musician, stated that "This LV03RE is a versatile, elegant, understated and tone-rich piece of art..." on Harmony Central, a Website that posts product reviews from musicians across the world. I continued to read reviews and search for lower prices until Rondinelli's shipment came in.

When Rondinelli's shipment finally came in, I was out of town for a baseball game. It just so happened that the store was having a huge sale on Larrivee guitars that weekend, and it put pressure on me to make a decision. I could not play the rosewood and mahogany models side-by-side, but I knew from previous testing that I generally preferred rosewood. Ignoring the golden rule of guitar shopping, play it before you buy it, I asked my parents to pick it up for me. I trusted Larrivee and the price was too low to pass up. It was in my hands four days later, and I was not disappointed.

When I first played it, I was blown away. I had never played a guitar of that caliber in a normal-sized room, and the volume was amazing. It was not only loud, but it was crystal-clear and the notes hung in the air long after being hit. If I had to start over, I would not do anything different. I got an excellent guitar, at an amazing price. It is worth every penny, as well as the two months of searching to find it.

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