

How To Choose Your Next Acoustic Guitar

By Drue James – For LGIL Premium Members

So Much Choice... Where To Begin?

One thing's for sure... you'll always have plenty of choice when it comes to your next guitar. Acoustic, classical, electro, body shape, tone woods and a huge amount of brands. There is a tremendous amount of choice and it can be overwhelming before you've even started.

There are a variety of factors that determine why one guitar sounds, feels, and plays differently from another. Understanding these factors is key when it comes to deciding what acoustic guitar you should buy.

Determine Your Budget

The one thing that will narrow down your choices is budget. Here are the 3 price points for skill level and experience: (I'll go into more detail about each one below)

Just Starting Out Beginner – Between £200 and £500

Intermediate – Very Keen Amateur – Between £500 and £1200

Pro – Always going to play for the rest of your life - £1200 to £5000

The reason I don't recommend buying a new guitar for under £200 as a beginner is the quality and sound can feel inferior. They can be difficult to play and ultimately be a hindrance to those early beginner stages.

Brands aren't as important when starting out but I recommend a Yamaha or a Fender. Making sure the instrument is comfortable to play is the most important aspect when starting out.

Considering Your Skill Level

It's important to consider how much experience you have with guitar because it will help you determine how much to spend.

A beginner will expect to upgrade guitars eventually, and doesn't have much need for the subtle aspects that make a high-end guitar better than a budget guitar.

If you're more experienced you'll want to aim for something in the £500-£1200 range. If you play everyday and very rarely take lengthy guitar breaks and you've been doing this for 5 to 10 years then something in the £1200-£5000 range will last you a lifetime.

Laminate or Solid Wood Top?

If you're on a tight budget choose an acoustic with a laminate top. A laminated top is made of more than one piece of wood. These much thinner layers of wood are joined together using a combination of heat, pressure and adhesives. They're cheaper than solid wood tops, but they don't vibrate as well. This means that the sound won't be as rich and the volume not as loud.

Look Into The Best Brands For Each Price Point.

Most well-known guitar brands have models for every price point, but some brands do certain price points better. Some brands to look into include Fender, Yamaha, Epiphone, Takamine, Furch, Faith, Seagull, Guild, Taylor, Martin, Gibson and Lowdin.

Fender and Yamaha both make several models of acoustic guitars that are rated highly for beginners on a budget.

Epiphone, Takamine, Faith, Guild, Furch and Seagull all make great acoustic guitars for those with a little higher budget.

Taylor, Martin, Gibson and Lowdin make many high-end acoustic guitars. These guitars will be more expensive but for good reason.

To Plug In Or Not To Plug In?

Decide if you want an acoustic or an electro acoustic guitar. Electro acoustic guitars have electronics in them that allow them to be plugged into amplifiers. This shouldn't be a huge consideration for complete beginners but if you're upgrading from your first guitar this should be more important. Non-electro acoustic guitars need to be rigged with a microphone accessory or played into a microphone in order to be amplified or recorded.

In my experience when you move into the intermediate skill level (been playing regularly for 3 to 5 years) you'll often want to start sharing your guitar playing and for this an electro acoustic is essential. Electro acoustic guitars often have a built-in tuner as well, which many people find useful.

Pick a Body Style That Works For You.



The rule of thumb when it comes to acoustic body shapes is that the larger the instrument, the deeper and ‘roomier’ it sounds. Which suggests there are already two factors that may work against each other: the tone you’re gunning for versus the comfort of playing the guitar. If you’re after a loud bellow but you’re on the small side, then that’s a compromise you’ll have to make.

We’ll get into how comfortable the guitar is later on in this guide, but for now just remember that the bigger the body size the louder and boomier the instrument will sound.

As you can see there are loads of body shapes but it helps to sort them into four categories in roughly ascending sizes: [concert \(parlour\)](#), [auditorium](#), [dreadnought](#) and [jumbo](#). I’m not going into detail with this guide for classical and nylon string guitars.

Concert and Parlour (Small)

Concert and grand concert guitars are some of the smallest you’ll find today, measuring about 13.5 to 14.5 inches across the widest portion of the body. Due to their bright and punchy tone, most fingerpickers flock to these guitars, but strumming them also yields a balanced, if a little small, sound. Ed Sheeran has made these guitars hugely popular amongst beginners.

Auditorium and Grand Auditorium (Small To Medium)

Also known as “orchestra” models, auditorium and grand auditorium guitars look like bigger siblings of the concert guitars. They’re versatile, medium-sized guitars about 15 to 16 inches across its widest that are just as responsive whether you’re using a light or heavy touch to pick, pluck or strum. They are often the choice for fingerpicking players as they have a bright medium tone. Although you won’t be able to achieve a low-end boom with these, they’re excellent all-rounders.

Dreadnought (Medium to Large)

Dreadnought guitars project more than classic guitars. Some describe them as boomy sounding. This is the most commonly played type of acoustic guitars for singer-songwriters, folk artists, and rock artists. As they are more bass heavy they sit nicely with the human voice. The trade off is that for fingerstyle they often won't be loud or rich enough. Also, they run about 16 or more inches wide and have thick sides, so fair warning to young or petite players.

Jumbo (Large)

Jumbos are curvy, hourglass-figured guitars, like concerts and auditoriums except much bigger. They're at least 17 inches across their width. Jumbo players are typically strummers who prize the guitar's powerful, bassy and room-filling sound. Or they're just big people!

One Last Thing About Body Shapes And Sizes...

Scale length is as important as size, and these vary from instrument to instrument. The scale of a guitar refers to the distance from the nut on the neck to the saddle on the bridge. Long-scaled necks measure about 25 inches and above, and create more tension and tautness on the strings that result in a louder and punchier tone. Coming in at under 25 inches, short-scaled models have strings that are looser and easier to bend, yet have neither the volume nor punch of a longer scale.

Consider The Differences In Tone Of Different Wood Types

Of the many parts of an acoustic guitar—the neck, fretboard, body, and so on only the top of the body really matters. And rightfully so, it's called the guitar's "soundboard." The woods used for the sides, back and neck of the instrument are also agents of tone, but they shouldn't influence the purchasing decision, especially if you're only starting out.

For the "Top" of the guitar there are generally 4 types of wood used:

1: Spruce

The most common tonewood for soundboards. They're generally light, pale and durable, without a heavily figured grain that screams "I'm expensive!" No matter the species, spruce-top guitars tend to sound crisp, clear and straightforward, making them suitable for any genre. A no-nonsense spruce-top guitar is probably where you want to start.

2: Red Cedar

Cedar is favored by finger pickers because it delivers warm, rich tones that work well with fast picking. It results in a darker and, some would say, “bell-like” tone as compared to spruce, which is why many fingerstyle players prefer cedar. Cedar-top guitars are, unfortunately, not ideal if you strum with a lot of volume and force, they will lose quite a bit of clarity over time.

3: Mahogany

Mahogany has a strong sound that some describe as punchy. It is often used by blues players. Widely used as the sides and backs of acoustics, mahogany is a dense wood that balances the soundboard wood by adding definition. When used as a top, the deep brown wood offers a quiet but punchy sound that evolves from bright to rich over the years you play it.

4: Maple + Rosewood

Ok, so I've squeezed two types of wood into number 4! Maple is very transparent and doesn't color the tone of the strings very much. It's similar to Spruce in this way. Rosewood and maple are traditionally used as the fretboards. maple fretboards typically sound brighter and feel harder and smoother in comparison to rosewood fretboards which have more grip and sound warmer and darker with more sustain.

Play the guitar!

Ultimately, it will be difficult to decide whether a guitar is right for you without playing it a while. This is why shopping in person is preferable to online shopping. Most guitar shop owners understand this, and they will allow you to play any guitar you're interested in.

When you're in the guitar shop ask if there's somewhere you can go and play the guitar without employees or customers floating around. The best guitar shops have little sound proofed rooms so you can play without any distractions. This is the best environment to test your next acoustic. Take a couple of guitars or maybe three into the room. If you're not sure about body size for your own physical playing comfort then take in 3 different body sizes to see which feels the most comfortable. You'll quickly feel which ones are too small or too big for your body.

Strum the guitars, pick the strings and play a little higher up the neck. Once you've narrowed down your choice you can play each instrument more extensively. Don't rush, this purchase decision is likely to effect your guitar playing for a long time.

Check The Important Quality Aspects Of The Guitar

There are many factors to look at when inspecting a guitar. Of course overall comfortability and how it sounds to you are important, but look for some of these things as well (These tests are especially important of you're buying a used guitar!!!)

Check the action height. This is how far the strings are from the fretboard. The higher the action, the more difficult it will be to play. Look for a guitar with low, even action.

Check the intonation. This means how well the guitar is tuned up and down the neck. Check this by playing an open D chord and then the same chord on the 14th fret. If it sounds out of tune, there may be a problem.

Play every note on the fretboard and listen for rattling or dead spots. Rattling could be sign that the bridge is loose and dead spots could be sign that the fretboard needs work.

Look at the neck from the side. It should be practically straight. A little bowing is okay, but a lot is not.

3 Important Questions...

As you're playing the guitar you're not in front of the soundboard (where most of the volume and tone can be heard) so ask someone else to play your chosen instrument and see what you like the sound of. Most guitar players will be delighted to show off their skills.

This guide is extremely comprehensive and will be really useful for your next purchase. However just remember 3 things when buying a guitar:

Does it look great?

Does it feel easy to play?

Does it sound awesome?

Only you can answer these 3 questions. Once you've got a solid yes for each one ask the guitar shop if they offer any kind of setup service. This means that if your new purchase has any issues once you've bought it you can bring it in to them.

Also you can get freebies thrown in like a case, strings, capos picks etc. It's like buying a car, you can often get bits and pieces thrown in, but if you don't ask you don't get. A gig bag (padded soft case) or a hard case is essential. The latter doesn't offer as much protection, but is better than nothing. A hard case is the best.

Cut Away?

A big thank you to my student Ian for pointing this out to me...

Should you buy a guitar with a cut away? A cut away is a where a small part of the body is removed so you have easier access to the higher frets. As a beginner I don't see this as a consideration. However, if you've been playing for 3 to 5 years and you have been playing songs where you need higher fret access then go for it.

The only small trade off with a cut away guitar is that there won't be as much roomier tone because there's a part of the body missing. It's only a small detail but this can be enough for some players not to choose this option. The best of both worlds is to own both types of guitar and use the correct one for whatever song you're playing.

Buy Loads Of Guitars...

And perhaps my final and most important point is when you gain more experience you will understand that different guitars are used for different music styles. This is often how people end up owning multiple guitars. For fingerstyle you might have a medium sized steel string, for sing and play a dreadnought, then you might like playing classical guitar. This is often how people get addicted to buying gear. It's not just that, they are things of beauty and you can't have too much of that in your life!