

**11 Things
You Need to Know
Before You Buy
a New Guitar**

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Introduction

The reason I have written this report is because a lot of people just do not know how to go about buying their first guitar. Even people who have been playing for a while and are buying their second or third guitar are sometimes unsure if what they are doing is right. Everybody has different ideas about these types of things, but in the following report we will discuss many things you have to think about to come to your conclusion.

There are many people who waste thousands of dollars on guitars and other related equipment and do not realise they are doing it. This is mainly written for you. If you follow the guidelines here you will save yourself a lot of money, time and frustration. Don't forget to keep it for further reference.

Buy the Best Guitar You Can Afford

There are two kinds of people to think about here:

- those who are just starting out and want to see if they like playing the guitar or not
- those who have been playing a while and have committed to play for a long time.

Learners' Guitars

For people who are just trying out playing guitar for the first time, a cheap guitar is most probably okay to begin with, whether it is an electric or an acoustic (non-electric) does not matter. Just make sure you buy one of a reasonable learner quality, not one that is a toy. A music store will help you here; beware of supermarkets, they mainly only sell inferior quality or toy-like guitars.

A good learner **acoustic guitar** will cost in the region of \$250–\$400 and is normally sold without a case to help keep the price down.

A good learner **electric guitar and amplifier** are around the \$400–\$750 mark and are also sold without a case. Once you have been playing a while and made the commitment to stick with it you can always move up to a professional model; however, it is always better to buy a quality instrument right from the start if you can.

Guitars for people already playing

These are the type of people who can really waste a lot of money buying and selling instruments. How many people do you know who have bought a guitar or made another similar purchase and wish they had bought a more expensive model as soon as they got home? I bet you know a few who have done that.

It is far better to buy the best model first up and then you won't have to buy another one again – unless you want to own more than one guitar, that is. It is surprising how many people buy a cheap guitar and then sell it for a song. They then buy another one that is not much better, then sell that one, and buy another that is still not much better, and then sell that one, over and over, and so it goes on. These people lose a lot of money in the process of buying and selling. If you have made a commitment to play for a long time then purchasing a top-quality instrument would be best.

What Makes a Good Quality Guitar?

Good quality guitars are many and varied, but there are some more popular than others, which does not mean they are any better. Many manufacturers not only make top-of-the-line models, but they also make budget models of the same guitar. For instance, the well-known manufacturer Fender make their popular “Stratocaster” model in the United States, and the budget model known as the “Squier” is made in various other countries. Another one is Gibson; they own the budget Epiphone brand, which makes all their popular models, like the “Les Paul” and “SG”, in various other countries as well.

Probably the most popular real top-quality electric guitar is the Fender Stratocaster, the ones made in the US. Here are some of the reasons why I think these guitars are so popular:

- You can play most styles of music with them.
- They feel comfortable to play whether standing or sitting.
- Many of the big name guitarists use them in all styles of music.
- They sound great in all sound configurations.
- They have good resale value if you ever decide to sell.
- If anything goes wrong they are easy to fix and parts are easy to get.
- There are many Fender guitar retailers throughout the world.

The most popular top-quality acoustic guitars seem to be the Ovation (made in the US), Takamine (made in Japan), Taylor, and Martin guitar models. The best classical guitars seem to be ones specially made by a luthier (a guitar craftsman). The most popular models might not appeal to you, though, so you should check them all out first.

Quality Guitar Manufacturers

There are many guitar manufacturers that make good quality guitars. The list is too large to include them all here but some of the most popular are:

- Carvin
- Epiphone
- Fender
- Gibson
- G&L
- Godin
- Ibanez
- Martin
- Ovation
- Parker
- Peavey
- Taylor
- Steinberger
- Takamine.

Many Models

The above-mentioned manufacturers make many professional model guitars, and the designs and specifications do change from time to time, so it would pay to seek the advice of an experienced guitarist friend, teacher or guitar sales person.

How Do I Choose A Model for Me?

Many people who are in the market for a top-model guitar buy the model their favourite player uses most of the time. Beware of some of the advertising, though, as some famous players endorse certain products but don't use them very often – or not at all.

After you have been playing for a while you will most probably want to own a few guitars, and most people own a couple of electrics, a couple of acoustics, a bass, maybe even a lap steel, banjo or mandolin. Of course they collect these over a period of years; they definitely do not go out and buy them immediately.

The Difference Between New and Second-hand Guitars

New Guitars

New guitars are normally bought from your local music store where they are reasonably knowledgeable about the products they sell. You can ask them all sorts of questions about the different models, and they should be able to explain them to you in plain, simple language. So you do not need to know much about the instrument if you are dealing with a reputable music instrument dealer. If you are going to a good teacher, they will also be able to help with your decision.

When you buy a new guitar it normally comes with a guarantee, which will normally last for one year (some last longer), so if anything goes wrong it can be fixed or replaced. A guarantee gives you peace of mind that you are not buying a lemon. Over the years I have seen many guitars that have had to be fixed while still in their warranty period.

With new guitars you can also get hire purchase and lease finance, which means there is not the burden of having to find the full amount of money to make the purchase. If you only have \$500 to buy a guitar it is normally better to put a down payment of \$500 on a \$2,000 guitar

than it is to buy a \$500 guitar. Simply because the \$2,000 guitar is a better model. Some can cost \$5,000 or more, but the average professional model is about \$2,000 in most countries.

Buying new means it won't have been stolen or altered by amateur guitar repair people.

Second-hand Guitars

With second-hand models you are usually dealing with a private individual. They normally want cash for the sale and do not offer finance terms, so you need to have the full amount of money. They also could be hiding some sort of damage to the instrument that you might not notice. For example, guitars left in the sun can get a warped neck, which means you can't play or tune it properly, and to replace the neck can cost more than the instrument is worth.

Unless you really know what to look for in a second-hand guitar I do not recommend this method unless there is a luthier or guitar repair person you can take it to for checking first. Getting it assessed would cost you maybe \$20–30, but it is worth it. However, most private individuals won't let you take the guitar out of their sight, and they do not normally offer a warranty. While you can get some really great bargains buying this way, you need to have a good knowledge of guitars and guitar repair principles.

Buying the Right Guitar for the Job

When you are buying a guitar you must decide whether you want to play modern or classical music. If you want to play classical music, you will need a nylon string guitar. If you want to play modern music, you will need a steel string acoustic or an electric guitar. So what are the differences then?

Classical Guitars

Many people want to buy one of these because they are cheaper in most countries, but if you do, you could be wasting your money. Classical guitars have a wider fingerboard and a smaller body than steel string models and are played totally differently as well. The classical guitar is not as popular as the modern steel string.

The fingerboard is wider because classical players don't play chords like their modern counterparts; they tend to play parts of chords and lots of single note type arrangements. It is also because they don't use a pick; they play fingerstyle and need to get their right-hand fingers between the strings to pluck them.

The smaller body of the classical guitar is so the player can be seated while holding it across their left leg and have their right arm comfortably resting on the top of the guitar. Classical players do not stand while playing their instruments.

Many people think a classical guitar is just the same as a steel string one. If you have ever played the piano you will no doubt realise that a piano and an organ are totally different even though they look similar; you don't even play them the same way. For those who haven't played a piano before, people who play piano can't necessarily play the organ, and vice versa. It is the same with the nylon and steel string guitars.

Don't try putting steel strings on a classical guitar because they are built differently and the steel strings put a much heavier tension on the neck and bridge of the guitar, and it won't be long before problems start arising with the neck and bridge. Steel string models have a truss rod in the neck and extra bracing around the bridge for the extra tension that steel strings put on the instrument.

Some people think, or are told, that the nylon strings are easier on your fingers – that is a myth. All guitarists' fingers hurt a bit when they first begin playing, but after a couple of weeks you won't feel any pain when playing for short periods. After a few months you will be able to play for hours on end without your fingers feeling pain.

Modern Guitars

These are the steel string varieties, which come in acoustic or electric models. If you want to play acoustic or folk type music it is better to have an acoustic guitar to start, because this is the type of guitar used for this type of music. If you want to play rock music you are better off to have an electric guitar to start, because that is what is needed for that type of music.

It is a good idea to sit down and try a guitar out for size. An acoustic guitar has a rather large body, so someone under the age of about twelve might find they can't get their arm across to strum it properly. I recommend that very young people (about five to seven years of age) begin on an electric guitar because of the small body size. The neck is okay for their left-hand fingers, it is just the body size that is a problem for the younger person. Electric guitars have lighter strings so are a bit easier on the fingers, whereas acoustic guitars have heavier strings and take a bit of getting used to.

I have found that in the cheaper ranges, steel string guitars bought new quite often have better warranties than their cheaper classical counterparts.

Try It Out Before You Buy

Before buying any guitar it pays to try a few out that you are interested in. For example, if you are planning on buying a Fender Stratocaster, go to a shop that has many of them in stock. When you begin to play each one you will feel the difference between them, even though they are the same model and same brand, they really do feel and play differently. It is a bit like driving the same model car you have, that someone else owns; it always feels different to yours.

Because of this difference in the feel of an instrument, it is essential you get one that feels good to you. If it feels good you will want to play it. If it doesn't you won't, and you would have just wasted your hard-earned dollars. This is one of the reasons I suggest buying a new guitar first, because you can try many guitars out in the shop. The sales people do not mind how long you spend testing them out, so take your time. When buying second-hand you can't try many out (unless you are buying a trade-in from a music store) so you really need to know what you are looking for.

I would never ever buy a guitar from an online store because I wouldn't know whether what I was buying was going to feel and sound good and play great. Even if they had a very good returns policy, the hassle is just not worth the time and frustration.

Always Pick a Guitar Because it Sounds Great

Many people get carried away with all the salespeople's hype like, "it has a solid top", or "it is made out of such-and-such a wood" or "it has gold-plated hardware". There are many more things like that which salespeople try to impress you with, but never fall for any of it because it means little to you if you are not happy with the overall sound. Professional players always go by the **sound and feel** of an instrument, never by the specifications.

Getting a Second-hand Purchase Checked Out

If you are buying on the second-hand market I strongly suggest you have any guitar checked out by a competent person. A guitar repair person would be best, or if you can't find one in your area a more experienced guitarist might be better than buying blind. You can find guitar repair people in the Yellow Pages of your telephone book, or ask at a music store.

When you are negotiating to buy on this market make sure you check out the new price at a local music store – it is surprising how many people want a "new price" for their second-hand instrument. Also make sure the person you are buying from has a "proof of purchase" document they can show you, and get a photocopy of it. If your new purchase turns out to be stolen you will not only lose the instrument but the money you paid for it as well.

I have seen so many people ripped off over the years buying on this market that I have not got enough space here to tell you some of the stories. If you know the guitar market well, and you know an instrument is in good repair, you can find some real bargains, but beginners, I think, should rely on their local music store.

They might have some trade-in guitars or some they are selling on behalf of clients. These guitars will normally come with a three-month warranty, and the shop employees normally know the clients they bought it from. If the guitars do turn out to be stolen the shop normally has an insurance policy to cover such matters. Buying second-hand from a reputable music store should be no more hazardous than buying a new instrument, and you get the benefit of their finance schemes as well.

Buy Quality Accessories

It is important when you do buy an expensive or professional model guitar that you buy quality accessories to go with it. No matter what style of guitar you play, if you have a quality instrument and poor quality cables, effects, etc. the whole sound will be poor. If only one thing in the chain is of poor quality, the whole thing sounds poor.

The Difference Between Cases

All top-of-the-line guitars such as Fender Stratocasters (US models), and Gibson Les Pauls and the like all come with their own personal case. However, among the cheaper brands, guitars normally don't come with a case in an effort to keep the price down. I strongly recommend you buy a case for your guitar if you are buying one of the cheaper models. There are three types of guitar cases: soft, hard and flight cases.

Soft Cases

Soft cases don't offer much protection for your instrument and are only to keep the rain off it. If someone stood on it while it is in a soft case they would damage the instrument. However, they are handy for carrying it over your shoulder, especially if you use motorcycles or bicycles.

Hard Cases

These types of cases are the next best. They stand up to some heavy knocks, and you can keep some accessories as well as your instrument in the case. They have to be held with your hand and are quite cumbersome on a motorcycle or bicycle.

Flight Cases

Flight cases are the ones the professionals use all the time. They can take the hardest knocks you can give them – like throwing them out a three-storey window and the guitar will be okay on landing. If you have a professional model guitar and are doing a lot of travelling in planes or buses, I suggest you get one of these. Flight cases are the most expensive but are well worth the extra money.

Always Have an Electronic Tuner

Probably the most overlooked part of a beginner guitarist's kit, people think they can tune by ear, pitch pipe, piano and various other methods. However, when you begin, most people don't know what "in tune" or "out of tune" actually sounds like. If only one string is out of tune the whole thing sounds bad. Nothing is more frustrating than an out-of-tune guitar.

I have seen many people give up playing because they were too miserable to buy an electronic tuner, and in doing so wasted a lot of time and money. Don't let it happen to you; buy an electronic tuner as soon as you begin. If you buy a professional model guitar most stores will give you a tuner for free; just ask them.

One little secret: professional players who can easily tune by ear all use tuners.

Always Know the String Gauge

Whenever you buy a guitar always know what the string gauge is as there are thick and thin strings. If you put a thicker string on, the neck will have more pressure on it, making it bow more than necessary, which could lead to major problems later. Thicker strings can also raise the tremolo arm action if your guitar has one. Always keep the packet of the last string set you put on your guitar in the case so you can refer to it when you need to replace them.

Thicker Strings

These strings always sound better than their thinner counterparts but are a bit more difficult to play. Jazz and blues players tend to like these types. They start from 12 to 54 (1st to 6th string) gauge and go up in thickness.

Thinner Strings

Although thinner strings don't sound as fat as the thicker ones, they do have a different quality about them. They have a much more twangy sound and are easier to play than the thicker strings. Guitarists who like these types of strings are rock, country and any other players who do a lot of bending in their playing. Most guitarists in this category play 9 to 42 gauge or 10 to 46 gauge strings.

If you want to change the string gauge from thicker to thinner, or thinner to thicker, it would pay to see a competent repair person first.

What to Do When You Need to Sell

There are times when people run out of money and decide to sell their guitar or other musical equipment. Most run to the pawnshop or second-hand store and trade their prized possession in too cheaply. Then a couple of months later they buy another instrument and pay top dollar for it again. I don't know how many times I have seen this happen, but it must be the most common error people make.

I think it is much better to go to a bank and get a loan or a credit card to see you through that tough period. It is much better to be paying a bank a nominal amount of interest on a loan than paying the price of making the mistake of selling assets cheaply, which can cost a lot of money to replace in the long term.

Conclusion

There is a lot to think about when purchasing a guitar. Do not rush out and buy the first one you see. It is much wiser to have a good look around first before making your final decision. Make sure you read this report a few times before buying that guitar and you will save yourself a lot of money and headaches later on.

If you need any advice on buying your new guitar or having guitar lessons, feel free to email me at kevin@guitar.co.nz or call me on (06) 357 0057.

Also, if you have not got it already, my book *The Secrets of Successful Practising for Guitarists*, would be a very wise investment to go with your new guitar. You can buy it on my website at www.guitar.co.nz/products/

Have fun playing and practising.

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