

TIPS FOR THE EVALUATION OF CLASSICAL GUITARS
by Sebastian Stenzel, guitar maker

- avoid testing a guitar in extreme climatic conditions and or directly after it was shipped by aircraft.
- if possible, choose a room where you are familiar with the acoustics.
- make sure the guitar is tuned to the right pitch.
- compare with a guitar you know well, but be aware that one gets accustomed to compensate the weaknesses as well as the strengths of each instrument one plays for a longer period, e.g. by adjusting the force of ones right hand: if you are used to an instrument which is relatively strong in the bass, you will automatically restrict the stroke of your right thumb.
- play pieces you know well, so that your mind is open to the guitar, not struggling with the piece.
- the pieces should contain as many different musical structures as possible, polyphony and single-note melodies as well as chords, slow passages as well as fast ones, and - very important - different scales (any guitar will sound good in E major). Pay attention to which degree the guitar allows you to convert your ideas of modulation, dynamic and contrasting colours of tone.
- test every single note over the whole fingerboard to find any badly dampened resonance („wolf-notes“), or resonance absorption („holes“). Do this both with the other strings dampened as well as with open strings, to distinguish the resonance of the strings and those of the guitar, but do not spend too much time on this. These resonance phenomena are unavoidable, but they should not be disturbing.
- play chords with dissonant harmony to check the sustain. Listen to see if you hear just one chord, or if you can distinguish the single notes which constitute the chord. It should sound homogenous, but also transparent to allow for clear polyphony.
- check the balance between bass and trebles. Bass notes transmit spherically in space, trebles are more projected from the front of the guitar. Therefore a guitar which is bass-heavy might not show this attribute in a large concert hall. In addition, there might be a great difference between the sound behind and in front of the guitar, so it is very interesting to listen to another person playing the guitar. On the other hand, it will be another instrument in the hands of another player. Never forget, that it will be you playing the guitar.
- check the balance between lower and higher frets, and make sure that the guitar does not „die“ in the high trebles (above 12th fret).
- inevitably, there comes a moment, when you don't know anymore what you are hearing. Then I suggest that you concentrate on how you are feeling just holding the guitar - you might be holding it in your arms for many, many hours. The same holds true for its aesthetic. You won't be happy with a guitar you don't like to look at.
- make sure the guitar is comfortable to play. Any slight irritation (e.g. with the shape of the neck) might become a real problem when you play for longer periods. The string-action should be adjusted individually for each player.
- according to your knowledge of guitar making, evaluate the quality of the wood and the craftsmanship of the maker. If you are doubtful about your competence, it is always a good idea to consult an unbiased professional before making decision.