

Choosing a Teacher

Your teacher can have a profound effect on your playing. You should seek one who has training in music and guitar performance. If your goal is to play classical guitar, be wary of guitar teachers who are primarily flat-pickers and dabble in classical on the side. The instruction methods for classical guitar playing have improved immensely in the last generation. Find a teacher who specializes in classical.

Try to hear students who've studied with the teacher you're considering. This might be easier than you think. For example, the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society holds regular open recitals. Attending these is a good way to see which teachers are producing students who regularly perform. It also suggests that a highly visible teacher whose students never perform may be better at self-promotion than actually helping students learn to play. Also, try to find a teacher who frequently plays duets with his or her students, both during lessons and in performances. Nothing will improve your musicianship faster than playing along with a proficient guitarist.

The going rate for guitar lessons varies widely. In the greater Cleveland area, you'll find teachers charging anywhere between \$50 to \$150 per hour. While rates may reflect the teacher's training and experience, they tell you nothing of a teacher's actual worth. A great teacher might charge relatively little—a bad teacher who thinks he's great might charge a lot.

Initially, the best way to judge a teacher is to talk to him or her. Ask the teacher about his or her training and teaching experience. This in itself may not tell you if the teacher is competent—there are many incompetent teachers with impressive résumés. But you'll at least get a sense of the person you're talking to, and that can help you decide if this is someone you'll feel comfortable working with. Also, ask to talk to students (or parents of young students) of the teacher. If a teacher who's worked in the area for a long time won't give you the name of anyone to talk to, then you might want to look elsewhere.

Once you begin studying with a teacher, beware of the following:

- Does the teacher frequently miss or cancel lessons?
- When you ask a question, does the teacher seem tongue-tied or unwilling to explain how something is done?
- Does the teacher frequently seem to miss the point of what you're asking?
- Is the teacher's behavior during your lessons impatient, abrasive, condescending, bored, or otherwise negative?
- Does the teacher seem more interested in impressing you with how good a player he or she is than in helping you to improve your own playing?

If you encounter these problems, find another teacher. Don't stay with an unsatisfactory teacher. (Always remember who's paying whom.) Bear in mind that you may have to go through several teachers before you find a good one. Don't feel guilty about this. The wrong teacher wastes your time and money, and can foil your interest in learning the guitar.

Also beware of teachers who treat you like an idiot, as though you can't understand the things they know. If patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, then obfuscation is the last refuge of a bad teacher. A teacher's job is to clarify. When a teacher throws up his hands and claims something is unteachable, then he fails you on the most basic level. Not only does he fail you, but he also insinuates that the fault lies in you. Of course, I don't

minimize the difficulty of teaching a high level skill. Indeed, many of the nuances of good playing defy attempts to pin down and dissect. But this is the job anyone who teaches takes on. I've no patience for teachers who say they have knowledge you aren't smart enough to understand, and neither should you. Teachers explain things—that's what you pay them for.

How do you know you have a good teacher? Look for the following:

- He or she is a competent player.
- You look forward to your lessons.
- Your teacher is eager and willing to answer any questions, even if you feel that some of your questions are stupid.
- You feel the material your teacher assigns is challenging, yet still within your ability to tackle satisfactorily.
- As time goes by, you become more and more confident as a player and performer.

Finally, to those who've considered taking lessons but have never quite convinced themselves to take the plunge, a word of advice. Over the years I've met many students who've waited years before signing up with a good teacher. None of them has ever regretted finally doing so, but almost all of them regret having put it off for so long. So don't be afraid to jump in. Good teachers don't bite, and they can introduce you to a world you might never have found on your own.