

TECHBENCH

Buying An Upright Bass

BY BILL LANPHIER

SELECTING AN ELECTRIC BASS IS A FAIRLY CUT-AND-dried deal—listen to recordings, learn what your favorite bassists are playing, read reviews, and pull out your credit card. New basses from the same manufacturer and of the same model are likely going to sound pretty darn close.

Not so with acoustics; you hear huge differences from one bass to the next simply because you're now dealing with a massive, predominantly organic creature with a sound that may continue to develop and improve for decades, maybe centuries, after you're gone.

For sure, shopping for an acoustic bass can be a daunting—even scary—prospect. But, by setting aside some time and having a plan, you can turn the process into a fun little treasure hunt for yourself. With suggestions from top dealers and other bassists, here's how I recently went about buying my second upright. None of the shops I visited knew I'd be writing a story about buying a bass, so I know the attention I was getting is typical of what anyone off the street could expect.

MAKING THE UPGRADE

When should the second-time buyer of an acoustic bass move



Upright guy Steve Swan plucks a beaut from his bevy of basses.

Figure 1

BASS TYPE	PRICE RANGE *	BASS TOP	SIDES AND BACK	FINGERBOARD
NEW PLYWOOD	\$1,300 to \$2,000	Plywood	Plywood	Usually ebony
NEW HYBRID	\$1,800 to \$2,900	Carved spruce	Usually plywood	Ebony
NEW SOLID WOOD	\$2,800 to \$10,000	Carved spruce	Solid wood (flatback or carved)	Ebony
VINTAGE PLYWOOD	\$1,500 to \$4,000	Plywood	Plywood	Rosewood or walnut
VINTAGE SOLID WOOD	\$3,000+	Carved spruce	Solid wood, often maple	Ebony

* San Francisco Bay Area, not including tax. Bass bags usually included. Bows and rosin occasionally included.
Note: Virtually all basses have maple necks.

Figure 2

OTHER FEATURES AND CONSIDERATIONS	TYPICALLY FOUND ON	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
FLATBACK	Vintage solid wood and some new solid woods	Sometimes better projection and quicker response. Easier manufacturing process on solid wood basses.	Sometimes not as warm a tone as carved backs.
CARVED BACK	Newer solid woods	Typically better arco response and also good pizz. The most popular back style today.	Requires more bracing on solid woods and therefore more difficult to manufacture.
CURVED, PRESSED BACK	Plywoods	Easily pressed into shape. Doesn't require bracing as do carved-back solid woods.	None
VIOLIN-STYLE BOUT CORNERS	Any bass type	Aesthetics	Pronounced bout corners more susceptible to damage than rounded "Gambia" style.
EUROPEAN MANUFACTURING	Any bass type	Hundreds of years' experience producing excellent basses. Typically fewer quality issues than Asian models.	Can be very expensive. May require major repairs due to age, but usually retain the quality sound after repairs.
ASIAN MANUFACTURING	Plywoods and solid woods	More affordable than European basses. Top models are often indistinguishable in quality and sound from new European models.	Quality can suffer, particularly on lower-price models. Quality also depends on proper setup by the U.S. dealer. Not on the market long enough to produce vintage instruments.
* 1/2-SIZE BASSES (37"-38" avg. scale length)	Any bass type	Easier playing for beginners or with small hands.	Much smaller, thinner sound than 3/4 or larger basses.
3/4-SIZE BASSES (41"-42" average scale length)	All bass types	The most common size for women or men. For most players, a good balance between playability and sound quality.	Typically not as big a sound as 7/8 and larger.
7/8- TO FULL-SIZE BASSES (42"-44" average scale length)	Solid wood, vintage	Typically fatter, louder, and often more definition.	Can be difficult to play for even normal-size hands. More difficult to fit into smaller cars, and heavier. Can be more costly.

* 1/4-size uncommon, but available

APPLICATIONS	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Beginners; often preferred in American folk music.	Affordable, more durable in harsh conditions. Sometimes thought to project better.	Simple, less-complex sound. Sound doesn't improve as much over time as on solid woods or even hybrids.
Beginners and working musicians in harsh conditions.	Affordable. Slightly more complex sound than full plywood.	Less durable than full plywood.
Pro-level or serious musician.	Much more complex sound than hybrid or full plywood.	More easily damaged in harsh conditions. Typically requires 6-12 months break-in time for a complex sound to develop.
Pro-level folk music.	Doesn't require break-in. More durable than vintage solid wood.	Not as complex a sound as vintage solid wood.
Pro-level musician.	Doesn't require break-in.	Typically more expensive and more easily damaged in harsh conditions.

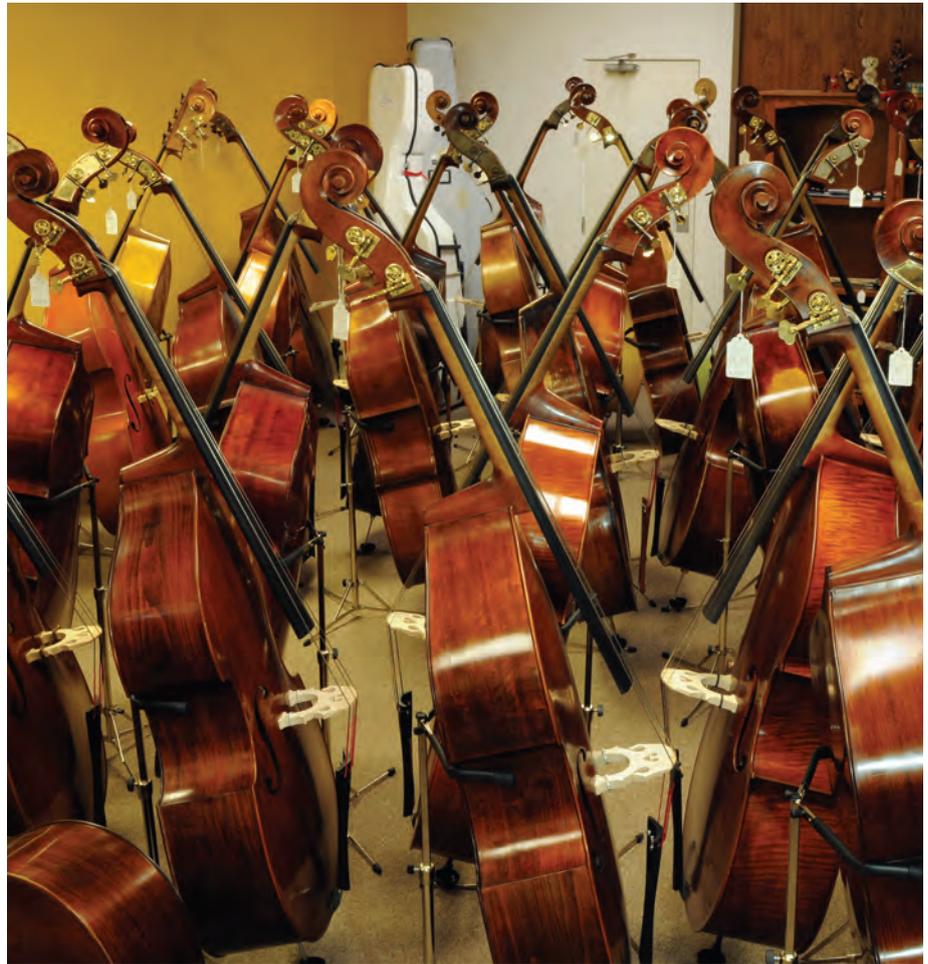
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up in quality? My Chinese-made Christopher plywood had served me well for nine years of continuous use playing straight-ahead jazz, East European folk music, a little bluegrass, and recording several CDs. Other players and bass techs still comment that it's one of the best plywood instruments they've heard. But I wanted something with a little more character and warmth, plus good cutting power.

Where to start? First, set a budget to determine if what you're looking for is within your reach. For me it was the \$3,000 range. I wanted to move up to a new solid-wood bass, and they start around \$2,800. For reference, check out **Fig. 1**, which outlines the types of basses available, their general features, and corresponding price ranges.

Once you know what kind of animal you're after, it's time to go into the jungle and track it down. To find a good bass shop, talk to fellow bass players or a teacher. Go

to a club or concert and talk to busy bassists, most of whom will be happy to give unbiased input. Or, hire a bass instructor to teach you about (and maybe even accompany you to) the best shops in your area!

ON THE HUNT

If you already own an acoustic, bring it along to provide a familiar baseline for evaluating tone and playability of prospective instruments. If possible, bring along your teacher or a fellow bass player and listen to each other play the same instrument. Test at varying dynamic levels and with every playing method you'd normally use, including pizz, slap, and arco.

I'd already had several good experiences with Greg Smithson, my super bass tech at Best Instrument Repair in Oakland, California. I'd played some very nice solid wood basses there, so Best was my first stop. Among the two or three basses I tested at Best, I really liked a \$2,800, $\frac{3}{4}$ -size orchestra



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model Chen Zuhua (or just “Chen”) solid wood, carved back, with violin corners. Compared to my plywood, it had more character and a more consistent response across the strings. I was about ready to buy it, but my bass buddy Ravi insisted that I visit more than one shop. “Basses are all so different!” Ravi said. “You may hear something you like even better!”

The next day I loaded up the Christopher and was off to Ifshin Violins, up the road in El Cerrito. There, I played four or five instruments, but the only bass that seemed to come close to Best’s Chen was a \$6,200 solid wood. To help me keep straight all the basses I’d been playing and would play, I brought along a small digital recorder to not only record the basses, but also my comments about them. As I’d play, I’d have a running commentary along the lines of, “This is the ¾ German at Ifshin. Very warm but not a particularly strong *E* string.”

Next, I was off to South San Francisco and the Acoustic Bass Shop, where I bought my Christopher plywood in ’02. I tried two or three instruments there, but still preferred Best’s Chen.

My final stop was Steve Swan Guitars in Burlingame, just south of San Francisco. Steve has a wall of guitars, but what really got my attention was a sea of more than 60 acoustic basses, each on a stand and organized by type. Before I arrived, Steve had

picked out 20 instruments he thought I’d like, each of which I plucked on a couple times. Steve helped me keep track of my four favorites, then after an hour of playing I whittled those down to a single ⅞-size Chen SB 200 flatback with willow sides—a used but drop-dead gorgeous instrument for \$3,500.

I meekly asked Steve how he’d feel about me taking the ⅞ home to spend more time with it. “Sure!” he happily replied. If a shop senses that you’re a serious customer and you’ve demonstrated that you can handle acoustic basses without banging them into doorframes (or each other), it’s possible you’ll be rewarded with a two- or three-day trial period.

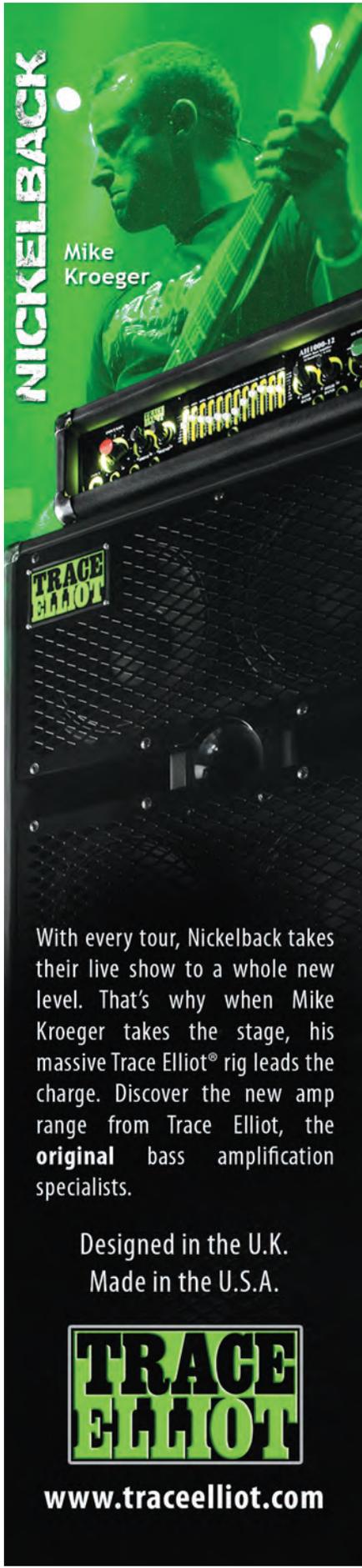
TRIGGER TIME

In this case, now you can really get serious about testing! I called over every musician whom I thought would lend an ear. I played piano duets, and even rounded up a jazz trio to accompany me. I cranked up recordings to stage level and played along with them. I installed my David Gage Realist pickup and checked out the sound through an amp. I even video-taped myself, which was extremely helpful. The ⅞ had good midrange and tons of cutting power, but it was too big for my stubby little fingers, it lacked some warmth on the *D* and *G* strings, and I was back again to Greg’s Chen, my very first pick.

continues on page 72

TESTING TIPS

- Your friends may not be able to spend a lot of time helping you test basses, but if you have a decent audio recorder, or a video camera with a high-quality mic—even a laptop with a built in video camera and mic—you can do a fairly thorough job comparing basses on your own.
- Record one bass at a time, and make sure the relative position of the mic and bass stays exactly the same for each bass. Moving the mic or changing its angle to the bass can completely change the recorded sound. I came up with a half-dozen short music passages highlighting different qualities I wanted to compare in the basses, including response and sustain in different registers, response during fast passages, and warmth. Then I played the same passages on each bass. To get a different sonic perspective, I went to another location at home and recorded all the basses again. Then another location. The basses sounded entirely different each time I moved, and this helped confirm my choices.
- Using the iMovie video editing app on my MacBook I was able to create a different video file for each bass. The thumbnails and file names allowed me to identify the bass seen in that file. Then, by looking at the audio waveform (in iMovie), I could instantly mouse from a specific passage on one bass to the same passage on another bass.
- In this way, I really started to hear the differences in the instruments, and they were dramatic. For example, even with the MacBook’s built-in mic, I could easily hear how much more low-end punch the Sun 120 delivered than any other bass I tested.



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SHOPPING TIPS WITH STEVE SWAN

AS OWNER OF ONE OF THE LARGEST AND most-highly respected acoustic bass shops on the West Coast, bassist Steve Swan knows his stuff. We talked to Steve at his showroom to learn more about acoustics, finding a shop, and selecting an instrument.

Can you recommend other shops outside of the Bay Area that have a big inventory?

Here on the West Coast, some big shops are the World of Strings [Long Beach], Los Angeles Bass Works, and Lemur Music [San Juan Capistrano]. Nationwide, there are maybe 30 shops with a broad inventory; this allows the dealer to focus more narrowly on your specific requirements. It's also important to find a shop that has a close relationship with qualified bass setup techs, either on- or off-site.

On the subject of setup, what's involved there?

Chinese basses, for example, are often shipped here without a bridge, sound post, end pin, or even strings. So, expert setup using quality components is very important. That's why it wouldn't be very practical for the consumer to buy direct from China.

How would you compare the sound and quality of new Chinese basses to new European?

At the top level, they are indistinguishable. But there are more bad Chinese basses floating around because many of them come in at a very low price point.

Why is it so important to have another set of ears when you're testing a bass?

The worst place to judge the sound of a bass is from the player's perspective. You're off to the side of the instrument, and the low frequencies develop more in front of the instrument, 15-20 feet away. So, it's very important to have a critical and objective listener to help. Another way to hear what's going on is to play into a corner and get the sound to bounce back to you.

What kinds of changes can be expected as a new bass breaks in? And what is the time frame?

If the bass is played every day, typically six months to a year for either plywood, hybrid, or solid wood. But the changes with solid wood are much more dramatic. As the fibers loosen and the top becomes less stiff, the tone broadens at every range, but most noticeably in the lower range, where the

bass becomes more balanced. Very light instruments can become bass heavy and lose sustain; that was the case with some of the 1920s and '30s German basses. But that's not an issue with basses made today.

Then what does affect sustain on today's basses?

That's often more a function of an overly stiff top, and/or string type and tension. Strings make a tremendous difference on basses, and top dealers usually outfit their display basses with new strings that emphasize the best qualities of each bass.

Is a bass that sounds great acoustically likely to also sound good amplified?

Not necessarily. If you'll be playing loud music with an amp and want to avoid feedback, you'd want a bass with a stiffer top or even a plywood top, and these probably won't sound as good unamplified. Kay plywoods are common, but I prefer the King and American Standard plywoods from H.N. White.

What sort of basses should be avoided?

Plenty! Anything under \$1,000 will likely have problems; \$1,500 is about the bare minimum. Look out for cracked neck joints and scrolls, plus loose tops and backs. These things can be repaired, but the underlying issue could be bad wood or glue used in manufacturing.

How do you feel about rent-to-buy options?

This is most common with inexpensive beginning-level instruments and, for a serious player, those should be avoided, too.

What if the potential buyer doesn't live near a big city? How about buying a bass sight-unseen and having it shipped to you?

There are so many variables in instruments, it's best to play the exact instrument you're planning to buy. So, be prepared to do some travelling.

How about buying from a private seller?

Again, bring someone along and ask for a trial period.

How much dealing typically goes on between the shop and customer?

You shouldn't expect that. New electric guitars, for example, have a pretty wide profit margin. But not so with acoustic basses; setup and service is often built into the deal and the shop has to absorb that cost. And some basses are on consignment and there may be no room for negotiation.

TECHBENCH

continued from page 68

But Steve was still confident he could top it. Based on my input on his $\frac{7}{8}$ bass, he had an even better picture of what I was looking for and was insistent, "I promise we'll find something for you here. You've gotta come back anyway to return the $\frac{7}{8}$. So, check out just three more I have for you."

I'm so glad Steve was insistent. One of those three, a new Xuechang Sun model 120 $\frac{3}{4}$ carved-back with a Russian spruce top, for \$3,400, is now mine. It's warm, cuts through in a mix, and has a very even response, and although the body is large and lighter than some, I can crank it up to earplug-mandatory level and still not get any feedback.

I'll admit I'm a bit obsessive about all this; over a one-week period I played more than 30 basses. I know my new Sun 120 isn't perfect—it isn't quite as amazing as the 60-year old, \$10,000 German bass that Steve let me play at his shop—but I do think it's entirely possible I tracked down the best-sounding acoustic bass for under \$6,000 in my area. **BP**



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