

this instrument the “Flatland-Tourist Special” or the “Folk Antique.” Aside from the few genuine antique instruments, most of these dulcimers are prevalent in areas where “traditional” means “looks made with the teeth.” People who buy these dulcimers usually hang them on rec-room walls in suburban bungalows. If you have one of these, take it off the wall, dust it off, fix it up, give it new strings, and play it.

Each one of these shapes has a particular character and sound, and surely one of them will fit your hands, ears, and head.

So you’ve gone out and found a friend’s friend’s dulcimer. Or maybe you ordered one through the mail. Or built one for yourself...or had an instrument maker build you one. Then again, maybe you were lucky enough to find one in some outlandishly out-of-the-way “shoppe.” But how do you know if it’s any good?

Okay. Let’s start with the wood.

We fuss a lot over the wood from which an instrument is constructed. It’s very important, and we tap on the wood to hear its tone. We hum into the sound holes, and generally make sure the dulcimer will take all the use we have in store for it. Really though, we’re fanatics when it comes to dulcimers, and many of our tests probably produce no tangible results.

Once again, it comes back to individual taste. A good hardwood usually is best because it gives a “brighter” tone than softwoods. Also, some woods have more eye-appealing figuring and coloration than others. A spruce top sometimes improves the quality of the sound.

But there is one definite thing to say about wood: the more you play it, the better it sounds. For this reason older instruments are often more valuable and sought-after than newer ones. When an instrument is played, the constant vibration within the sound chamber alters the physical structure of the woods cells—some shrink and change shape, some