

The Question of Soundboards -

David Hackett has contrasted eight samples of soundboard, both modern and 18th C, and the short discussion is great for understanding the variation we can see in soundboard wood selection. All pictures are scanned at the same size and resolution.

Here are the pictures of the eight samples, with notes



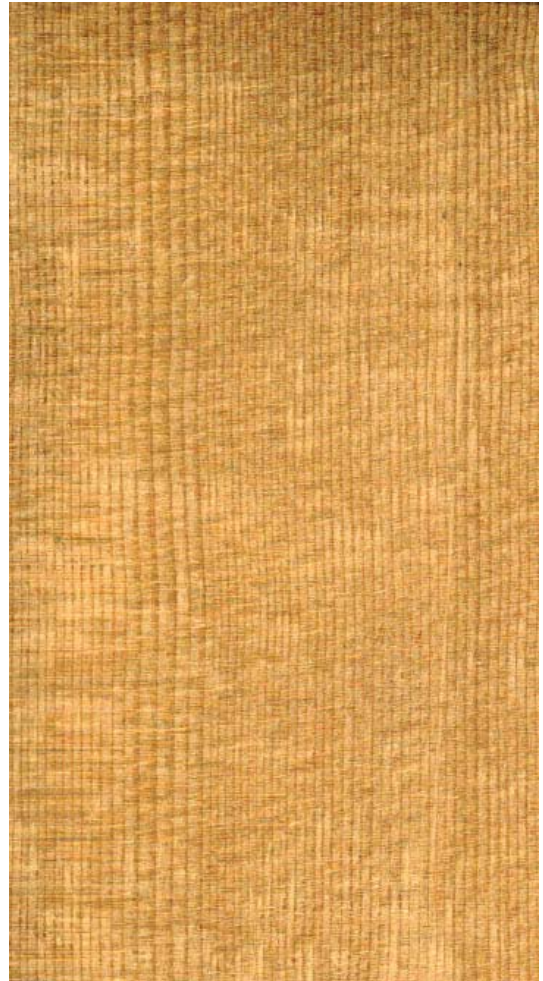
*First we have a piece of spruce, *Picea abies* (?) from a batch I bought many years ago from Mr Brett in Norwich (sadly now retired). About sixteen grains to the inch, perfectly quarter-sawn, so grain rings at 90° to the surface. Boards about 5" wide. Most of us would agree that this is very good timber. I have used it successfully for a spinet, a new soundboard for a Ganer, and a 'Viennese' grand.*

The second sample is from a Clementi of 1805. Softwood, but I am by no means certain of the species. Only about six or seven grains to the inch, and the apparent spacing is greater because it was sawn well off the quarter - at about 45 - 30° (i.e. nearer flat than vertical). Surprisingly thick - about 5mm. Few of us would choose this for our own work, but we love Clementis, don't we?



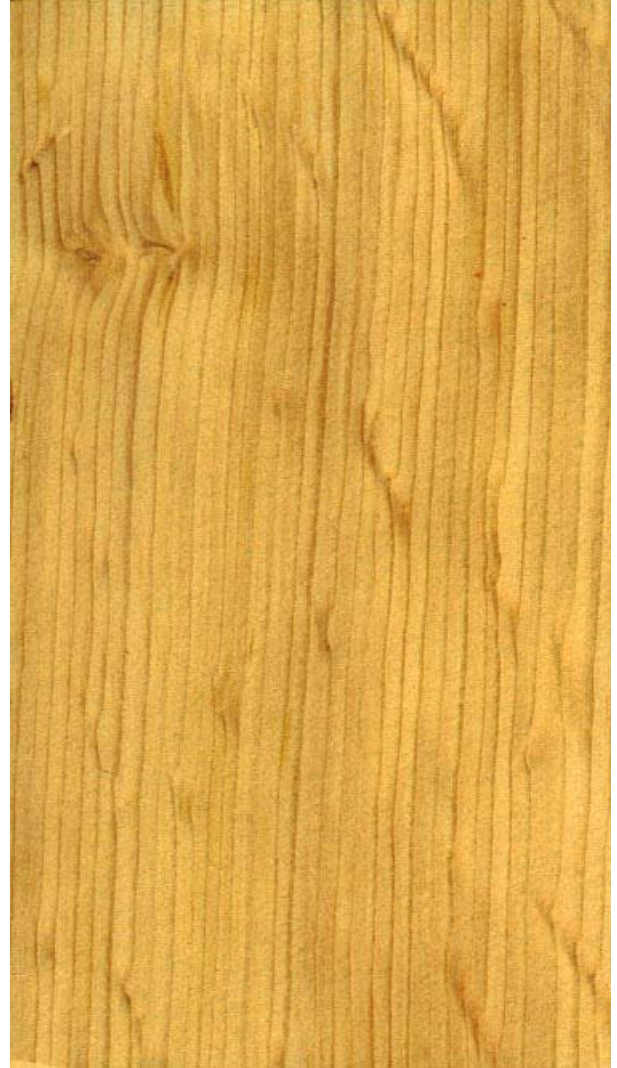
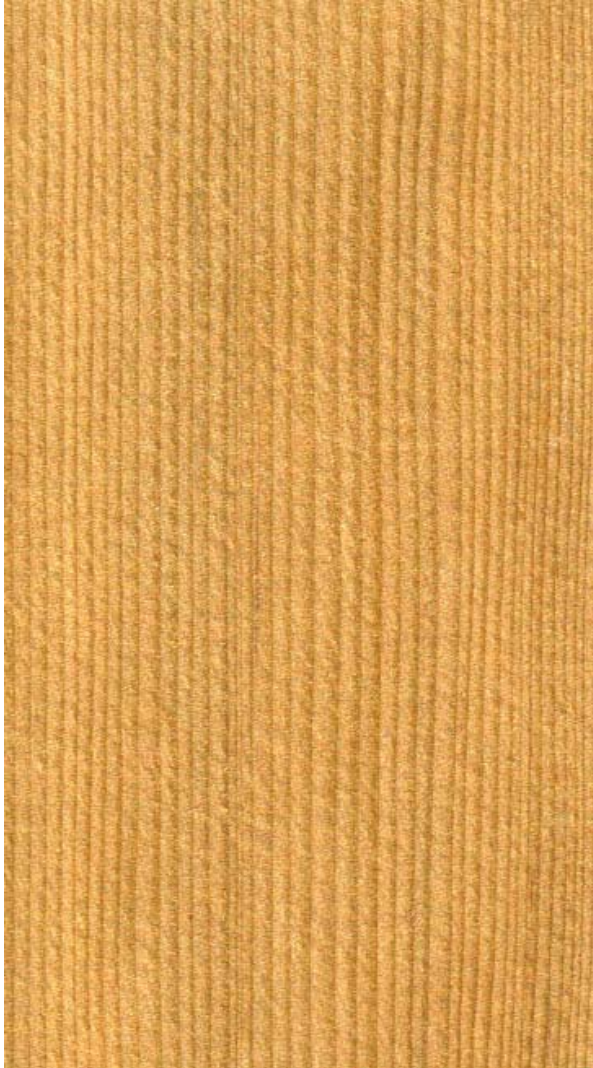
Number three is an offcut (grain side-to-side) from a newly supplied soundboard from Vogel in Germany, as purchased by a Friend. Very close grain - up to about 45 per inch! Cut close to the quarter: 70 - 80°. Boards quite narrow, but beautifully jointed.

Then next we have a piece from a later Clementi, c.1822. Much more like what we would expect - about 26 grains per inch, and cut about 80°. Thinner than the 1805 one, at about 4mm. The dark spot is a pin-hole.



The one with the wrestpin holes is a remnant from an eighteenth-century wreck, possibly a Buntebart. About 20 grains per inch, but the grain not particularly straight. Very near to the quarter, not more than 10° off. Quite thin, about 3.5mm.

*Then on the right we have a piece of Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*), from Mr Brett again. 20+ grains per inch, sawn perfectly on the quarter. Very lustrous when planed, and shows an occasional 'flower' where there are ripples in the grain, similar to the effect on satinwood.*



*Number seven should be the odd one out - but is it? It is not spruce at all, but hemlock: *Tsuga heterophylla*. 20 grains per inch, perfectly quarter-sawn, and available in clear boards 8" wide. The density is very similar to spruce, and it works well. It is in fact very similar to the Sitka spruce. Has anybody ever tried it for a soundboard? I might just have an opportunity soon....*

Finally we have another old soundboard, taken from a Ganer. Not the original, but probably a replacement installed in the early years of the nineteenth century. Cut at about 10° off the quarter, a few small knots, and a 'flower' similar to that on the Sitka spruce.