

A CRASH COURSE IN STRING INSTRUMENT BUYING

The idea of buying a string instrument can be a daunting task. Unless you are fairly familiar with the way they work, what makes one instrument sound better than another, and what makes one instrument more valuable than another, shopping can seem like an impossible process. Here are some thoughts to keep in mind:

- Shiny and new are not necessarily good qualities. They are qualities that are often appealing to the untrained eye. The instruments look pretty but do not necessarily have a good sound.
- It isn't as simple as recommending a good "brand name." For the most part, instruments that carry a "brand name" are not necessarily a good quality.
- It is important to remember that you usually get what you pay for when buying a string instrument. Beware of anyone who has "an amazing" deal – you're most likely about to overpay for an instrument of low quality. **Also, chances of the Stradivarius in Grandma's attic being real are about one in a billion.**

SOME TERMS TO KNOW BEFORE YOU SHOP

Set-up

This refers to the way in which the bridge is cut, the fingerboard is shaped, the pegs are fitted and the soundpost is set. These things have a direct affect on the ease of playing and the tone quality that can be achieved from the instrument. Only an experienced professional should perform set-up.

Fittings

The pegs and tailpiece are often referred to as fittings. Poor quality pegs such as plastic can break and cause difficulties in keeping the instrument in tune. Woods other than ebony, boxwood and rosewood are generally thought to be too soft for pegs. Tailpieces that are of poor quality or fitted incorrectly to the instrument can mar the tone and even create problems in being able to play in tune.

Hand-Made

The body, neck and scroll are made completely by hand by one maker. Of course, the quality of materials and skill of the craftsman directly influence the tone quality and playability of the instrument. Appearance: The varnish will appear uneven, as it has been applied by hand. The instrument may be made to appear older.

Value: If the craftsman is highly skilled and uses excellent materials, hand-made instruments will increase in value over time.

Be aware: Just because an instrument says "hand-made" on the label doesn't necessarily mean it is true. A professional luthier and/or string specialist will be able to tell the difference.

Workshop-Made

These instruments are made by hand also, though not necessarily by only one maker. These instruments are often created in Germany, Romania and Czechoslovakia in workshops where the art of instrument making is taught.

Appearance: The varnish of these instruments, like hand-made instruments will appear to be uneven and may or may not be made to look older.

Value: Depending upon the quality of materials used and the skill of the craftsmen involved, these instruments usually retain their original value or increase slightly.

Be aware: Often European names are used in workshops throughout Asia. These instruments are often made with inferior materials, resulting in a lower quality product.

Machine-Made

As the name implies, these instruments are often mass-produced with machines.

Appearance: These instruments usually look different from hand-made or workshop-made instruments as the varnish is evenly colored and very shiny. This is due to the fact that the varnish is sprayed on as opposed to hand rubbed.

Value: Machine-made instruments will decrease in value over time. Be

aware: Just (be aware)! Enough said.

BUYING VERSUS USING A SCHOOL INSTRUMENT

There is always a question of whether it is better to buy an instrument, or use a school instrument. For first year players, it is often a good idea to use a school instrument. The student will eventually want their own instrument and we encourage ownership, but only if it is a good quality instrument. The cheap instruments that are made of inferior materials will only hinder the student in learning how to tune and play. Parents need to be willing to spend at least \$350 for a violin, \$500 for a viola, \$650 for a cello and \$900 for a bass otherwise we recommend playing a school instrument. The student will feel ownership in having their own instrument and typically buy a better quality instrument than a school owned instrument. Also, the student will be able to keep their instrument over the summer which inspires them to practice more.

Instrument Sizing

Be sure to ask your teacher, what size instrument they recommend. An instrument too big will be frustrating for the student because they cannot play in tune. It can also injure the hand trying to overstretch. Viola players have to be extremely careful when buying a size instrument.

School sizes compared to Violin shop guidelines:

Violin A = 4/4 size (largest size)

B = $\frac{3}{4}$ size

C = $\frac{1}{2}$ size

Viola – Please let your teacher help determine the size needed. High school students might be ready for a 15, 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ or 16 inch viola. Smaller viola sizes are 12, 13 & 14”

Cello G = 4/4 size (largest size)

H = 3/4 size

I = 1/2 size

Bass J = 3/4 size (largest size)

K = 1/2 size

L = 1/4 size

Buying an Instrument – Part 2

WHY IS QUALITY IMPORTANT?

There are no two ways around it, playing a string instrument is difficult. The task can be made easier or more challenging, depending upon the quality of the instrument. It is impossible to get good sound from a poor quality instrument. Would you want to put time and effort into an instrument if you knew that no matter how hard you worked, it wasn't going to sound any better? A good quality instrument will grow and develop with the student as his or her skill grows and develops.

SET A BUDGET

It is important to have an idea of how much you can spend before you begin shopping. String instruments can literally range in price from \$100.00 to several million dollars. While a sixth grader does not have a need for a Stradivarius, it is important to purchase the best instrument you can within your price range. Prices for instruments are determined by the quality of materials used, whether the instrument was made by hand or by machine and age and condition (for previously owned instrument). You need to be willing to pay at least \$350 for a violin; \$500 for a viola and \$650 for a cello. Remember you want a quality sounding instrument. Please do not buy a \$50 e-bay instrument. These are not quality instruments.

FIND A REPUTABLE DEALER

It is imperative to work with a reputable expert when purchasing a string instrument. A good starting point would be to find shops that specialize in string instruments. If the store sells guitars, pianos, drums and other instruments, the sales personnel are less likely to be experts in the field of string instruments. Find out where professional string players and teachers buy their instruments and have them repaired. Chances are they will have rather valuable instruments and entrust them only to people who have shown expertise in the field. Beware of any dealer who does not offer a trial-period. If they will not allow you to take the instrument out of the shop for a few days to play it and have it examined by the student's teacher, chances are they have something to hide. Ask up front about policies such as return, trade-in and financing.

Be sure to play on the instrument yourself and have someone in the store play on the instrument so you can hear the tone quality. Also play on instruments that are out of your price range and lower than your price range so you can begin to hear the difference in the tone quality. Everyone has a different

preference about the tone quality they like whether it is a darker, richer quality sound or a brighter more brilliant sound. After you play on several instruments and hear other people play on the instruments, you will begin to develop an ear for the tone quality you like.

NEW VERSUS OLD

It is often said that old instruments are better because as the wood ages and instrument is played, the tone sweetens and becomes more resonant. This is true to an extent. If the instrument was of excellent quality to begin with, and was treated with exceptional care, the instrument will improve with age. If, however, the instrument was made with inferior materials, or has not received great care, it will not improve. A new instrument that is either workshop quality, or handmade can be an excellent value. If an older, or previously owned instrument is purchased, the following check list might prove helpful.

Condition/Quality

- Is the instrument hand-made, workshop-made or machine-made? This will be a consideration in the value of the instrument as well as value at resale.
- Are there cracks and if so, have they been properly repaired? Cracks, depending upon the location and size, can render what was once a good instrument useless. Many cracks can be easily repaired, though some of those repairs can become quite costly.
- Has the set-up been done properly? This cannot be emphasized enough. The set-up affects the tone of the instrument and the ease of playing. For example, if the bridge does not have the correct curvature and height, it can make playing in higher positions and double stops almost impossible. While you might find a good instrument with a poor set-up, you need to remember that the set-up may cost an additional several hundred dollars and you need to mentally add that cost to the price of the instrument.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- Never purchase an instrument sight-unseen or from sources that do not provide professional setup and maintenance.
- Buy the highest quality instrument you can afford. It will enable the student to develop his or her talents further and, will prove to be a better financial investment.
- Before buying, have the instrument checked out by the student's teacher or some other professional whom you know and trust.

WHERE TO BUY YOUR STRING INSTRUMENT

The following is a list of instrument dealers in the Jefferson City area, Kansas City and St. Louis area. While most have the word violin in their business name, they deal with all orchestral string instruments. It is always a good idea to phone ahead to make an appointment. The list is in alphabetical order and does not represent any order of preference.

Dealers:

Bearden Violin Shop
8787 Lackland Rd.
St. Louis, MO 63114
1-800-443-2342
314-427-7570
www.beardenviolinshop.com

Beckman Violin Shop, Inc.
5600 Johnson Drive
Mission, KS 66202
Phone: 913-831-1119

Capital Music Company
213 E Miller St
Jefferson City, MO 65101
573-635-2732
capitalmusiccompany.com

Clemens Violins
6353 Clayton Rd.
St. Louis, MO 63112
314-727-4787
www.clemensviolins.com

Geoffrey Seitz
4175 Loughborough
St. Louis, MO 63116
314-353-1312
seitzviolins.com

Gregory Krone of Seitz and Krone Violin Makers
4187 Highway KK
New Haven, MO 63068
(573)237-5580

Jerry Field
904 Amythyst Lane
Jefferson City, MO
573-556-3523
fieldviolins.com

K. C. Strings Violin Shop
5842 Merriam Dr.
Merriam, Kansas 66203
Phone: (913) 677-0400
Toll Free (888) 635-5225
www.kcstrings.com

St. Louis Strings Violin Shop
6331 Clayton Aves
St. Louis, Mo. 63139
314-644-6999
www.stlstrings.com

Tom Verdot Violin Shop
Columbia, MO 573-443-5011
www.playprettyproductions.com/verdot

Top Notch Violins
3109 Sutton Blvd
Maplewood, MO 63143
(314)616-2172
www.topnotchviolins.com

Will West Music & Sound
807 Missouri Blvd.
Jefferson City, MO 65101
573-635-7777
www.willwestmusic.net