

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, but they often indicate inferior craftsmanship.
- It isn't as simple as recommending a good "brand name." For the most part, instruments that carry a "brand name" are of inferior 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 about to be hood-winked.

The 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 finger-board is shaped, the pegs are fitted and the sound-post 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 can break, 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.

Beware: Just because an instrument says “hand-made” on the label doesn’t necessarily mean it is true.

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.

Beware: 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.

Beware: Just beware! Enough said.

BUYING VERSUS RENTING

There is always a question of whether it is better to buy an instrument, or rent. For first year players, it is often a good idea to rent. It is difficult for a fifth grader to know if playing in orchestra is something he or she wants to do for the next 8 years of school. It is our expectation that many more students will begin orchestra in the fifth grade than will return in the sixth grade. Playing a string instrument is, for many students, a very foreign concept. If the instrument is rented, and the student should decide that music, or that particular instrument is not his or her calling, the parent can simply return the instrument to the rental company and not be saddled with the task of selling a “used” instrument. Another good reason to rent during the first year of study is that most students in the fifth grade require fractionally sized instruments. Unless you have purchased an instrument from a string instrument dealer that allows for trading up, the parent then becomes responsible for disposing of the smaller instrument.

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).

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.

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 an 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

1. 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 re-sale.
2. 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. 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 set-up 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.