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425 822-0717

What to Look for when Purchasing or Renting a String Instrument.

By Henry Bischofberger, Violin Maker

It is imperative that you get a good instrument, even if it is a child's size. *Quality does not have to mean expensive.* Many factory made student instruments, if well "set-up," will be of good quality for your student. Having an instrument "set up" mean a qualified Violin Maker makes the final adjustments by hand. These adjustments include making sure the pegs fit properly, cutting the bridge to fit the instrument, putting on good quality strings, and making sure the bow hair is clean and full. Proper set-up can make the difference between a good instrument and one that doesn't play well. Your child is much more likely to stick with it if his instrument sounds and feels like it should. Read on to avoid the most common instrument problems.

The Strings: Look closely for any fraying or imperfections. Run your finger up and down each string and feel for bumps or divots, which indicate the string should be replaced. Steel strings are the lowest quality. It is well worth the extra fuss to upgrade to Perlon core strings (Dominant brand). Old or metal strings will not make a clear tone and they are more likely to squeak or break. It is best to use Dominant for violin/viola, Spirocore or Jargar for cello and Spirocore or Helicore for Bass.

The Pegs and Tuners: Make sure the pegs fit snugly and turn easily but also stay without slipping. For all instruments except for the bass, the pegs should NOT be mechanical. There should be no screws in either end of the peg. Your instrument will have at least one (and often four) fine tuners on the tail piece. Make sure these tuners turn easily and work properly.

The Bridge: The bridge is NOT glued down. It is held in place simply by the pressure of the strings. The feet at the bottom of the bridge must fit the top of the violin exactly. The height of the bridge should also be correct. If it is too high, it will be very hard to press the strings down. Bridges that don't fit properly are much more likely to fall down. A continually falling bridge may cause the sound post to fall.

The Bow: Good bows are made from wood or carbon fiber and real horse hair (not synthetic hair). Look over the hair from the top to the bottom. It should be white or slightly yellow in color with no dark spots. If the hair is thinning at the frog (the part that is held in the hand), discolored, or dirty, ask for a different bow. Make sure the screw works to easily tighten and loosen the hair.

The Sound Post: The sound post is a small wooden post inside the instrument placed almost under one foot of the bridge. Look inside your instrument and make sure it is there and that it is straight up and down. The sound post is very important for getting a good sound. If the sound post is down or missing, the instrument should NOT be played until a Violin Maker puts the sound post back up.

The Case: Make sure the case is in good working order, all latches and zippers work properly. Make sure the instrument doesn't rattle inside when the case is closed.

Instrument Size: Make sure to get the right size instrument for your child. The violin shop owner can determine the right size. An oversized instrument is frustrating to play, and causes the student to develop bad habits.

The "Great Deal": Stay away from instruments that are very cheap or seem like a great deal. If you want to buy one of these instruments, let your teacher or a Violin Maker look at it *before* you buy. If you have an instrument from your grandpa or in your attic, take it to a Violin Maker to have it properly set-up and get fresh strings. Your teacher will likely require you to return the instrument if it is not up to par.

A good instrument is a joy to play. Follow these tips to give your child the best chance for a great orchestra experience.

Henry Bischofberger is a third generation Violin Maker located on Seattle's Eastside! He learned his trade at the Violin Making School in Brienz, Switzerland and has been in business for over 35 years. Henry has violins, violas, cellos and bows in all sizes for sale and rent. You can contact him by phone 425-822-0717. © 2011 Henry Bischofberger Violins, LLC. Feel free to copy for non-commercial and school use.