

Survival Guide for String Students and Parents

Handout from the notebooks of Marilyn Miller-Graef

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See also: [Letter to Orchestra Students: Orchestra Etiquette and Protocol](#)

BUYING A STRING ORCHESTRA INSTRUMENT



DO'S

1. Ask, ask, ask: your orchestra, your teacher, your director, other players, to see if anyone has an instrument for sale, even if it needs work. Older violins are wonderful, a \$100 and a set of strings may put it right!
2. Ask other players for recommendations as to products, shops and luthiers.
3. Choose your instrument from a large group you have sampled, at least 3-5 instruments.
4. Consider vintage or imported instruments: they are often the best value. See the section on TIPS.
5. Several large instrument businesses will send instruments or bows to your home for you to try; this is an especially good way to try out different bows. Two of the better ones are [Shar Instruments](#) in Toronto & [Johnson Instruments](#), in Boston

DON'TS

1. DON'T buy an instrument in a hurry.
2. DON'T buy an instrument from a small selection; you need to COMPARE brands, shops and prices.
3. DON'T buy an instrument without planning what bow you will use or buy: see the TIPS section.
4. NEVER buy an instrument after just playing it in the store/shop: take it home for a try-out; this is common practice, shops do it all the time and you aren't obligated to buy any instrument you try out.
5. DON'T buy an instrument SOLELY because of its label, mark or brand.

TIPS

1. Almost every parent wants an instrument "around \$500", or "under a thousand." This demand inflates the price in these brackets; every dollar you spend above this buys you exponentially more instrument. If the price has you scared, or is out of your budget, rent an instrument and BUY a good bow.
2. Pay attention to the bow! The bow should be about 1/3 to 1/2 the cost of the instrument. Rarely is any bow priced under \$200 worth the investment; it costs \$40-\$75 to rehair a bow yearly: you do the math.
3. The instrument doesn't make the player. Although it makes learning much easier and can inspire a student, \$x number of dollars does not equal \$x improvement in the player.
4. Beware instruments with fancies: carving on the scroll or painted designs; they are cosmetic selling "come on's", and beware any shopperson who tells you they are marks of quality--they aren't.
5. Think "Vintage": During the 1910's-1930's the violin was the fad instrument of the time, (like our modern day electric guitars). European instruments were imported to this county in large numbers; they were the student instruments of the day; they are a great value and much in demand for tone and quality.

Important Terms You Better Know

Luthier is a maker, repairer and restorer of string instruments and/or their bows.

"Master Made" instruments are made start to finish by a single luthier; they are the most expensive. 3K-20K

"Shop" instrument means several people worked to produce the instrument; they are less expensive. 2K-6K

"Product" instruments are made by large companies, usually sold in "kits" w/ a bow and case. \$350-\$2000

"White", or "bare" instruments are unfinished; they are imported and are finished here. \$300-\$2000

Find a real "Strad" in the attic? Nope, I don't think so. Most violins and violas are labeled that way, indicating the instrument is a copy of that model, or for a cheap gimmick. The most famous designs from which almost all string instruments are patterned are: Stradivarius, Guarnerius, or Amati.

Insurance: Your instrument may not be covered under your home owners without a special policy.

Case: Protect your investment with a decent case; plan to spend at least \$50-\$75; better ones are \$150 on up.

Going shopping? Here's what to look for in a good shop, store or luthier:

DO shop at a store, or luthier that:

1. Makes their living at it, not a sideline, takes pride in their knowledge and business.
2. Their workplace bespeaks good business: instruments displayed are clean and polished; tools/work bench, are well organized and professional.
3. Answers all questions, offers helpful suggestions, has a variety of instruments, both in kind and price.
4. Offers set-up, service and repairs on site.
5. Offers positive information about other shops, makers or luthiers, for comparison shopping..

DON'T shop at a store or luthier that:

Their workplace is disorganized, and instruments are not well kept. Talk is cheap, no matter what the "brags" are (advertising, player talent, past fame, etc...), look at how, and where, they do their business.

Does not ask about the customer: level of playing, current instrument, price range, and, in the case of a child, does not CAREFULLY size the instrument to child).

Tells you a certain instrument is valuable "solely" for label or brand. No set-up, repairs, or service on

site. Implies that your (or your child's) musical success depends on how much you spend.

Care and Feeding of Orchestral Instruments and Orchestra Etiquette

DO's

1. Always wipe off any dust or dirt with a clean, dry cloth and put your instrument back into the case or rack when you are finished.
2. Clean your instrument every six months with a SMALL amount of special VIOLIN polish.
3. Change your strings every 6-12 months (more often, the more you are playing).
4. Rehair your bow every 6-18 months (the more you play, the more often you change).
5. Always use BOTH hands to put the bow into the case and secure it before you close the cover. Damage to bows most often occurs due to closing the case on the bow. CRUNCH.

DON'TS - NEVER do any of the following:

1. NEVER put any cleaner or lubricant on the neck or fingerboard or the hair of the bow. Use special cleaners or polish VERY carefully; a little goes a long way.
2. NEVER force a peg that won't turn.
3. NEVER let someone else pick up your instrument, play it, or care for it.
4. NEVER leave your instrument in a car; hot or cold temperatures will damage it.
5. NEVER leave your instrument on the floor. Number one cause of instrument damage; it gets stepped on or run over. No kidding; picture your violin with your foot through it.
6. Andrew Wu from SHAR wished to add: "Please do not leave your violin while in an open case, especially with the shoulder pad still attached. It is very easy for the case to close and crush the top of the instrument. With winter here it is very important to keep instruments in an environment of 45-50% relative humidity. This will hopefully avoid the need for repairs which could cost in the hundreds. I recommend an evaporative humidifier. Remember not to leave the instrument in the car for any reason; the cold can do just as much damage as the heat."

STRINGS, ROSIN AND SHOULDER RESTS

1. A set of strings costs anywhere from \$20-\$50 or more; there are three basic kinds: gut, synthetic, and steel.
2. Get a better brand of rosin, at about \$15 a cake.
3. Get a good shoulder rest, \$20-\$75.

ETIQUETTE

1. NEVER comment on another player's ability, good or bad. If you can develop a reputation of never being heard saying anything bad about anyone, it will serve you well. The music world is a very small world.
2. NEVER criticize another player to a conductor; it's none of your business.
3. Show respect to players in the front positions, e.g., the concertmaster.
4. NEVER touch another player's instrument -- don't touch the percussion instruments when you pass by them.
5. NEVER take yourself too seriously; always leave room for laughter.

SunMusic Strings



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