

10 Insider Secrets For Deciding On Which Instrument To Buy



Getting a good quality instrument that will help you progress in your playing and achieve your musical goals more quickly is a big decision for any player. The following are some aspects, amongst others, you might like to consider before making a decision.

1. Clarify what you want

What sound are you looking for?

Although it is difficult to put concepts of music into words and adjectives, before you start looking, take the time to sit down and write down what sound you like. Try to put it into words. Dark? Bright? Rich? Warm? Focussed? What sound is it that you are trying to achieve with your playing? What aspects are really important to you? Try to be specific. You need more than 'an instrument with a nice sound that projects'. Think along the lines of wine tasting. Are you after a velvety merlot or a crisp sauvignon blanc?

If you are not clear on what you want, you may well not buy the instrument that will help you achieve your goal. Listen to recordings of various artists and try to identify the sound that you like, that you are trying to emulate.

Keep an open mind

When you begin trying out instruments, don't fall into the trap of going for an instrument that sounds like the one you already have. It is sometimes tempting to go with what feels familiar. If you really like the sound of your current instrument, then why are you looking to buy a new one? Try to keep an open mind, otherwise you may waste time and money, and end up with something that is no better than what you already have.

Play a few different instruments first

It may also help to swap instruments with various people before you start trying out instruments to buy. Borrow instruments from friends, stand partners, and teachers. Don't just play each one for a few minutes, but really give them time. It is highly likely that the sound response will be quite different to your current instrument. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but will help you to become familiar with different sounds and sharpen your thinking on what good sound is.

Listen to the sound of your current instrument

It can be a useful activity to get a few people to play your own instrument, so you get an idea of its sound. It may sound different to what it sounds like when you play it. You could record yourself on your current instrument and possibly also the instrument you are trying out (ensure that the room and settings are the same for both instruments).

2. Be prepared

Make sure you have a familiar bow to try out the instrument. A good bow can make a huge difference to your playing, and is worth the investment of money to get. Try to use the same bow for all the instruments you try, in order to get a fair comparison.

Be prepared to play the instrument to a variety of people, to get their impression of the sound you make on it. Get other players to play it for you to listen to. Sometimes the sound you hear is different to that being projected, and at the end of the day, music-making is all about communication. What others hear is vital to the whole process.

What to look for when trying out instruments

3. Sound

Sound is king. For all musicians, this is probably your #1 consideration. The following are some aspects to consider in relation to sound.

Response

Does it respond quickly?
How easy is it to pull out sound?

Resonance/Cushion/Resistance

Does it feel like the instrument is resonating well?
Can you hear overtones, especially when you do double-stopping?
Does the instrument have 'cushion' (Can you 'dig' into the instrument without it collapsing?)
How far towards the bridge can you play whilst still getting a clear note?

Dynamics

Check how loud you can play.
Check how soft you can play. Does the instrument still 'speak' clearly when played soft?
(Many people forget to check this)

Colour

How interesting is the sound?
Can you shape it, mould it, produce different colours on it?

Register

How does the bottom end of the instrument sound? Is it warm and rich?
How does the top end of the instrument sound?
Does the instrument 'speak' from the G string right up to the E string?
Are the strings even, in tone and dynamic? (it might be useful to get someone else to listen for this, as you play.)

Projection

Instruments sound different in different locations and situations. It is important to play the instrument in a variety of settings to get a good indication of its performance. If you are a

quartet player, play it in your quartet. If you work in an orchestra, play it there, etc. This is also an area where it is crucial to get feedback from others.

How does it project in the concert hall?
How does it sound with piano accompaniment?
Does it speak well in ensemble work?
How is it in an orchestral setting?

What should I play?

Play the pieces you are learning right now.
Play a passage that is challenging. Does the instrument make it easier or more difficult for you?
Play a passage that explores the full range of the instrument, crossing all four strings.
Play a range of violin technique:
Scales
Double-stopping
Octaves
5ths
Staccato
Spiccato
Arpeggios
Plucking

For more information on how to detect possible problems with the violin, refer to Point 3.

4. Appearance

It's an interesting thing, that although sound is indisputably #1, somehow the appearance is important too. Many players assert that they don't mind what an instrument looks like as long as it sounds good, but then find themselves magically drawn to the most attractive instruments.

When you try out an instrument, imagine having the instrument in your case. When you open your case and see it, will it appeal? Will you want to pick it up and play it? What is your initial reaction to the appearance of this instrument?

If appearance is very important to you, make sure you look at the instrument in many different types of lighting (natural, concert hall etc), as lighting can quite dramatically alter an instrument's appearance. In particular, if you are concerned with its appearance on the concert stage, try it out in that setting.

Varnish

The varnish of a violin is critical to its tone quality, as well as either drawing you to it or repelling you.

There are roughly three main styles of varnishing an instrument, with all sorts of stages in between. These are:

- a) Clean finish
- b) Shaded finish
- c) Antiqued finish

The finished appearance of a violin is a very personal matter. Violinmakers have differing philosophies on the violin's appearance and different styles appeal to different players.

General Model

It is important to realise that different models produce violins that have a different character. You may play an instrument that doesn't 'speak' as you want it to. This does not necessarily mean that it is a bad instrument; it may just not be suited to your playing style. It is your task to find a model that is suited to your playing.

Some models are slightly smaller than others which can be important if you have short arms or small hands. Often Guarneri models are on the shorter side in their body length, which could be to your advantage.

Choice of materials

a) Wood

Some wood is more attractive than others, although the attractiveness of the wood's 'flame' is not always related to its sound. Sometimes, instruments made from relatively plain wood can sound fantastic. Many people also think that a one-piece back equals a superior sound, but this is a myth - the quality of the wood is the defining factor, not whether it is one-piece or two-piece. A well-varnished instrument will still reveal the flame of the wood beneath the varnish.

b) Fittings

Generally fittings are either made of ebony, rosewood or boxwood. Boxwood is lightweight and can help with reducing the weight of an instrument, which can in turn help with the sound. Think about whether you like the instrument's fittings, if this is important to you.

c) Workmanship

This is not the place to go into lengthy details on what defines good workmanship, but the violin as a whole should 'flow' and look organic. It should be appealing to the eye, with nothing that looks distorted or uneven. If it looks right, chances are it is built correctly.

d) Age

If you are looking at an old instrument, you would also need to check the following things: cracks on the body, loose fingerboard, wrong neck positioning. All of these things impair the sound of the instrument and affect its playability

5. General Feel of the instrument

Before you even lay a bow on the strings, you can begin to identify certain aspects about the instrument. How does it feel when you pick it up? Is it heavy or light? Beware of instruments that feel unusually heavy. This may be an indication that the plates are too thick and/or the wood is too dense, making the instrument stiff. Does the violin feel balanced? Does it lie well in the hand?

Set-up/Playability

The set-up of an instrument is absolutely crucial to its playability. Assess the following things:

Can you tune the instrument well? Are the pegs easy to adjust?

Is the string spacing good? Can you do double-stopping comfortably over all 4 strings?

Can you play 5ths comfortably?

Is the curve of the bridge good? (Can you play all the strings individually without touching any other strings?)

Is the bridge centered when you look down each side of the fingerboard?

Do you have enough bow clearance over the C-bouts and corners?

How is the string height and width at the top nut? Is it comfortable to play there, or do you have to push down hard?

How is the string height and width at the bridge?

How does the neck feel? (It shouldn't feel too thick, or too thin.)

When you play in 3rd or 4th position, is it comfortable to play? Can you reach 3rd and 4th position naturally? (The neck should feel the correct length.)

Do you feel 'secure' on the fingerboard, without feeling that you are slipping off? The fingerboard should be curved, following the curve of the bridge. However, the edges shouldn't be too rounded off, but create a platform to support your fingers.

6. Specifications

Good violins are built and set up to certain measurements. It may be a good idea to take an instrument you are considering buying to a reputable violinmaker/restorer to seek their opinion on the workmanship of the instrument - ideally someone not in direct competition to avoid a conflict of interest and bias.

7. Value of purchase

For many violinists, purchasing a Stradivarius or del Gesu is out of the question, financially. These instruments cost hundreds of thousands, or millions of dollars. Thinking that 'old = better', many players seem to fall into the trap of buying expensive old instruments, made by obscure Italian makers. However, old does not always mean better, and these 'old' instruments can often be difficult to play and you will have to work very hard to get an acceptable sound out of it. Beware of this trap, and always keep an open mind in terms of the instrument. They may be expensive and worth some money as an antique, but you will not necessarily have a fine-sounding instrument to play on, which is, after all, most players' goal. Furthermore if you do invest a lot of money into a poor-quality old instrument, they could become very hard to sell on in the future.

Good modern instruments, moreover, are becoming more and more valuable, and more and more accepted by the musical world as excellent concert instruments. Many soloists and ensemble musicians play on quality modern instruments. Over time, their value is increasing.

8. Service/Adjustment

It is a good idea to find out whether the violinmaker or shop is able and willing to service the instrument once you own it, and is able to adjust its set up, so that it sounds its very best. Is he/she willing to adjust the bridge and sound post. and are they interested in monitoring the development and progress of the instrument? New instruments benefit from a few check-ups in the first year, and an annual check thereafter, and the violinmaker should be willing and able to do this.

9. General reputation of the violinmaker

You may wish to find out more about the violinmaker's reputation before you purchase an instrument. Perhaps they have a website you can check, or you know someone that has purchased one of their violins. Check to see that they have learnt their trade from a reputed school, where some of their instruments have sold to, whether they have won any awards, and what previous purchasers say about their purchase.

10. Seek second opinions

This has already been mentioned, but having a second opinion is really invaluable when deciding on an instrument, especially as an instrument sometimes sounds different to a listener than a player. Seek the opinion of:

- a) Teachers and other players.
Have other people play the instrument (more than one, to get a fair indication.). Be wary of teachers who receive commissions from makers for making a sale, as they may support a sale for personal reasons.
- b) Respected violin repairer/restorer, who ideally is not selling instruments in competition (to avoid conflicts of interest).

How to make the final decision

At the end of the day, just like choosing a house or a car or even a partner, you have to have a basic attraction to the instrument. Each instrument is individual and has to be assessed on its own individual merits. Not all of the above-mentioned aspects may be important to you. You may like to make up an 'essentials' list of your own from which to go off. Hopefully, however, the points we have covered have been of some use to you in the process of making that very important decision: which instrument should I buy?



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