

PURCHASING AN INSTRUMENT FOR ORCHESTRA

There are many places to buy a musical instrument including department stores, catalogs, internet sites, private individuals and wholesale clubs. Many times, these non-school music stores will offer what seem like very inexpensive instruments. With some of these instruments, there is no after-sale support, no repair service or a direct working relationship with the manufacturer; and the instruments are typically of low quality. The results when purchasing from a non-school music type of source are often frustrated students and higher long-term costs for the parents. We recommend renting or purchasing an instrument from a store that specializes in school music service. When you are ready to rent or purchase an instrument, here are a few "pointers" to help you choose a good quality instrument.

- ***Musical instruments are NOT toys!***

A usable instrument is a well-constructed work of art, combining both the latest technology and time-tested old-world craftsmanship.

- ***Watch out for internet auction sites!***

Often, students/parents who purchase instruments from auction sites end up frustrated due to the poor quality of the instrument or because the instrument is in need of serious repair. Not all manufacturers build instruments according to specific standards with up to date technology. Most school music stores offer only quality brand name instruments that directors prefer.

- ***Play the instrument before you buy it!***

This will not be easy with internet/catalog companies. It will cost more in shipping and restocking fees than if you went to a local school music store.

- ***Get a major, national brand-name instrument.***

Do not waste your time on unknown instrument brands. Non-brand name instrument manufacturers often do not make parts available to repair centers. Therefore, locate a good name brand from your teacher or local school music store.

- ***An inexpensive instrument can be a waste of time and money.***

Not all instruments are created equal! Cheap instruments are usually just that, cheap. If you purchase a "questionable" instrument, you may spend more on repair just to make it usable. Some brands of instruments manufactured offshore or even domestically cannot be supported with critical parts for proper maintenance and repair.

- ***Don't be afraid of school music store salespeople.***

These people can be a great resource. They are typically professionally trained and often work hand in hand with us and some make regular visits to the school. For the best advice on stringed instruments, find a local music store that deals with strings often, not just as a side venture.

- ***Consider the value of service after you have purchased.***

Repair is an inevitable fact. Alternative sources often do not offer maintenance or replacement programs. Most school music stores offer maintenance and replacement programs as part of their rental/purchase plans. Usually, the cost is nominal and is well worth the small expense. Remember, it is a matter of "WHEN" not "IF" an instrument in regards to repair and service. If you have any questions or concerns or would like my input on which instruments are proper and suitable, please contact the strings teacher at your child's school.

Is it Really a Violin? Or Is it Only a VSO? **(a “Violin-Shaped Object”)**

A Parents’ Check List

We’re very excited that your child is considering joining his school string program! And we want to be sure he has the best possible chance to succeed in strings. Unfortunately, we have recently seen young people attempt to learn to play on instruments that are of such inferior quality that the children cannot possibly learn. Bargain hunters are finding inexpensive instruments on the Internet, in discount stores, and in some catalogs. Sadly, these instruments are **not** bargains. While the price may *look* right, the “real” cost of this instrument may be in costly repairs, poor durability, poor tone, or worst of all, a student who is not able to succeed in string class. We want to help you be able to distinguish a “real” violin from a “VSO,” a violin-shaped object that looks like a violin. A violin will give your child many years of fun and enjoyment, while a VSO may only lead to student and teacher frustration, wasted family expense, and worst of all, a student who has lost an opportunity to become a lifelong music maker. Here is a very simple checklist you can use to determine whether the instrument you want to buy is a “real” violin, or a VSO:

1. The Pegs – provide easy, stable tuning.

Do the pegs work smoothly? Hold properly? __

Look for 360° contact on all pegs at both points of contact with the instrument. __

2. The Nut – provides for proper placement of the strings.

The nut should be the height of a business card off the fingerboard. __

Is there string damage at the nut? __

3. The Neck and Fingerboard – provide a durable playing surface, buzz-free sound.

Lightly pull up on bottom of fingerboard – is it loose? __

Look down the fingerboard: are both sides evenly spaced between the f-holes? __

Measure from the nut to the bridge – is it 325 – 327mm? ** __

The fingerboard should have a scoop, but only a very little; and should not be wavy. __

If you hold a string down just below the nut & at the end it should make noise when tapped.

** A music dealer who sells string instruments should have what’s called a Mensur tool that you can use to measure different parts of a violin.

4. The Bridge – provides for proper string height and spacing.

Is the bridge positioned between the nicks of the f-holes? __

Is the back of the bridge perpendicular to the top of the instrument? __

Correctly positioned, the feet of the bridge will be flush with the top.

Are the grooves in the bridge too deep, so that they cause string damage? __

Is there a protector on the e-string at the bridge? __

If someone tunes your violin or changes a string for you, make sure he or she checks the bridge afterwards!

5. The Top and Back – provide for soundness of body, proper sound.

Are there any cracks in the instrument? __

Feel under the bottom of strings – is there a “soundpost crack?” __

Is there any varnish damage? __

Is the top spruce? Is it “solid carved?” Where was it grown? __

Quality of the wood used is one of the most important aspects of string instrument construction.

Is the bottom maple? Where was it grown? __

While flamed maple is 5– 10 times more expensive than unflamed, it is more brittle, and not always of better quality. Neither is a one-piece back always better than a two-piece.

The top should be about 3.2mm thick at the f-holes, and the “tap-tones” of the top and bottom should match. Ask your local school music dealer to demonstrate the instrument’s tap-tones.

6. The Soundpost – provides support, transmits sound to the back of the instrument.

Look in the f-hole -- is the soundpost right behind the foot of the bridge? __

A soundpost should only be re-set by a certified repairman.

7. The Adjusters (“fine tuners”) – provide tuning ease.

Are any adjusters loose? Do the screws move easily? __

Are any so tight that they touch the instrument? __

8. The Chinrest – provides safe, secure and proper hold for the player.

Is it loose or broken? __

Does the part that cradles the chin touch the instrument or tailpiece? __

Is there a cork on the bottom to protect the bottom of the instrument? __

9. The End Button and Endpin

Is the end button (violin & viola only) centered in the end block? __

Is the button made of ebony? __

Is the button held firmly in the hole? Are there cracks around the bottom? __

Does the endpin (cello & bass only) moves easily? Is it bent? __

Does the screw hold adequately (cello & bass only, again)? __