

MMEA: Eleven Tips for a Player or Parent on Buying a Better Violin

by Claire Givens

At the 2000 MMEA Conference, Claire Givens discussed the where, when and whys of buying a new violin and did a demonstration. She shares an excerpt from her talk below. [ed.]

Violins, violas, violoncellos and their bows being purchased for a player above a beginning level are usually sold in stores or shops that specialize in these instruments, and ideally, also specialize in their repair. Violinmakers/repairers or players who are knowledgeable about fine string instruments usually run these shops. The shop owners, through their personal study and experience with instruments and players of all levels, will be able to guide you through the process of finding an instrument and bow for your child that suits your child and is also a good long term investment.

1. Set aside time.

Allow 1 or 2 hours in a week for the process of looking at instruments and/or bows. The process will be more enjoyable and educational without time pressure.

The process:

- a) Discovery: How can a better violin enable you to develop your sound — its quality, tone colors, expression and response?
- b) Definition of taste and needs: What kind of instrument suits your needs best, whether it be for playing in orchestra, doing solos or playing for your own enjoyment?
- c) Learn to communicate what you hear to the professionals so they can determine whether changes can be made that will help in finding the “right” violin. Sound will be affected by changes in strings, or bridge and soundpost adjustments. If you like certain things about an instrument or bow, but not others, talk about this with whomever is helping you. It will help you get what you want in the most efficient way.

2. Determine appropriate quality or price range of the instrument.

Discuss with your child’s teacher what level of instrument they would like to see your child playing. The teacher knows what progress your child is making and how the present instrument

may be holding him/her back and also can gauge future needs. The teacher may also be aware of prices vs. value and be able to guide you to the price range of instrument you should be considering for purchase.

3. Plan ahead.

Have a price range in mind when you call to make an appointment to see instruments. That way, the shop you are dealing with can get a certain quality ready for you to consider. If you don’t want to spend more than a certain dollar amount, make sure to tell this to the seller. For the education of your ear or for your curiosity, you may want to ask to hear instruments in that next range up or down.

4. Determine the shop’s policies for trying instruments.

Ask the shop if they have a “trial policy,” i.e. if you really like a violin, can you take it out of the shop for a set length of time to show it to your teacher, play it in orchestra or a concert hall. Whatever factors are important to your decision-making, determine whether they will fit into your “trial period.” For example, will your teacher be in town to give you feedback; can you get into a hall if projection of sound is important.

5. Trade-in policy

Ask about the trade-in policy of the shop. If in the future your child may need a better quality instrument or a larger size, what value will your present purchase be given in a trade situation? Also try to determine what selection the shop has available in the range or size that might be the next step up if trading could be important to you.

6. Build a long-term relationship with the seller.

Buying a violin is not like buying a pair of shoes. You don’t make your purchase, use it until it wears out and then get a new one. Fine stringed instruments are designed to last hundreds of years and, in a sense, you are just a custodian for a

number of years. During that time, you will need a repairman to make certain your instrument is healthy and is sounding its best. It is in your best interest if the seller provides this service, especially if the seller offers a 100% trade in value. In that way, the seller will have an interest in the upkeep of your instrument and will keep you advised of whatever is necessary to maintain its value.

7. Purchase good value.

Buy a fine violin from someone who has something at stake in being honest and providing good value, such as a good reputation in the community, a business relationship with your teacher, or a personal relationship. Value of fine instruments is based on four things: origin, quality of craftsmanship, condition, and sound. In most instances, the buyer is quite dependent on the seller’s expertise and perspective on the market place to price instruments and bows accordingly. Unfortunately, there is no Blue Book or Consumer’s Report for violin value.

8. Include your teacher in the process.

Your teacher wants your child to do his/her best, not only technically — in learning the instrument — but also in being able to musically express himself/herself. Having the right tools, i.e. a violin and bow, is crucial to this process. The wrong instrument may result in injury, frustration and lack of motivation. Most teachers will give guidance in this process of choosing an instrument, as having an appropriate instrument and bow plays an important part in their success. Please pay your teacher for any time outside of lesson time that they spend helping you. Some shops pay teacher commissions. If a teacher is advising you and getting paid by the seller, you (the buyer) should know this in advance and it should be discussed openly so that you get the best possible guidance and advice.

9. Planning payment for a fine violin.

Check to see whether the shop has

any financing or can refer you to a bank that understands violin purchases. By the time you have made your decision, be ready to tell the shop how you wish to pay for the instrument. If you wait until you fall in love with one, you may be left trying to beg, borrow or steal the purchase price and considerable heartache will ensue if your plans don't materialize.

10. The bow.

A bow can make a big difference in the way a stringed instrument sounds and responds. Once you've decided on

the instrument, play through bows to find the one that sounds the best on the instrument and responds the best for the player.

11. Don't forget a protective case.

The value of your new instrument and bow is only as secure as the case. Determine how much risk you need to guard against and choose carefully. Ask about materials used, suspension features, and warranties.

Claire Givens has been serving the

Minnesota string community at her shop since 1977. In addition to offering expert sales and repair, Claire works with many organizations in the state to support string playing and teaching. For ten years, she served on the board of MNASTA and the String Task Force. Currently, Claire co-sponsors a master class series at MacPhail Center for the Arts and funds cash prizes for the Minnesota Sinfonia competition and the Young People's Symphony Concert Association (YPSCA) competition. ‡