Cello

Guidelines for Selecting a New Instrument

by David Carter with David Folland

For a young string player, the choice of a new instrument is an important step. Often it is the difference between a fractional and a full size, bringing a marked improvement of sound. Or it could be a step-up instrument from the first full size, in which case the criteria are somewhat different. I have asked my good friend David Folland (gold-medal winning violin-maker) for his insights on buying that first full-size instrument. With a huge range of sources to buy from, and a wide range of instruments, the choice is difficult. Should one order a low-price instrument from a mail-order outfit, or a moderate-priced one from a local shop? Are instruments made in any specific country preferable? Will an instrument that sounds great at first improve with age, or lose its luster over time?

These days, good instruments are made in many countries around the world, so it makes more sense to evaluate each individual cello rather than make a judgment based on where it was made. Similarly, if an instrument is made properly it will improve with age. Paying close attention to the structure of the instrument will ensure a happy long-term relationship.

When evaluating instruments, there are several starting points. One is the instrument's basic structure. The top of a cello should form a continual arch without abrupt dips or bumps. If the arch falls abruptly on the bass side near the bass bar, or the f-hole area is distorted due to arching that has fallen, chances are strong that the instrument will have sound problems. Similarly, if there is a bulge just behind the bridge caused by the soundpost, chances are that the set-up is not good, or that the top may be too thin. The relative weight of a cello is not as important as the wood used and the arching the maker has chosen. Some wood is both light and strong, and higher arching is stronger as a rule than lower arching. For example, St. Olaf College owns a 1750 Thomas Smith cello that is very light, yet its high arching has preserved the excellent condition of the cello. Proper anchoring of the neck into the body of a cello is also very important; make sure that there is no movement of the neck from side to side. This is a very costly problem to fix.

A new instrument is the most likely choice in most cases, but if an older instrument is a possibility, the structural considerations are still very important. In addition, the general condition of the cello must be factored in, and of course an instrument with extensive repairs can be problematic. Old repairs often need to be cleaned and reglued, and you may have trouble evaluating the quality of that previous work.

Another starting point reflects both the setup work and the structure: what is the playability of the cello? Look for high-quality pegs that turn easily and don't slip. Especially dangerous is a pegbox that is cracked; small cracks become visible as you push the peg in while tuning. An instrument needs to have a well-cut bridge and soundpost, with the correct string height and spacing between strings. Ease of playing and volume of sound should be balanced; I certainly believe that young cellists need instruments that are easy to play in order to develop good, relaxed playing habits. Also, the tone through the registers should be balanced and even. As the prices of instruments rise, so does the depth and character of the sound, and one increasingly makes decisions based on these qualities of tone based on personal preferences.

Of secondary importance are the fittings. Tailpieces should have built-in tuners (which tend to buzz less). The strings need to be of high quality; saving $50 or so by using cheap strings is hardly worth it. Endpins should be of high-quality metal (will not dull easily) with good screw mechanisms so they don't slip down, and above all must be long enough (your 5-foot cellist is planning on a growth spurt soon), preferably 24 inches. The mechanical elements need to live up to years of use. An instrument can certainly be upgraded with better fittings, but it adds expense.

Another secondary point of examination is the quality of workmanship. How do the edging, varnish, corners and purfling seem? Certainly the care that a maker shows on these details speaks to the general quality of the instrument. Is the purfling inlaid? Do the corners (both in the rib structure and on the top and back) match up neatly? Are the edges uniform, with overlapping that is consistent? Is the varnish uniform in color and application?

Finally, where to buy a cello is a matter of preference, but the value of your local violin shop who will stand behind their products is important. One certainly might bring an instrument from, say, a mail order shop (or bought on eBay…) to your local dealer, but the money you save might go right into upgrading the setup to make the cello playable.

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David Folland specializes in making violins, violas and cellos of professional quality. He has won gold medals at the Violin Society of America International Competitions and a bronze medal at the Manchester Cello Competition. His instruments are played in major symphonies across the country.

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