



MAKER'S BENCH

Teachers, Violin Shops, and Families Can Work Together to Build Confidence

by John Waddle

As I write this, I am in my twenty sixth year of owning and operating a full service violin shop. Before I started the shop, I had already been in the business of making, repairing, and selling violins, violas, and cellos, since 1981, working in three different violin shops before starting my own shop.

Even though I had worked in shops previously, I still remember the sense of satisfaction I felt when I sold the first violin in my own shop. Since then I don't know how many instruments and bows I have sold, but I still feel that sense of satisfaction each time I sell one. Doing repairs, appraisals, research, and restoration work are also satisfying. Most of my business comes from referrals from customers or from teachers, sometimes from other shops. I sell and service instruments and bows of all sizes, including violins, violas, and cellos. Some of the families I have sold instruments to when their children were learning got to watch those children grow up and become professional musicians and teachers, and I continue to help them with their own instruments and bows, and now their students' instruments and bows.

Very few people learn how to play a bowed instrument exceptionally completely on their own. To become a great artist, everybody needs the help of someone to make the instrument and the bow, somebody to teach them how to maintain and care for them, and someone to teach them how to play them. As progress is made, decisions have to be made about whether to rent or to buy, and where to go to get help.

It has been said that, "the greater the artist, the greater the self doubt." A truly great artist is constantly striving to know more about their art, is constantly comparing their own work to the work of great artists who have come before them, and other artists who are trying to do the same or similar art. Each time an artist performs, if he or she is truly great, they know that what they have done could have been better. This attitude of striving for perfection is important as a motivator for the artist to keep striving to do better, but can become stifling if taken too seriously. Knowing that we have fallen short can lead to lack of confidence, and sometimes frustration when we don't know how to improve. This is when we turn to others for help.

Trust is important in any relationship. This trust goes both ways, and is tested over time. Knowing people over a long period of time is a good way of establishing trust. When we first meet someone new, we don't know if we can trust them or not, but over time, we learn who we can trust and who we need to be more cautious with. Trust is especially important in business. Because stringed instruments and bows can be very expensive, it is especially important to be aware and informed about what it is that you are buying. Most musicians who buy instruments and bows are not as knowledgeable about them as the people selling them, so it's easy for them to be taken advantage of.

It has become common practice for people to take an instru-

ment home before buying it to try it out and find out if it is the right instrument for them. This is true for student instruments as well as professional level instruments, which can be quite expensive. This is usually allowed with no more than a casual agreement between the person borrowing the instrument and the shop. Most of the time this arrangement works out just fine.

Each room you play in sounds different, and it's a good idea to try out an instrument in the orchestra you play in, or in a quartet, as well as the room where you normally practice (assuming that you do practice!). Often, but not always, potential buyers will seek the opinions of others. In the case of students, the person they trust the most is usually their teacher, or sometimes an orchestra director, but sometimes it might be a stand partner, or a colleague in an orchestra. I often hear from parents that they don't feel confident making the decision on an instrument or bow without first showing it to their teacher. Recently I had a phone call in which the first question asked was, "If I come to your shop and try instruments, can I take it out for a week or so, so I can show it to my teacher?"

Acquiring the knowledge necessary for pricing instruments requires many years of experience buying and selling them. I have a wide selection of instruments and bows in a variety of price ranges, so I can help most people who call; what I normally do is ask what price range the person is comfortable spending, and show them what I have in their range. Deciding how much to spend is up to the person buying the instrument or bow. They might ask for advice, or they might have questions about different price levels, which is fine. I am often asked how prices are determined for instruments and bows. This process is well established, and has been for many years.

If possible, before they come in, I will select instruments in my collection, based on what they have told me about what they are looking for, I will tune up each instrument and play it briefly to make sure it sounds good and is adjusted optimally. This process can take a surprising amount of time. I try to be sensitive to people's budgets and will never push them to spend more than they are comfortable spending. It's normal for me to spend an hour preparing for a visit with someone trying instruments or bows when they come in. I tell them what I know about the instruments and try to answer their questions as they are trying them. Some times I make adjustments to the instruments based on their feedback. Once they have gone through this process, they usually narrow down the selections to one or two instruments or two or three bows. Then I write down what their selections are and allow them to take them home for up to a week. Hopefully during that week they are playing the instrument or bow and evaluating them, and often that's when they get a chance to take it to their lesson, or to orchestra, or to their quartet for more trialing.

I find that it's really about confidence. If for whatever reason, the person feels confident that they can play the instrument for

themselves, and for others and feel good about it, they may have found a match. Sometimes this process can take time. I recently sold a violin to a musician who had tried over one hundred violins before coming to my shop. The one she bought had been tried by many and rejected, but it was just right for her. Instruments and bows can be very personal.

Teachers can be very helpful if they know the student's playing level and can recommend appropriate pieces for the student to play to test the instrument or bow. I do feel that it is important for the person buying the instrument to have the final say in choosing the instrument, but no teacher wants to teach a student who has an instrument that they do not enjoy hearing.

With so many instruments and bows available now, at so many price levels, it's all the more important that buyers are aware of what it is that they are buying. When I buy an instrument or bow, it's only after thorough examination and understanding

of what it is. I know that if I sell it, I will most likely see it again for maintenance and repairs and adjustments, and possibly take it back as a trade-in at some point, so it's important that I like it and want to see it again. Some instruments become like old friends because I see them over and over.

If you are a teacher and you have a student who needs to look for a new instrument, you can help them by giving them some instruction in what to do to choose an instrument at the violin shop. You can tell them what to listen for in playing different instruments, and how to play the instruments to hear the differences. If the person is prepared when they come in, they will feel more confident in selecting an instrument. If you suggest that they play a scale, make sure they can play the scale confidently. If you suggest a piece of music for testing violins, make sure they can confidently play that piece of music. If you do not like the instrument they have chosen, before you tell them you don't like

it, be sure to ask them why they chose what they did, what attracted them to the instrument, what did they hear that they liked. It may be that they have different taste than you do, and you might change your mind about the instrument if you know why or how they chose it.

If you are a teacher and your student comes to the lesson with an instrument or a selection of instruments that they have spent time and chosen to consider, and you agree that they have chosen well, that will help them feel more confident. If they like the instrument, they will be more motivated to play it, and will feel more confident playing it for others.

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