



# MAKER'S BENCH

## A Few Guidelines for How to Try Instruments in a Violin Shop Setting

by John Waddle

Whether a person is a beginner or a professional player, going to a violin shop to look for an instrument can be a memorable event in a person's musical life.

Most people want to come in and try several instruments, and choose one or two that they will take out on trial for a week. Some people have the personality to make decisions easily on their own, and others need to take time and enlist the help of others. Occasionally someone will come in and try a few instruments or bows, buy one, and go home.

Instruments can be expensive, and I know how important it is to find the right one.

Usually young beginner students come with a parent or both parents. Sometimes the whole family comes. Sometimes the string teacher comes to the shop with the student, and that can be helpful. Teachers are always welcome in my shop. If the student has been with the teacher for a long time, the teacher will know the student and can help in suggesting passages of pieces for the student to play, or in giving the student confidence to try the instruments in the shop. The teacher can also play the instruments for the student to hear.

My shop is open by appointment, which allows me to schedule people to come at a specific scheduled time. I usually schedule one-hour appointments with people who want to try instruments. I enjoy working with people and getting to know them.

I try to find out ahead of the appointment what size instrument the person needs, how long they have been playing, what their goals are as a player, and what price range they are interested in.

I try to be prepared for the appointment by choosing the best instruments for the person coming, checking them over, tuning instruments up, and, if it's a viola or violin, getting appropriate shoulder rests fitted to them so that when they come in, they can use their time to play the instruments. Obviously, it's important that the instruments are in tune when they are being tested or they won't sound their best.

I know that most families are busy with all sorts of activities all the time, so I want to make it as easy as possible for them to come in and find what they are looking for.

When they come in, I try to help them to feel comfortable and at ease. The person who will be playing the instrument needs to test the different ones I have available in order to choose which one or two they will be taking home for further trial. How well they do the testing will depend on their level of experience and training.

Sometimes there may be a large number of instruments they can choose from, so they need to have an approach to the testing process that works for them.

Here are some suggestions of things to try in testing instruments:

### 1. Fine tuning of the instrument.

You can get some sense of the tone an instrument has just by tuning

the strings. Was it easy to tune? Did the pegs work well? Does the instrument have four fine tuners or just one? Do you prefer to tune with just the pegs, or do you prefer to have a fine tuner on each string? How did the instrument feel when you were tuning it?

### 2. Play a scale.

After checking that the instrument is in tune, a simple two-octave scale in first position across the four strings works well even for advanced players. This allows the player to hear each of the most basic notes on all four strings. Did the notes seem to all have the same basic character? Was the sound even from note to note, or were there notes that stood out in a bad way? Was the sound even as you changed from string to string? Did you like the sound? Is it still in tune? After playing a scale, it may need to be tuned again because instruments in shops are generally not played every day.

### 3. Play up the low string.

I usually suggest that if they can, they play up the lowest string next. Is the sound clear all the way up? You may need to try different bow speed or pressure, or placement of the bow on the string to get the best sound. If there are problems with the sound in the higher positions on the low string, they may as well know that right away, not the fourth day of an at home trial period.

### 4. Test for wolf notes.

Testing for wolf notes could be the next thing to do. This is easily done, just by playing the notes that are most often problematic. Some instruments do have bad wolf notes, and if an instrument does, it's good to know that before going too much further in the testing process. These days there are more ways to deal with wolf notes, so usually a wolf note doesn't mean you should reject an instrument, but you may as well get that test out of the way.

### 5. Play some music.

For some, even after tuning and playing a basic scale, they will already prefer one instrument over another, but playing a piece of music can help to either reinforce the opinion they already have formed, or change their mind about their opinion. Play a short fast passage of something and a short slow passage of something.

### 6. Test for dynamics.

Music is about emotions and feelings, and those things need to come out. Can you get enough sound out of the instrument? Is the whole instrument vibrating when you really sink your bow into it, or does it only have so much to offer? Can you play it softly and quietly as well? Is the sound still beautiful and clear? Again, do you like sound?

Usually it's best to try all the instruments with the same bow, just to eliminate too many variables, but if the customer doesn't have a good bow, I will loan them a bow to use for trying the instru-

ments. If I loan them a bow and feel that the bow isn't working for them, I might suggest they try a different bow. It's too much to try to focus on selecting an instrument if you are also trying different bows.

After these few tests, many people will have narrowed the choices down to one instrument. If not, they may have narrowed it down to two. At this point, they may make a choice based on just the sound, or they may ask questions about the instrument. What is its story? Who made it? Where was it made? How old is it? If it is

old, what repairs has it had done to it? Do they like the way it looks?

Beginners, students, and many adults are often timid and lack the confidence of more experienced players and need to be encouraged to play in a shop. They need to be assured that it is not their playing that is being tested but the instrument. Comparing instruments requires some basic skill and concentration.

Just as each person has their own unique voice and personality, each instrument also has a unique sound and set of characteristics.

Some instruments are easier to play than others. An instrument may work well for one person and not for another.

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