



# MAKER'S BENCH

## Keeping Instruments Clean

### A Topic Near And Dear To My Heart

by John Waddle

As a violin maker, repairer and dealer with more than 35 years of experience, I have seen my share of instruments in dire need of cleaning. Honestly, some are pretty disgusting. As string teachers, you have an opportunity to model good practices with your students. If you take care of your instrument, and talk about it with your students, they have some chance of learning from your example. If they see you carefully handling your instrument, and wiping your instrument clean before you put it away in the case, it will make an impression on them.

Keeping your instrument clean is a way of showing respect. Respect for the person or people who made it, respect for the value the instrument has, respect for the history of the instrument and how it may continue on as a valuable instrument after you no longer have need or desire for it.

For many reasons, it makes sense to keep your instruments as clean as possible. It can be done. Part of it is being aware of what is happening to the instrument and why. To play your instrument, you first pick it up. When you pick it up, how do you pick it up? Do you pick it up by the neck? Or do you pick it up by the body? Either way, are your hands reasonably clean? Whatever is on your hands will be transferred to the instrument. Do you have sweaty hands? Do you hold the instrument in a particular place usually? Have you looked at your instrument closely? Are there areas that are wearing away where your hands or some part of your body has been coming in contact with the instrument?

Instrument varnish is fragile and wears away easily. Once it is worn off, it is gone and will never be quite the same. Varnishes for stringed instruments are made of gums and resins, oils, and possibly pigments. The varnish can be damaged pretty easily by heat and contact with warm sweaty bodies.

There is no way to avoid some wear on the instrument unless you never play it. Playing violins, violas, and cellos is a close, sometimes intense physical act.

Your thumb has to make contact, and will wear away the areas of the neck and neck heel where you place your hand when playing. Your hand will come into contact and wear away the upper shoulder of the instrument whenever you play in the higher positions. If you play violin or viola, your shoulder and neck will come into contact and wear away at the lower back and rib and edge of the instrument.

If you play cello, your left hand will not wear the neck and upper shoulder as you would if you played violin or viola, but your chest will wear away the upper portion of the back, and your legs contact and wear away the edges of the lower bouts by the lower corners of the back.

If you are sloppy with your bowing, you will damage the edges and corners of the top with your hands or your bow. This kind of accidental damage is common and can be severe.

Some of this wear is expected and part of playing. Some can be prevented.

Some people devise various ways of protecting the instrument

from damage, coverings for the upper shoulder for instance. There are rubber C clips for violin that fit over the edges of the C-bouts of the top. These protect the fragile edges and corners from the ravages of the bow.

Aside from learning how to avoid unnecessary damage to the instrument from your own contact with it, another factor is rosin on the instrument.

Without rosin, bowed stringed instruments would not make any sound. Try it some time. If you get your bow re-haired, ask the person not to put any rosin on the new hair, and try it on your instrument. This might be a surprise if you have never tried it before. The type of rosin does make a difference. Traditionally, rosin has always come from the sap of trees. Which resin from which tree, or combination of resins from different trees, and the processing of the rosin determines what properties it will have. Some rosins are available with various things added to them to give them some special properties. Do they work? Some people think they do. Now there are "rosins" that are not made from tree resins at all. They are made synthetically, and are very similar to natural rosin. My approach to new rosins is to try them on a new bow, or a newly re-haired bow, and see if they work.

Regardless of which kind you choose, some rosin is bound to fall onto the instrument when you play. Most will wipe off fairly easier with a soft cloth.

Now we have nice micro fiber cloths that work well, but a scrap of an old soft cotton t-shirt works too. Here's the thing though, after you have wiped off the violin a couple of times, where is the rosin now? It's on the cloth. If you keep doing that, more and more rosin builds up in the material of the cloth and pretty soon you might be just wiping rosin with rosin. Whatever cloth you acquire for wiping your instrument, wash it when it becomes soiled. You can hand wash in warm soapy water and you will get rid of most of the rosin. Some rosins are softer and stickier than others. When the soft sticky rosin, or any rosin, lands on the varnish of the top of the instrument and sticks, it can be hard to remove. If this happens, it's best to have it cleaned by someone who knows how to do it without damaging the instrument any more.

Most of the commercially available "violin cleaners" or "instrument polishes" are really just mixtures of water and oil and wax, and don't really clean the instrument, and leave a layer of the polish on top of the varnish, dirt, dust, and rosin.

It's also possible, common, harmful to the violin, and wasteful to use too much rosin on the bow. You don't need to apply rosin every time you play. If rosin is falling off the bow onto the violin when you play, you have too much rosin on the bow.

One of the most beautiful violins I have ever seen was owned by an elderly professional violinist in a major U.S. symphony who used it every day over his whole career. It was in excellent condition, and still had a great deal of its original varnish. It was a very old violin. He appreciated having it, and I watched him take it out of

his case very slowly and carefully and look it all over to make sure it was OK, and then before he put it back in the case, I watched as he carefully and gently wiped the whole violin with a clean, soft cloth. I have no doubt that that violin will still be in great shape when he can no longer play it, and just hope that whoever the next person will be lucky to own that violin will be as careful and respectful of the violin as he was.

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