



MAKER'S BENCH

Eleven Frequently Asked Questions

by John Waddle

1. How do I tell if my bow needs to be re-haired?

Ideally, each day when you practice, you will tighten the hair just enough, draw the bow across the strings without the wood of the bow touching the strings, and the horse hair in the bow will do what it is made to do, which is to get the strings vibrating. If you use the right amount of bow speed, pressure, and you know how to position the bow on the string for the optimum effect for each note you are playing, your bow will work beautifully for you. Problems can be due to the hair stretching or shrinking, hairs breaking, not enough rosin or too much rosin, worn out or brittle hair. Have a qualified violin shop or bow maker check your bow at least once a year and re-hair it if it needs it.

2. How do I know if I need new strings?

New strings will need to stretch a bit at first. Some do this more than others. Once they have settled, they slowly wear from the contact with the player's fingers and hands. The strings wear unevenly along their length. If they become worn enough they don't sound as good as they did. Have a qualified shop check your strings at least once a year. Get new strings when they need replacing. Your instrument will sound better.

3. How do I know if my bridge or sound-post needs adjusting?

A good, well-made and fitted bridge can last years, but if it becomes bent or warped, get it straightened or replaced right away. Your sound-post may need adjusting or replacing periodically. Have your bridge and sound post checked at least once a year by a qualified violin shop. If they need to be adjusted or replaced, ask them to do the work for you. Your instrument will sound better and be more satisfying to play.

4. How do I know when I should start using a Dampit or humidifier?

You should start using your Dampit when the temperatures drop and the heat comes on in your house. Pay attention to the humidity. Use the Dampit and humidifier when the humidifier drops below 40%. You can stop using them when the humidity goes above 60%. Don't over-humidify your instrument. Use common sense.

5. How do I tell if I should get my fingerboard dressed, or my nut adjusted?

Your fingerboard and nut become worn from playing. If they become worn enough, they will start to affect your sound and intonation. Have your fingerboard and nut checked at least once a year by a qualified violin shop.

6. How do I tell if I should get my pegs replaced or adjusted?

Pegs can wear out or shrink unevenly over time. If the pegs wear out enough, you should have them replaced. If the pegs are hard to turn, or turn unevenly, or slip, it might be possible to have them adjusted. Have your pegs checked at least once a year by a qualified

violin shop or luthier.

7. How do I tell if I need fine tuners?

Fine tuners can be helpful. If you are competent with tuning with pegs alone, and your pegs are working well, you don't need fine tuners. If tuning is hard for you, and you are spending too much time tuning, or if you are not able to get your instrument in tune with just the pegs, then get fine tuners. Fine tuners can be added to your tail-piece, or better yet, get a tail-piece with built in fine tuners put on your instrument. There are also pegs with built-in gear mechanisms that work well. Ask your violin shop or luthier if they can help you with these.

8. How do I tell if I have an open seam, and if I have one, what should I do?

If your instrument develops an audible "buzz," or doesn't sound quite right, you might have an open seam. There are a number of ways to find open seams. A qualified violin shop or luthier will be able to help you. Your instruments should be checked for open seams at least once a year. If your instrument has an open seam, you should have it glued right away. Don't try to do it yourself if you don't know how.

9. What should I do if my end-pin isn't working properly?

Violins, violas, cellos, and basses all have end-pins. Check to see that your end-pin fits the body of the instrument well. There should be no gaps, and it should fit snugly, but not so tightly that it won't come out. If you play cello or bass, does the screw that holds the end-pin in place work well? Does the end-pin slide in and out smoothly? Does it slip when you are playing? If so, you may have a poor quality end-pin. If your end-pin doesn't work well, have it replaced by a qualified violin shop or luthier.

10. Rosin. How do I tell if I am using the right amount?

Without any rosin, you can't make any sound on your instrument with your bow. Add rosin until the hair in the bow grips the strings and causes them to vibrate. If rosin dust is falling off the bow onto the fingerboard and the top of the instrument, you are using too much rosin. If you feel like you have enough rosin on the hair, and you are still having problems, you might need to try a different brand of rosin, or have the hair in the bow replaced.

11. How do I tell if I am tightening my bow too much or not enough?

Tighten the bow enough that when you draw the bow across the strings with normal pressure, the wood of the bow does not touch the strings. If you have tightened the bow properly, and the wood of the bow is rubbing against the strings, either you are pressing too hard, or your bow is not strong enough for you. If you over-tighten your bow, it may break. To get the sound you want, you can experiment with bow speed, bow pressure, and contact point on the

strings with the bow. Over-tightening the bow may not work as well for you as learning to use bow pressure, bow speed, and control of where the bow is on the string.

John R. Waddle is a violin maker, dealer, and restorer whose shop is in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is a 1981 graduate of The Violin Making School of America in Salt Lake City, Utah,

and has had his own shop in St. Paul since 1986. John is a member of both The American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers, and the Violin Society of America. †