



# MAKER'S BENCH

## Talking about sound—

### It's not rocket science; it's way more complicated than that!

by John Waddle

For many years, I've enjoyed writing down words that my customers use when they talk about sound. The words on this list, in no particular order, have been generally used to describe sound in a positive way:

- Efficient, mellifluous, growl, loud, soft, juicy, even, ripe, honey, meaty, immediate, flowing, clear, mellow, round, zing, colorful, smooth, happy, humane, pure, focused, articulate, ring, forgiving, complex, buttery, deep, commanding, vigorous, sizzle, balanced, sparkle, dark, velvety, full, sophisticated, present, stable, pop, shimmer, alive, golden, bright, smoky, punchy, full flavored, blend.

These words, also in no particular order, have been generally used to describe sound in a negative way.

- Temperamental, snappy, sad, tinny, stiff, wispy, flat, sharp, throaty, edgy, boxy, hollow, scrubby, brittle, harsh, muddled, pinched, boxy, simple, in your face, dead, dirty, fuzzy, nasal, musty, scratchy, sluggish, brassy, buzz.

Note that loud and soft are both listed as positive. An instrument can be capable of both qualities depending on how it is played. As I write this, I notice that there are more positive descriptors than negative ones.

Some words, like bright or edgy, could also be used in a positive or a negative way. Bright and clear and pure can be quite pleasant, however bright and harsh and strident can be painful. Some words, like nasal or dead or clear, are words that most people would agree on in terms of meaning.

The word "efficient" is a word for sound that I've heard other violin dealers use more than musicians.

Projection is something that is more important to some players, while blending in is important to other players.

Words like mellifluous, honey, mellow, and velvety have similar meanings, as do words like juicy, ripe, complex and full.

One violist told me that she was looking for a viola that had the personality of her golden retriever. I knew just what she meant because I grew up with a golden retriever.

I'm still a little puzzled by the word snappy, which was a word used by a woman who was trying cellos and did not like some of them because they were "too snappy."

It seems that some people are more sensitive to certain pitches or frequencies than other people, and will cringe when they hear these pitches. The word "humane" came from someone who, I believe, was one of the more sensitive ones. The same pitches, or

frequencies don't bother other people.

I try to hold the sound of certain instruments in my memory because they seem to have the most positive attributes, and at the same time, the least negative attributes. It's important to experience a wide range of instruments because until you do, you can't know what is possible.

When a person is first starting out learning to play violin, viola or cello, they are struggling just to get the notes in tune, and to play the music as correctly as they can. It is only after much practice and training that they can begin to express emotions and have something to say as they are playing. By learning to use bow speed, bow pressure and point of contact on the string, a player can get good sound out of just about any instrument, but a poor player will struggle to get good sound out of even the best instrument. The best players can overcome the limitations an instrument might have and still make beautiful music, whereas an inexperienced beginner will have difficulty making even the best instrument sound good.

The best way to experience the sound an instrument is capable of is to play it yourself. If you listen carefully to a good player playing it, you still might get a sense of the instrument if the player allows the instrument's unique qualities to come out. You can't judge the sound of an instrument by looking at the label or the color of the varnish.

It's hard to judge the sound of one instrument alone on a given day, because unless you compare it to another instrument, it might be hard to remember what the last instrument you heard sounded like. It's more meaningful to compare two instruments side by side one after the other.

The player makes the most difference in how any instrument sounds. The bow also makes a difference. Some bows are better suited for some players, and some bows seem to work better with certain instruments. The room you are in also makes a big difference. The sound of the instrument, the sound that the player is trying to achieve, the room in which the instrument is being played, and the bow the player is using all add up to make the sound. It makes a difference if the room is empty or full of people or things.

So, again, it's not rocket science; it's way more complicated than that.

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