



MAKER'S BENCH

Instruments and Bows: How Much to Spend Now?

by John Waddle

Recently a teacher commented to me that families buying an instrument and bow, especially for the first time, often need guidance and explanation to understand why more expensive instruments and bows cost what they do. Families often wonder, is it worth spending (that much) more? Another question that comes up often is how to know if the instrument or bow will retain its value for resale or trade-in on a better instrument.

The best advice I can give is to find a violin shop and a luthier that you trust. Most people will not be able to tell whether an instrument is an authentic work of a famous maker or shop, or what condition the instrument is actually in without the help of an expert who has put in the time and effort to learn the trade. Acquiring expertise takes many years of diligent effort and intention. A luthier earns their reputation over time by constant exposure over many years to hundreds of instruments. A reputation for humility and honesty must be tested and earned.

Instruments

Up to \$100

This is an age of everything being available on a computer screen. While it is possible to buy an instrument "outfit," which includes a bow, case, and "rosin," practically at the price of a bow re-hair, you will get what you pay for. As much as possible of the work was probably done using various machines. The instrument will most likely not have a carved top; instead, the top will probably be laminated (plywood). The strings on the instrument will be the cheapest kind, basically a wire. The bow might be some kind of wood. The hair in the bow might be from a horse, or it might be synthetic. The rosin might be from a tree, or might be synthetic. The case will be cheap and not expected to last long. These instruments will likely have no resale value and will not be something with trade-in value. They are not a good choice for a beginner.

Up to \$300

I consider this to be the low end of what I sell in my shop. Occasionally I have a few small violins or violas for children in this price range. In my shop, cases and bows are always a separate purchase. These instruments do not have labels, and are factory made. If an instrument is mass produced in a factory, with much of the work done with machines and many people involved at various levels, if it comes out well, it is somewhat by chance. Some operations are definitely better than others. I don't have any full-size violins, violas, or cellos in this range. These instruments will have little or no resale or trade-in value since it would cost me more than the original price to get them ready to sell again.

\$300 to \$500

I have violins from $\frac{1}{32}$ size up to $\frac{3}{4}$ size, and 12" to 14" violas in this price range, that are serviceable. They are in good condition, but still generally factory made. Sometimes they have a label identify-

ing the shop they came from, with a city and date of origin, which helps give the instrument value. If they have been very well cared for, they can retain their value or be attractive as a trade-in.

\$500 to \$1,000

This is the lowest price for full-size violins and violas that I would recommend purchasing. (Beginner cellos start at twice this price.) Though these instruments are still mass produced in large workshops on an assembly line, at this price you can expect higher quality and resale and trade-in value (if it has been well-cared-for). They are in good condition, set up well, with quality strings, and four fine tuners. Most student instruments, intermediate, and even advanced instruments now have a tailpiece with four fine tuners, unless the player asks to have a tailpiece with only one fine tuner for the top string.

\$1,000 to \$2,000

The violins and violas in this price range are made with better wood, better looking varnish, have quality strings, four fine tuners, and are generally made with more care than the less expensive instruments. They are still commercially made by a team of people in a workshop, but the workers tend to be more highly skilled.

\$2,000 to \$5,000

Instruments in this price range are most likely still commercially made. The quality of the materials used, the craftsmanship, and the resulting sound potential can be better than instruments made in the bigger factories. I have a good selection of $\frac{1}{2}$ size to full size violins, 15" and larger violas and $\frac{1}{4}$ to full size cellos, though prices are going up due to supply chain issues, shipping costs and worker shortages. These instruments are good enough for students and amateur players who have learned the basics and are working on more challenging music. Resale value and trade-in value will be affected by condition.

\$5,000 to \$10,000

These instruments are priced higher because of the reputation of the maker or shop where they were made. Especially with older instruments, condition is important.

It is important to know three things.

1. Who, or in what workshop, was the instrument actually made. Unfortunately, looking inside of the instrument for a label will not necessarily tell you, because labels cannot always be trusted. It is important to purchase from a trusted source.
2. In what city it was made. The city of origin will not tell you anything about the quality or value of the instrument, but knowing the history of the instrument will help give it an

identity, which adds to its resale and trade-in value. Again, beware of fake labels.

3. In what year it was actually made. This is part of the identity of the instrument. Everything degrades over time, and everything that comes in contact with humans degrades faster. If buying an older instrument, knowing the condition is important. It may not be obvious that repairs have been made without an expert's opinion. It has become more common for extremely valuable instruments to have an evaluation done using computed tomography (CT) scans to determine certain condition issues, or a dendrochronology report to determine the possible age of the instrument.

\$10,000 and up

These instruments were likely made in a smaller shop, perhaps by one person, or a person with experience supervising a few workers. Buying an instrument directly from the person who made it, or the shop where it was made can give some assurance as to the actual identity of the instrument. Luthiers earn a reputation for their work over time. The long-term marketability, resale value, or trade-in value will depend on many factors that are hard to predict, like any other investment.

A violin by a contemporary luthier was recently sold for \$151,280.00. The highest recorded price ever paid for a violin is \$15,821,285, the price paid for the "Vieuxtemps" Guarneri Del Gesu in 2012.

Buying an instrument is not like buying anything else, because unlike anything else, it is supposed to look good, sound good, function well and hold up possibly for hundreds of years if cared for properly. There are instruments that were made in the 16th century that are still working instruments.

Bows:

Up to \$300

Bows are available in this range. They are mostly made with carbon fiber shafts. They have ebony or composite frogs and horsehair. Some of them are good, serviceable bows. Some of them cost less

than the cost of a bow re-hair. I am seeing fewer bows made with Brasil wood (a lesser valuable resource than Pernambuco, which is a better wood for bows) than I used to, perhaps because of the success of carbon fiber.

\$300 to \$600

There are bows available in this range with either wood or carbon fiber shafts. If the shaft is Pernambuco, the frog and button will most likely have nickel silver mountings. Silver or gold mountings are reserved for bows with superior wood qualities. The shaft is sometimes roughed out in one place and finished in another place. The frog and button might be from other sources and the final bow might be assembled and finished in another shop.

\$600 to \$4,000

Bows in this range can have either carbon fiber or Pernambuco shafts. The frogs and buttons will be mostly ebony with silver or gold mountings. These bows will be made in workshops with a few to many workers. Some of the higher priced bows in this range might be made by one person, or just a few people, and quality in general can be suitable for more experienced players.

\$4,000 and up

Bows in this range are more likely to be made by one person, or in a workshop with fewer people involved than the less expensive bows. Better quality woods are used. The same factors that determine instrument values apply to bows. Some of the most expensive bows are the older bows made by famous bow makers of the past. Here again, authenticity, provenance and condition are important factors.

The highest price on record for a bow is \$367,862.00. Higher prices may have been paid in private sales.

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. †