



# MAKER'S BENCH

## Buying a New Instrument: A Luthier's Perspective

by Angela Thompson

One of my favorite aspects of working in a violin shop is assisting players who are looking to purchase a new instrument. Whether the student is buying their first full-sized instrument or college-bound and looking for a better-quality instrument to suit their growing talent, instrument shopping can be intimidating as much as it is exciting. I have put together a list of practices that we follow at David Folland Violins that seem to be helpful in choosing the right instrument.

When a customer calls to set up a time to come look at instruments, we lay out what we have in their price range. For first-time buyers, the selection (especially for violins and violas) usually looks like a few good quality factory-made student instruments and a few hand-made instruments. The factory-made instruments are often new and set up to spec in the shop, and the hand-made instruments can be older 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and have been repaired or restored. It's important to know that both are great options and one is not necessarily better than the other. If they're trying violins or violas, I then play through all of the instruments to make sure they are sounding and playing nicely and note any issues or irregularities. We pick the best three to five so that the customer isn't overwhelmed by too many options. If, during the visit, the ones we chose are not suitable, we have backups to show and others above the price range as well.

Something I have noticed that makes a difference when testing the instruments is to play long, sustained notes in a scale from the lowest register to the highest the student can play. Playing "into" the strings instead of "on top of" is a technique I find valuable—using the weight of the bow arm to pull out the sound, but not digging into the strings aggressively. This displays the evenness of tone throughout the strings and it gives the student a better idea of the true sound of the instrument. Once the student has narrowed their preference between two or three instruments, I suggest playing the same piece or pieces on each. We encour-

age students to think about what they are hearing and what kind of sound are they drawn to. Beyond the tonal ideas of bright versus dark sounding instruments—is the tone clear, clean, even, sweet, warm, inviting or does the sound feel nasal, closed off or tight? How is the response of the sound when you play slow versus fast? Does it take more effort to pull the sound with the bow or does it immediately project and ring? The bow that is used can make a difference as well. We have a nice, professional level bow that we encourage students to use as they test instruments. And of course it is important to play the instruments with their personal bow, but during the visit it's nice to hear the instruments at their fullest potential.

Another approach is to listen to someone else play the instrument. I always ask if the student would like me to play the violins or violas they are interested in. There can be subtle differences under the ear and from a distance. Sometimes this helps making the decision a little easier. Of course, there is no pressure in making the decision on the spot either. Most shops allow players to take an instrument or two on a trial period for up to two weeks. This is a great opportunity to show the instrument to a private teacher for their professional opinion. It's also beneficial because it takes time to adjust to playing a new instrument and the player can hear how it sounds in different rooms. It's also usually acceptable to take the instrument to an appointment at another shop to test against their instruments.

It's important that I mention that adjustments can be made as well—simple or complex. Maybe the instrument sounds lovely, but something about the playability is difficult. For example, fiddle players often prefer to have a bridge where the arc is less curved to make it easier to play double stops. Other adjustments can be made to bridges to change string heights as well; some players prefer a lower or higher action. A neck can be carved down if it feels too thick or is top heavy. Pegs can be replaced

with mechanical or perfection pegs for ease of tuning. Tailpieces with all fine tuners can be installed. Strings can also have a significant effect on the tone of an instrument. We experiment with strings to find what we believe sound the best on a particular instrument, but it would be a quick and easy accommodation to try a different set if the player has a specific preference.

Lastly, commissioning an instrument to be made is always an option, especially in Minnesota. Most of this article is addressed to students and parents who are buying their first instrument and may not know much about quality and good practices, but for players who are considering going to conservatory or already studying music in college and plan on having careers in performance and/or teaching, buying an instrument from a maker is an excellent path to consider. Fortunately, there is a rather high concentration of luthiers in the Twin Cities and surrounding areas who make new, personalized instruments and have instruments already made to sell. The timing on construction can vary, but the end result is an instrument made explicitly for the player.

Selecting the perfect instrument can be challenging, but hopefully these tips and practices will add a touch of ease to the process. Luthiers and other shop workers want to help players find an instrument they love, so don't hesitate to ask questions and express feelings. Ultimately, a loved instrument is a played instrument.

*Angela Thompson is a violin maker, repairer and player. She is a 2016 graduate of Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee with a Bachelor's degree in violin performance, and a 2020 graduate from Minnesota State College Southeast in violin repair, where she is now a substitute teacher. Angela is a member of the Violin Society of America and currently works under the instruction of acclaimed luthier David Folland in Northfield where she repairs instruments and continues the study of violin making. †*