

Rules of attraction

Buying a new instrument is as much about rigorous auditioning as it is about falling in love. Violin maker Guy Rabut recommends a step-by-step approach to finding the ultimate partner

The search for your ideal instrument can be an exciting and rewarding journey. It's a process that takes time and patience, and one in which you will have to learn to identify your needs as a musician and also fine-tune your perceptive abilities. The match must work both ways so that you are right for the instrument and the instrument is right for you. If you follow the right steps and stay connected to the process, however, the right instrument will almost select you.

Often, the focus of a search is simply to find a fabulous instrument, when instead it should be a quest to discover the instrument with which you can make a wonderful sound. Although each instrument has distinctive characteristics, the voice that we celebrate in the concert hall is primarily that of the player rather than that of the instrument. It has been demonstrated many times that two different players with the same violin and bow will sound as if they are playing two different instruments.

It is best to establish a systematic approach when you are auditioning instruments for consideration. Start by listening to as many great players as you can in order to develop your taste for what constitutes a great sound. Recordings are helpful but are no substitute for a live performance. Begin to identify the characteristics that you find attractive and that speak to you as a musician. As you listen to your own playing, start to formulate the qualities that you require in order to create your individual voice. A mental checklist containing as many observations as possible will be a great tool in your search.

Most players are extremely familiar with one or two instruments that they have owned or borrowed. At first, all new instruments are compared to those. In order to expand your listening experience, it is important to try several different types of instrument so that you understand better the range of tonal possibilities. It is much easier to eliminate instruments you don't like first, rather than trying to find your favourite immediately. Use this approach and you will quickly reduce the number of choices, making it easier to concentrate on the final decision.

Some players find it helpful to take notes about each instrument as they try it. These notes usually include some information about the maker, age, price and condition, as well as any relevant impressions regarding the sound. After a long day of shop visits, it can be very helpful to have some reflections to help sort out which instruments stood out and should be revisited. I have occasionally had players make a recording of each instrument in an effort to compare the sound. However, the limitations of the equipment available and the fact that each instrument is recorded in a different environment will tend to confuse rather than clarify your decision. Sharpen your listening skills and your powers of perception and you will have all the tools you need to make the right choice.

Two questions should be at the front of your mind as you proceed on your journey: 'Is it good?' and 'Do I like it?' The first question is of a more mechanical nature.

It concerns the structural soundness and construction of the instrument. An instrument with unrepaired cracks, serious worm damage and a falling neck will only lead to problems in the future. Instruments that are too thick or too thin, have non-standard set-up measurements, or are made from sub-standard materials should be avoided. The last part of 'Is it good?' concerns instruments by non-living makers. This is the question of pedigree.

If you are paying a market price for an instrument by a particular maker, it is imperative that the instrument has a certificate from an expert who is universally respected by the market. To ignore this point is to invite trouble further down the road if the pedigree is questioned when you attempt to sell the instrument.

As you are trying various instruments, you may want to enlist the services of a second dealer or maker to verify the condition and value of an instrument that you intend to buy. Unless you are a close friend of the expert, expect to pay for the evaluation. Many shops or makers will not give a second opinion, as they would rather have your business than encourage you to shop somewhere else. There are also legal liabilities that arise when giving statements of value and authenticity about instruments. The possible legal ramifications that could occur in most cases outweigh the benefit of any compensation. My advice is to work with a maker or shop that you trust. Remember that the process of finding the right instrument shouldn't be antagonistic, but rather a collaborative effort to find the instrument that suits you the best. Word of mouth is a very powerful force and when you choose to shop with good establishments it helps to elevate standards throughout the market.

The second question, 'Do I like it?', should always be considered after you have determined that an instrument is good. You don't want to fall in love with something only to regret it later. If the instrument doesn't pass the first test, it doesn't matter how much you like the sound: don't buy it! After you have played a number of instruments you will become more attuned to the process of determining which one is right for you. In the best circumstances, one or more instruments will begin to seduce you and you will not be able to stop playing them. Don't force the attraction. Let it happen. If you are not getting a clear message to continue playing, move on to the next instrument. Make every effort to avoid being attracted for the wrong reason. Some common mistakes include an attraction to the famous name of the maker; your friend, teacher or a famous player you admire playing an instrument by the same maker; or a romantic story being associated with a particular instrument. Let the romance enhance, not cloud your vision. You will be creating your own incredible story with your instrument, no less romantic than Napoleon's spur marks in the side of the 'Duport' Stradivari cello or a violin that lay hidden in a castle for a hundred years.

You may find that after several weeks of looking, you become confused or frustrated. Take a break and resume your search at a later date. Different instruments may become available in the meantime and you will return with renewed energy and fresh ears. It is a good idea to bring a musical friend or colleague along to help when you are trying instruments. It doesn't even have to be another string player; a singer or a wind player can provide very insightful comments and be tremendously helpful.

Musicians are often uncomfortable discussing the financial aspects of shopping for an instrument. If you are in a shop, give the salesperson an accurate idea of your price range so that you won't waste your time or the shop's by looking at instruments you can't

afford. When looking at older instruments, if you feel that the price is higher than the market value, it is fair to inquire if the price is set in stone. Often the instrument is on consignment with the shop from a private owner and this can determine how the price was set. If you are looking to trade in your current instrument against a new one it is also appropriate to discuss the value of the trade-in. The guidelines when shopping with a maker are slightly different. Most makers have a fixed price, which establishes the value of their instruments. It is best to respect that price and move on if the instruments are out of your range.

Once you have identified one or two instruments that are particularly interesting, take them home to audition for a week. Show your teacher or colleagues and try to get into as many different playing situations as possible to find out how the instruments perform. Play in a trio or quartet, and with a piano and orchestra if you have those opportunities. Each of these situations will reveal different strengths and weaknesses of the instruments and will help you to narrow down your selection. In my own experience, I find that by the end of the first week you will know if you don't like the instrument. If you find that you are attracted strongly at the end of the first week, use a second week to arrive at a final decision. More time is rarely helpful and more often than not it is counterproductive. If you are still unsure at the end of the second week, it is better to return the instrument and keep looking.

Love at first sight can happen, but I recommend a blend of reason and feelings to guide you in the instrument selection process. Allow these forces to work together in order to achieve your goal. Only once in 30 years have I actually had to ask a player to slow down and take a bit more time before he made his final decision to buy. He arrived at the shop on a Friday and selected an instrument that he said he wanted to buy. I suggested that he take it home and call me after trying it for a week. The following Tuesday he called and asked, 'Now can I buy the instrument?' I agreed: in this case it was love at first sight. The physical comfort of any instrument is also very important. In the case of violins and violas, the instrument must be a comfortable size and the neck must be properly shaped. You will be holding your instrument for several hours a day as you play and any discomfort will be magnified over time, possibly leading to injury. With cellos, try to determine if you feel at ease reaching around the instrument to play, and if you can shift comfortably from fourth position to thumb position.

Testing the sound of an instrument should be a thoughtful process guided by intuition. Put the bow on the string and begin playing over the whole range of the instrument. If you find the voice pleasing and the instrument generally responsive, move on to more specific questions. Avoid becoming preoccupied with particular notes or small details too soon. If you don't find the voice attractive or if the instrument is hard to play, put it aside and move on to the next one. Sometimes a simple adjustment can ease a playability problem if you find the voice pleasing. Test the instrument as you would in an adjustment session. See if the voice is open from the lowest register to the top of the first string. Make sure that the sound has a good balance between the focus or core and the harmonic richness around the sound. Avoid empty, hollow-sounding instruments as well as nasal, edgy-sounding ones with no flexibility. The ideal is to look for a combination of desirable characteristics in balance. As you test the sound further, use selections from the repertoire that reveal different qualities of the instrument to help you make your decision (see box on previous page).

In a chamber setting, the ideal instrument is one that is complementary to the group, not one that blends. The best chamber musicians perform together as one while still retaining their discrete and identifiable voices. To this end, violas and cellos in particular should have a clear and powerful quality to ensure that their lower and mellower voices are not lost in the sonic soup. In a string quartet, the high, pure sonority of the violins allows them to be heard clearly but it is still important to maintain the individual identities of the first and second violins.

I hope that this short tour through the process of finding your ideal instrument will give you the confidence to make this exciting journey. If you follow the steps and listen to your heart along with a healthy dose of reason and common sense, you will make a choice that will bring you tangible rewards each time you pick up your instrument and play.