

GUIDE TO PURCHASING A STRINGED INSTRUMENT-updated September 2016

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Dear Parents,

I have prepared this guide to assist you in the purchase of an instrument for your child. Please feel free to send an e-mail and I will be happy to help you to choose an instrument for your child.

In recent years, there has been an explosion in the number of stringed instrument manufacturers. It is often difficult when reading online descriptions to differentiate between a genuinely high-quality student instrument and a cheap “knock-off.” The best rule of thumb advice I can give is that “you get what you pay for.” Looking online, I found new violin outfits (violin, case, and bow) for less than \$50.00. For that price, you’ll get a nice, shiny violin you can hang on the wall for decoration—certainly not a playable instrument!

There are many inexpensive instruments on the market manufactured with poor workmanship and inferior materials. These “bargain” instruments are extremely difficult or impossible to keep in tune and have an unpleasant, harsh tone. It is counterproductive and frustrating for a student to play an instrument that has a bad sound. By the time students are in Churchill, they need to be playing with an instrument and bow that allows them to perform the techniques required of more advanced music.

If the price seems too good to be true, use caution!

Here are just a few examples of popular higher-quality student instrument brands:

Meisel
Scherl & Roth
Lewis
Lidl
Glaesel
Schroetter
Pfretchner
Eastman
Knilling

The quality of an instrument depends on the quality of the wood used. Stringed instruments are traditionally made from seasoned maple and spruce. The more the instrument is hand-carved, the better it will sound. The fittings (pegs, tailpiece, and fingerboard) should be of ebony. Some cheaper brands have fittings that are made with pine and painted black, which will warp and break easily. If the pegs are not fitted correctly, the instrument will not stay in tune. Instruments should also come with 4 fine tuners (string adjusters) for steel strings.

SIZES: I can measure your child for the correct size. A violin or viola that is too large can cause neck, shoulder, and arm strain. Instruments that are too large for the child’s hand will be difficult for them to finger properly, causing them to play out-of-tune if they can’t reach the correct notes.

Violins are sized by fractions –1/2, 3/4 or 4/4. Most students play a 4/4 size by the time they reach Churchill.

Violas are measured in inches-13", 14", 15", 15 ½", 16", 16 1/2". There is no such thing as a "full size" viola, but the largest violas usually don't exceed 16 ½". Violas beyond 15" not only increase in length, but also increase in thickness and weight. Cellos and basses are measured in fractional sizes like violins. Most cellists are playing either ¾ size or 4/4 size by the time they reach Churchill. A "full size" bass is really only a ¾ size or a 7/8th size, since a true "full size" bass would be too large for anyone to play.

Dealers

I recommend that you purchase instruments from a reputable music shop or luthier. A good store will allow your child to try the instrument before purchasing it. Never purchase an instrument from a vendor that will not allow you to return/exchange an instrument.

Intermediate-level violin outfits usually start in the \$500-\$600 and go up from there. Outfits starting in the \$800+ range usually include an upgraded bow (see my "Guide to Purchasing a Bow" for more information) and will take a student through high school and beyond. Advanced students should go to a reputable violin shop/luthier (there are many in NYC) where better quality handcrafted instruments are sold. An advanced student violin (instrument only—without a bow & case) will start at \$1500-\$2000 and go up from there. An instrument of superior quality will continue to appreciate in value. Violas, cellos, and basses are more expensive because they are larger instruments.

A used instrument can be a good choice depending on its condition. A violin shop/luthier will have many used instruments, since truly good instruments become "seasoned" with use and can develop a more beautiful tone. Sometimes music stores sell gently used rental instruments with minor blemishes but in playable condition. A very old instrument may have cracks or have seams that have come unglued; however, if the instrument is of good quality, it may be worth putting some money into it for repairs.

Please feel free to email me if you have any questions before purchasing an instrument. I'd rather help you **before** you purchase an instrument than to disappoint your child when I have to tell them that their shiny new instrument is unplayable! ☺