

Information on String Instrument Purchases

If you are thinking of purchasing a string instrument (ie. Violin, Viola, Cello, or Bass) it is important that you know that the process that will get you the best value in an instrument is very different than the way that you would go about getting the best value in most other purchases.

Most items that you purchase have a brand name and a model name. There is not much variation within a model, and you can be reasonably sure that you will get a similar item if you ordered the same model twice. This is not the case with string instruments. There is often great variance between two instruments that are called by the same name or model.

There are two primary ways by which instruments are labeled and priced. One is based on the cost of the materials used and time spent in construction and the other is based on the quality of the sound that is produced by the instrument. Instruments of the highest quality are priced based solely on the sound created by the instrument, because the price is set by the musician that is willing to pay that price. Instruments produced in large quantities are often priced based on the cost of materials and time, leading to large differences in the quality of these instruments.

This variation in quality makes it difficult to insure that a person is getting a good deal on an instrument. The only way to insure using your money wisely is to hear the instrument before making the purchase. This eliminates any online purchase as a wise choice. While you may end up with a good instrument from an online purchase, you are rolling the dice and the odds are not in your favor.

Locally, there are two types of retailers for string instruments: large distributors and small violin shops. Once again, the conventional wisdom argues that large distributors with greater buying power will be able to provide a better value than small shops. That would be true if instruments were branded and labeled consistently.

Small violin shops have survived by taking advantage of their knowledge and ability to judge the value of an instrument by the sound that it can produce. Because there is variation in the finished quality of an instrument, placing an instrument in a category is not a fixed science, especially if it is being priced based on the cost of materials and workmanship. It is a common practice for a small shop to order 20 instruments from a luthier (instrument maker), play them to determine their quality, and return the lower quality instruments to the luthier. They will then create more value by using their skills to adjust the sound post, bridge, string height, often replacing inferior strings and bridges. Through these adjustments, the small shop owner is able to offer an instrument of superior quality and sound for a cheaper price than a large distributor.

On the back, there is a list of highly-regarded shops in the area. I hope that this information is helpful for your purchase. Please contact me if you need more information about your purchase.

Sincerely,

Ben Denne

The following shops deal in violins, violas, and cellos:

Perrin and Associates Fine Violins

Roger Perrin

1 East Lexington St. Suite 401

Baltimore, MD 21202

410-539-0043

Call for an appointment

Gailes Violin Shop

10013 Rhode Island Avenue

College Park, MD 20740

301-474-4300

Potters Violins

4706 Highland Ave.

Bethesda, MD 20814

800-317-9452

The following shops deal basses:

Shank's Strings

308 W High St

Elizabethtown, PA 17022-2140

(717) 361-0511

Bob's House Of Basses

12301 Shafer Ln.

Bowie, MD 20720-3359

(301) 805-9407