

Wendy Moes
Strings Magazine
Nov./Dec. 1989, pp 42-44



How to Look For and Evaluate the Work of Today's Violin Makers

Why are new instruments suddenly drawing so much attention? Perhaps people are making better instruments. Or the world's string-playing population is outgrowing its supply of able-bodied old instruments. Or the prices of these antiques are getting too high. Or all of the above. Whatever the reasons the stigma that once attached to a brand-new stringed instrument seems to be less and less evident. Today, renowned players are recognizing the worthiness of new instruments and are using them proudly in public.

This recognition encourages violin makers to invest their time and talents in making instruments to an extent never possible before. Many of these makers have backgrounds in repair and set-up. With extensive knowledge of the classical maker's methods, successes, and failures, they are equipped to make real advances in both the quality of sound and appearance of new instruments.

New makers also have an advantage over the classical makers: They can build for today's players and today's halls, both enormously changed in the last 50-100 years. When players wish for more focus, quicker response, and a fuller bass sound, they can now ask that such qualities be built into their instruments. In posing such challenges, they set the stage for creativity and ingenuity on the part of makers. Both players and makers then enjoy a new sense of collaboration of playing a meaningful role in the evolution of instrument playing.

You may not intend to alter the course of music history by looking for an instrument, but there are several reasons why you ought to consider a new one the next time you do look. By discussing some of the factors that enter into such a decision, my aim is to help you become a free agent in this process. You can then make your own decisions and be confident of them.

When looking for any instrument, the biggest considerations are authenticity, condition, sound quality, and appearance. The harrowing thing about the first two is that both are a matter of opinion, and worse yet, usually someone else's opinion. Since violin dealers seem to make a sport of disagreeing with one another, the musician looking for an instrument can be left in a miserable nervous quandary.

One of the biggest differences between looking for an antique instrument and a modern one is that authenticity and condition are both givens in the latter case. The nervousness and resentment which can grow out of the necessity of relying on other people's sometimes fickle opinions is gone.

To many people there is also something special about the experience of ordering a new instrument, seeing the rough wood (sometimes even getting to choose it), and watching the instrument grow. This certainty matches the excitement of owning an instrument which has had many experiences you have not shared.

Sound quality is still the major factor in choosing an instrument, new or old. So a little preparation is necessary in order to learn what sound one likes best. Before you spend time and money going around looking for instruments, play every instrument you can get your hands on from friends, teachers, and stand partners. Play every instrument at length for hours, not minutes.

Instruments vary in material and build, and each will make subtle, or even drastic, demands on your technique before you get the best sound. Chances are great that the technique you use on your present instrument won't be an instant success on the others. This does not make them bad instruments. Try changing the bow speed, pressure, and sounding points. Be able to play on different kinds of strings. After doing this for a while, you will get used to changing instruments and finding out how each responds. Discuss the pros and cons of each with their owners and anyone else who cares to take part. This is very good for opening your eyes and ears, and will help you develop a definite opinion of what good sound is and what suits you best. Unless you know this, you don't really need to change instruments. Then with new ears and playing ability, you can start looking for an instrument.

This vital knowledge is the same for new and old instruments alike. With new instruments, one question that often arises is whether the sound will change. This is an age-old problem with improperly built instruments, and deserves some de-mystification.

Everybody knows a young branch will bend and an old one will snap. This stiffening process goes on long after the tree has been cut. A stiff piece of wood vibrates differently from a flexible one, resulting in a higher and more complete overtone series. We can't hear all the overtones, but we perceive the sound to be more full and pleasant. This means a well-made instrument will improve with age as it stiffens, but it should sound good to begin with. A bad-sounding instrument will not necessarily get better and could get worse.

Proper arching and graduations are necessary. An instrument built too thick or strong will gradually get too stiff to vibrate freely. Be cautious about an instrument which feels heavy to lift and sound quality that is quite good on the top string and fades toward the bottom string. The lower register requires more flexibility and suffers first when the instrument begins to stiffen.

The other factors which can cause New Instrument Syndrome ("It sounded great to begin with, but now...") are improper sizing and varnish. Watch out for thick varnish and varnish that soaks into the wood. This is often the case when the wood looks stained and the grain is reversed. These instruments can also sound fine for a while, until the varnish begins to harden and hamper the vibrations. A knowledgeable maker can avoid these problems. The violin maker, like a painter must know his materials, how they age and affect each other.

There is a wide range of quality in new instruments, just as with old ones, and there is a great deal of overlap between new and old instruments. A mistake often made is to assume that any old instrument is better than any new one. People come to us often and say: "I already have a new violin." (As if they were all the same.) "I am looking for something better now." (An old one.) Some people think that anything Italian is better than anything that is not. This is certainly not true with modern instruments. There are good makers all over the world. The very best old instruments can beat the new ones, but there is a lot of middle ground. Unless the status of an expensive old instrument is absolutely vital to one's career, one could well consider a new instrument. It could have the sound and playability you are looking for. The lack of interest in new instruments on the part of dealers, though unnerving, probably has more to do with the low profit margins than in low quality of sound. When a maker sells an instrument, dealers are not usually involved-another good reason for their lack of enthusiasm.



If you have a particular maker in mind, play as many already existing instruments as possible, and as old as possible to see and hear what age does to them. Discuss sound and changes, if any, with the present owner. There are also a few further considerations. When you find a maker whose instruments you like, is he or she easily accessible to you? This is important because a new instrument, like a new car, needs extra service for the first year or so. After vibrating and being under tension for a while they can settle, as do older instruments that have been opened for repair work. This settling usually takes the form of sound post tension and neck angle changes. Be prepared to make several trips that first year. If these go unadjusted, the instrument can appear to change or lose some of its sound quality, causing the owner to worry that it is afflicted with the dreaded New Instrument Syndrome.



Is the maker you have chosen also knowledgeable in set-up and sound adjustment? Is he able to do necessary bridge and sound post adjustments? A maker is ultimately responsible for keeping his instruments in tip-top playing shape; only if you live too far away should you need to go anywhere else. This crucial ability usually comes from years of repair work or direct contact with players fulfilling their set-up requests. Makers should welcome the constant feedback and the chance to monitor their instruments' progress, while players welcome a truly caring service.

It happens quite often that players with new instruments from other makers come to us for adjustments saying: "He makes fine instruments but he can not adjust for beans." Some players and makers are almost proud of this, as if it proves they are artists and not mere mechanics. To us, it means the maker does not have a full understanding of how instruments work. Violins, unlike art, must not only look appealing, but also function in a very precise way. Understanding how they work, how to make them work-and there is a lot that can be understood-is absolutely essential, and comes before artistry. The maker's artistic merit will show up automatically in the amount of personality and character he gives his work, not in how well he can copy a modern-day conception of a Stradivari, and not in machine age ideals of symmetry and "workmanship."

Until recently, a great number of musicians were reluctant to play any instrument that looked new. But that prejudice is rapidly disappearing into the past. The instruments of Stradivari, Amati, and Guarneri were all once new. They looked it, and they looked great-fit for kings. They were not antiqued. It is not the newness of some modern instruments that makes them unsightly. It is not the age alone of old instruments which lends them their charm. The charm was there to begin with in the character of the work and the varnish, and should be there with new instruments too.

Audiences, by the way, are notoriously unable to hear the difference between old and new instruments. Any soloist who owns a new instrument-and there are many now who do-can tell stories by the dozen of green room compliments on his Stradivari or Guarneri, when really he had played the new one that night. The best instrument is the one that performs and handles best for the player, not the one with the biggest price tag or the most venerable reputation. When you next look for an instrument, keep that fact in mind. You may end up living happily ever after with something brand new.

