A Buyer’s Guide to Purchasing a Violin

How to Buy a Violin Under $2,500
Here's a buyer's guide to finding an affordable fiddle to match any budget
By Erin Shrader

Worldwide Wares
Shopping online may seem the easiest way to find a stringed instrument, but hidden costs can add up fast
By Heather K. Scott
A Buyer's Guide to Violins Under $2,500

Need a student instrument? A second violin? A good quality fiddle for contradance gigs? Here’s a buyer’s guide to finding an affordable fiddle to match any budget

By Erin Shrader

Made in China. Those words on a violin label used to send teachers and violin dealers running the other way with memories of poor workmanship and piercing tone. That kind of violin still exists (see “Hundred Dollar Fiddle,” online at AllThingsStrings.com), but the quality of instruments produced today in the better Chinese workshops and factories has risen dramatically. There’s probably never been a better time to find good quality at an affordable price, whatever your budget. Still, the market can be confusing to the buyer, whether student, parent, or experienced player in search of an affordable fiddle. At this price point—up to $2,500—violins all look about the same and prices appear to be all over the map. Why? What does more money buy? And what makes an instrument good?

Unfortunately, it’s not easy to answer those questions just by looking. To add to the confusion, there’s not always a direct correlation between price and sound. But there are explanations for the prices and there are definite differences between instruments at different price points. To get a sense of the affordable production instruments coming from Chinese workshops and factories, Strings asked three long-established companies—Eastman Strings, Scott Cao Violins, and Snow Violins—to send a representative example of each of their entry-level, midrange, and advanced violins under $2,500.

Each of the nine instruments sent by these companies (representing three models from each manufacturer) was made of the proper materials—maple back, ribs, and scroll, with spruce tops and ebony...
fingerboards. Even the most modest was made of hand-carved parts, with inlaid purfling. Each was set up with quality bridges, fittings, and strings.

To learn more about the technical elements, I took all nine instruments to violin maker Anthony Lane in Northern California. He pointed out details about the materials and workmanship that make a difference in sound, playability, and overall quality. Then several violin players on our staff gathered for a listening party.

What Makes a Good Violin?
Some aspects of the violin are permanent—the wood it’s made of, how it’s carved, the varnish. These give a violin its inherent quality. Other elements, collectively called the setup, can be changed or adjusted. Both the inherent and changeable characteristics have a big impact on the sound, look, and feel of a fiddle.

Elements of Sound
Wood The disparities between the different price levels start with wood, which is selected for acoustical properties and also for visual beauty. Aged, flamed maple, with ideal acoustic characteristics, is typically used for the back, ribs, and scroll of a violin, but it’s expensive. So affordable, entry-level models are typically made of plain maple while the more advanced (and expensive) instruments show more flame or “figure.” Spruce, from which tops are made, is less showy than maple, but soundwise, it’s the spruce top that does most of the work. All violin wood must be aged before use or it will distort or crack over time, but the more expensive wood is aged longer.

You’ll hear wood referred to as European or Chinese. European maple is more expensive than Chinese, but according to Lane, the acoustical properties are the same. “They just look different,” he says.

Entry-level instruments will typically be made of plain or slightly flamed Chinese wood while the top-of-the-line instruments (those priced at $1,500 to $2,500) will have more flame or figure.

Workmanship As Jack Hu of Snow Violins explains, each level of instrument is made by a different group of makers. Workers specialize in different tasks, such as arching, scroll carving, or setting the neck. “[They are made] all by hand, just different hands,” Hu says. The older, more figured wood goes to the more skillful group of makers, who make the more expensive instruments. Skill and attention to detail are very important in violin making. After wood, the shape of the arches and accuracy of the graduations (thickness) of the top and back are the most important factors contributing to sound. Every piece of wood is different and a good craftsman will know where to leave it thicker and where to take more out for the best results.

Model The model dictates the shape, dimensions, placement of sound holes and bridge, shape of the arches, and so on, all of which affect how the instrument looks, sounds, and responds. All elements must work together acoustically and visually to make a good instrument. Developing a model requires knowledge and experience. You’ll hear the terms “Strad model” or “Guarneri model” tossed about. One very successful violin maker admits it took him years to learn to tell them apart by looking. Some musicians gravitate consistently in one direction or the other, depending on their preference of sound (for instance, Guarneri models often have a darker tone favored by some violinists and fiddlers), but one is not better than the other.

Those Things You Can See
If you think instruments are selected by tone alone, think again. Violins are valued almost as much for beauty as for voice, and nobody is immune to the lure of appearances. Even the simplest of our nine sample instruments had a certain visual appeal. Expect the maple on the less-expensive instruments to be plain, while the more-expensive instruments will typically have more flame in the wood.

The primary job of varnish is to protect the wood from the ravages of dirt, weather, and human hands. Varnish that is too thick or hard acts like a straitjacket on the wood, restricting vibration and muffling the sound. Done well, varnish enhances sound and brings out the beauty of the wood, especially flamed maple, which appears to play with the light. Lane, the luthier, explains that the first layer of a good varnish job (called the “ground”) seals the wood, protecting that refractive quality. The colored layers then “float” on top. “It’s what we all strive for,” says Lane, nodding.
approvingly at a particularly well-done entry-level violin among our samples. When the color soaks into the wood, staining it, the result is dull and opaque.

The finish can be straight, shaded to simulate varnish that has broken down over time, or antiqued with nicks, scrapes, and worn edges. Think distressed denim. Any of these approaches can be done well or badly. For example, the plain, golden varnish of one of our sample instruments makes the most of a simple piece of wood. Antiquing can add visual interest, but look at a heavily distressed instrument and ask yourself what would have had to happen to an instrument to make it look like that!

Remember that antiquing takes time and typically adds cost to an instrument.

Those Things You Can Feel
"The neck is for the player," violin maker Sigrun Seifert once said. Therefore she gives it special attention. The neck should not feel tacky, sticky, rough, or chunky. A violin neck that’s the proper shape will fit the hand with no dips or unevenness to get in the way of shifting smoothly.

The Significance of Setup
Certain elements of your instrument are made to be replaced and adjusted. A good setup can bring out the best from a modest instrument, while a poor setup can make a good fiddle miserable to play. Anything you buy from a good violin shop should be properly set up.

The easiest parts to see are the fittings—pegs, tailpiece, end button, and chin rest. Fittings made of boxwood and rosewood are considered fancier than ebony, aesthetically speaking, and cost more. But ebony is actually the better choice functionally, Lane says, because it doesn’t compress or wear out as easily. Our entry-level models tended to have simple ebony fittings, while the advanced models had fancier, ornamented pegs. Chin rests are easily exchanged, so don’t dismiss a violin because the chin rest feels uncomfortable.

Pegs should turn smoothly and stay in place—if you can’t tune it, you can’t play it. Some of our entry-level instruments scored better on this front than pricier models. Four fine tuners, either built into the tailpiece or added individually, are not necessarily a bad thing. Individual tuners are easily replaced if one breaks.

Fingerboards should be ebony and properly shaped so that every note sounds clearly—the curve should be neither too round nor too flat, without bumps, and with a slight dip in the middle. Otherwise, certain notes won’t sound right, or will feel awkward to play.

The bridge is important: it transmits the vibration of the string to the top. All nine instruments came with good- or better-quality bridges from well-known bridge makers. No matter how humble the fiddle, the bridge feet should fit the top. The bridge should be the correct height and should match the curve of the fingerboard so the string height (called the “action”) is comfortable and even for all strings. The strings should be evenly spaced with easy string clearance for the bow.

Peer inside the instrument to see the soundpost standing just behind the bridge. It is not glued in, but carefully carved for a perfect fit. The bridge and soundpost work together to transmit the vibration of the string to the instrument’s body. Small adjustments to the bridge and soundpost can make a big difference in sound.

In Lane’s opinion, the sound difference among most of our sample instruments was well within the margins of what can be adjusted with setup.

Don’t Forget to Compare
There’s no substitute for trying out a lot of violins and choosing the one you like. Two or three fiddles of the very same make and model can look and sound quite different. Fiddles are simply not consistent: They are made of wood, not plastic. They are made by people, not machines. The same violin will sound different depending on strings, setup, the bow used, the player—even the weather!

This variability isn’t necessarily a drawback. Don’t be surprised if the one you like isn’t the most expensive. An inexpensive instru-
ment may happen to be made of better-than-expected wood. Or a critical step, such as the arching or graduations, could have been done by a particularly talented maker. A midrange instrument may use more expensive, but not better, components and not show significantly better workmanship or attention to setup.

Be sure to have someone play the fiddles you like so you can listen. The sound from the audience perspective can be quite different. Also, try a blind test—close your eyes and listen without knowing what you’re listening to. You may be surprised at how influenced we are by price and by looks. When blindfolded, our staff couldn’t consistently sort out instruments by price, and sometimes made very different remarks about the same instrument than they had when they could see it.

Evaluating the sound
Some qualities can be evaluated objectively. Others are purely subjective. Try to weed out instruments on the objective merits and then select for tone.

• Listen for evenness of tone from string to string and up and down the neck. Listen for notes that sound dead or strings that have a different timbre than the others. On many of the sample instruments, the E string was significantly brighter than the others. Ask the clerk, if you are unsure, whether this can be adjusted or if a different brand of string might sound better.
• Does it “speak” easily, or is the tone hard to control?
• Check its projection. Why play if no one can hear you? An instrument that sounds a bit bright may be less pleasing under the ear, but project better and even sound better at a distance.
• Test its flexibility. Will it crescendo and decrescendo smoothly?
• Sound is hard to describe in words. Here are some words commonly used to describe violins (ask the sales clerk to explain his or her definition of those terms if they are used): warm, dark, bright, sparkling, boxy, hollow, shrill, edgy, smooth, thin, fat, rich, complex.

Financial Matters
It’s OK to pay more for better sound. “With good violins, the differences in sound are small, but they’re expensive,” Lane says.

If you can afford to, consider resale value. “It’s easier to resell a $2,500 fiddle than a $500 fiddle,” he adds. The bargain-priced entry-level fiddle may be good quality for the money, but the higher-quality instrument with some handmade character will do better when it comes time to sell.

“You’re not losing value. You’ll always get your money back out of it,” Lane says.

The Bow Factor
If you don’t already have a bow, or aren’t satisfied with the one you own, factor one into your total budget. A good-quality bow will be far more rewarding to play, will aid your development as a player, and make the most of a less-expensive violin.

Buying an Affordable Fiddle—Fast Facts

What to Expect: At a minimum, you should expect to find ebony fingerboards, good or better bridges, and quality strings—everything should fit and work properly.

• Entry level: Plain, Chinese wood; simple fittings, including fine tuners; simple, straight, or shaded varnish. Sound: bright, not too complex.
• Mid-range: Chinese or European wood with more figure; fancier-looking fittings; shaded or antiqued varnish. Sound: smoother or warmer.
• Advanced: Highly figured European or Chinese wood; fancier-looking fittings; shaded or antiqued varnish; more complex sound.

What we found: You might expect better attention to the details of setup with each step up in price, but workmanship—good or bad—tended to be consistent among the brands. Sound quality didn’t necessarily improve with price, so don’t be swayed by the price tag—shop and compare. Instruments of the same model can look and sound quite different.

Use the same kind of strings if possible. According to Lane, strings can make such a difference you could end up paying a lot more for an instrument that sounded better simply because it had better strings. Many violin shops use Dominants, by Thomastik-Infeld, as a sort of industry standard.

Use the same bow, preferably the one you’ll be playing after the violin purchase. Bows can sound as different from each other as instruments. If you don’t already have a bow, consider dedicating a significant percentage of your total budget for a good bow.

Play and listen. The sound is different when heard from the audience than from the driver’s seat, so have a friend, teacher, or someone at the violin shop play for you so you can evaluate the sound as an audience member might hear it.

Compare instruments you’re considering in a blind test. The results may surprise you. Violinists often hear what they expect (or hope) to hear based on looks, price, or a famous name. No one is immune to flash!
You're in the market for a new violin, viola, cello, or bass, but don't live anywhere near a violin shop. So what's a beleaguered string player to do? Online shopping just might be best. But buyer beware.

The variety of online offerings is staggering. You'll find literally thousands of instruments from super-cheap student instruments to vintage auction items, from factory-made to high-end hand-crafted marvels. Many online sites are reputable—Shar, Southwest Strings, Sam Ash, Tarisio, and StringWorks, to name a few—and offer good customer service. But the vast geography of online purchasing defies easy classification and can be overwhelming. In some cases, hidden costs can add up fast, starting with shipping—you could end up paying even more to return a lackluster fiddle. And your online purchase may be crafted so cheaply or set up so badly that it’s impossible to play (see our companion story, “Sounds Like a Hundred Bucks,” on page 61).

For those just entering the online market, the following primer offers the basics you should know before you buy.

Before You Get Started
There are three things you should look for before contacting a seller: a trial period, a return policy, and a money-back guarantee. Of the latter, “You can't be successful without it,” says one eBay seller who uses the online alias Violiniada and requested anonymity.

Any transaction is most likely to be successful if at least one of the parties, buyer or seller, is knowledgeable about stringed instruments. Keep in mind that the seller you meet through Craig’s List or eBay may not be able to accurately assess the value, quality, condition, or even the size of a used or antique instrument. As a result, it’s wise to ask a teacher or friend who knows about instruments to help you make your purchase, or to stick with companies that specialize in violins.
And when it comes to customer service, remember that local violin shops are reluctant to work on inexpensive instruments purchased online because they can be difficult to repair and the results are seldom satisfactory. After all, a $100 fiddle with $400 worth of work is still a $100 fiddle, with minimal resale value once you’ve outgrown it.

Still, the Internet can be an asset when searching for a new instrument.

“The Web is not the end of your destination, but should only be the beginning,” says Todd French, Los Angeles Opera cellist and president of online stringed-instrument retailer StringWorks. He points out that many websites contain a wealth of information about violins and other stringed instruments, and the Web can provide musicians the chance to find a company or dealer that is located outside of their geographical area. (The Violin Dealers and Shops section of Strings’ Buyer’s Guide Directory includes the Web addresses for dozens of helpful, knowledgeable dealers.)

Remember, the online violin market is vast and confusing. You’ll find every type of seller, from swindlers to highly regarded violin shops and venerable auction houses. To help you get the lay of the land, here’s a look at the geography of the online instrument market.

Know Your Options

CRAIG’S LIST: Craig’s List (www.craigslist.com) is a virtual garage sale where buyers can find anything from mismatched silverware to used cars. But like any garage sale, most of the merchandise isn’t worth taking home.

One advantage of Craig’s List is that it connects you with sellers in your own community so you can inspect your potential purchase in person. “I prefer to buy through Craig’s List,” says Elizabeth Erickson, a violin, viola, cello, and composition teacher in Arlington, Massachusetts. After looking at many listings and meeting several sellers, Erickson found an instrument she really likes. “The only drawback was driving around so much in the middle of winter, but the satisfaction of knowing it was the right instrument was definitely worth it,” she says.

Of course, the other advantage of online venues over retail is price. Erickson also picked up an electric cello from Craig’s List. “[It] was in like-new condition,” she says, “for less than half the price of a new one!”

Buyer Beware: There’s no recourse or responsibility on Craig’s List. No chance of return or guarantee of satisfaction, unless the seller agrees. Criminal or civil charges can be brought, however, in the case of fraud.

EBAY: The quality of instruments sold on eBay runs the gamut, from cheap student outfits to top-notch instruments with money-back guarantees. Prices start at the ridiculously low price of $9.99. Sellers range from individuals cleaning their attics to violin shops clearing out extra stock to people who make their living selling exclusively online through “eBay stores.” You can even bid in real time at auction houses around the world through eBay partner LiveAuctioneers.com.

Trying to discern who’s who in the land of eBay isn’t always easy. And there’s no simple answer. Your best bet is to attempt to contact sellers and at least correspond via e-mail (better yet, spend some time on the phone). Be prepared for a lot of missed connections. For this article, we contacted about 20 sellers . . . and only received responses from two.

Another tactic is to get a sense of the eBay seller through the Meet the Seller information that accompanies each listing, where you can find out how long sellers have been in business on eBay, where they are based, their feedback rating, how many transactions they have completed, and what else they have for sale.

Even professionals can get burned buying online, as luthier Peter Van Arsdale of Berkeley, California, can attest. Van Arsdale says the images of his “eBay special” looked exquisite. But upon receipt, he discovered the instrument was glued together with a permanent adhesive—something no photo could reveal. “It was impossible to do the many necessary repairs to make it into a playable instrument,” he says. “It still sits neglected somewhere in my studio.

“Do you wanna buy it? No, I didn’t think so.”

Buyer Beware: Buy only from an eBay seller who offers a return policy, trial period, and money-back guarantee. And if the seller does offer a return policy, be sure to check the particulars. “Many
return policies start on the invoice date and end on the date that the product arrives back to the seller,” advises Robert Fear, owner and founder of the online instrument seller Folkmusician.com. “If this is the case, then a two-week trial period may not give you enough time to get the instrument back for a refund.” He adds that buyers should also check for restocking fees and pay with a credit card. “This will help protect you if the instrument does not arrive, arrives damaged, or has been misrepresented,” he says. In addition, eBay has its own customer service team that can investigate possible fraud or help negotiate problematic sales.

WEB-ONLY RETAILERS: This market includes general music importers with loads of inexpensive instruments (many offer all kinds of instruments, not just the violin family). But you’ll also find some specialty online retailers with onsite workshops, trained sales staff to help guide your search, and dedicated shipping departments that make sure your purchase arrives safely.

Shar Music, one of the largest online stringed-instrument shops, sells everything from rosin and shoulder rests to student and advanced instruments. The company’s inventory of fine instruments and bows includes a broad selection of vintage and new instruments by leading makers.

“We believe a musician shouldn’t be limited by a local selection or opinion,” says Hans Anderson, sales manager and fine instruments specialist at Shar. “We encourage our customers to utilize the extensive content on our website and then call to speak with one of our instrument specialists, all string players.”

Others agree. Todd French reports that most of StringWorks’ customers contact the company either by phone or e-mail prior to making a purchase. His shop offers a selection of handmade, carved violins, violas, and cellos for advanced beginners through professionals. “We also have a very active forum on our site,” French says. Customer feedback is a good thing to look for when shopping online. An open forum, as French points out, “means you must be sure to please every customer, all the time, or the entire [Internet] has access to your complaints, right on your own site.”

At Southwest Strings, another large-scale online string retailer, every instrument sold via the Web receives an in-house setup: bridge, post, pegs, nut, fingerboard shaping, strings, and final adjustment. The strict instrument-packaging procedures “have reduced breakage to .057 percent,” reports Southwest Strings staffer Tiffany Johnson.

STOREFRONTS WITH ONLINE SERVICES: Of course, going to your local dealer, speaking with a professional who knows you, being able to play a selection of instruments, pick your favorite, and take it home on trial is always going to be your best bet. But if you simply can’t get to a violin shop, a violin shop that also offers online services can provide the next best thing.

“A good dealer can help narrow down the selection, pick an instrument for you based on your requirements, and make sure the instrument is set up correctly,” says Robert Fear. If you’re looking for something specific, a dealer may be able to locate it for you. This person-to-person attention can make buying from an online dealer ideal.

‘Buying a violin online is a lot like buying a used car. Only you don’t get to drive it or take it to a mechanic to check it out.’
—Peter Van Arsdale

Some shops, such as Johnson String Instrument in Massachusetts, offer a home-approval period through their websites, with the details spelled out clearly. Johnson states the warranty on instruments and repairs, as well as appraisal, trade-in, and exchange policies up front.

Also look for specialty shops that include buying and instrument-care resources as well. Folkmusician.com offers a wide selection of self-help information to guide you through the process of finding the best instrument for your needs.

Buyer Beware: Be sure to clarify the details before ordering or taking instruments and bows on trial. How will the instrument be sent to you? What insurance do you have if something happens en route? What shipping costs are involved? Does the seller have affiliations with local dealers to help with any problems once your instrument arrives?

CLICK-AND-MORTAR AUCTIONS: Can’t make it to New York or Boston for the violin auctions? It’s possible to peruse the catalogs and bid from home in these specialist-run sales. The venerable Christie’s now offers Christie’s Live online bidding during selected auctions, including stringed instruments. Clients of Skinner, the Boston auctioneers, can bid in real-time via the Internet through LiveAuctioneers.

David Bonsey, head of musical instruments at Skinner, cautions that live bidding goes quickly—most lots are done in less than a minute. An additional 5 percent premium will be charged for using...
LiveAuctioneers. Bonsey makes a point of emphasizing personal service and invites buyers to e-mail or phone directly.

“They will get me,” he says.

Tarisio is an instrument-only auction company founded by longtime violin dealers. “We’re totally different,” says Jason Price, one of Tarisio’s three founders. “We are in possession of the property and in full control of its attribution, condition, description, etc.,” he says.

Tarisio holds live previews in select cities, but the bidding is conducted online over the course of several days. The pace is much slower than bidding at live sales. “On the auction day you register, then start bidding. If you’re successful we bill you, you pay, then we ship or you collect,” Price says.

Tarisio holds six auctions a year: two large sales with viewings in New York and Boston, two sales of lower-priced lots often in need of restoration, and two high-end sales in London. The company’s website contains a wealth of information on buying and selling, including an archive of previous auction prices.

Buyer Beware: If there’s something you’re seriously considering at any auction, it’s best to see it yourself. All lots are sold as is. No trial period, and no returns. Tarisio will stand behind its attribution (who made the instrument and when) with a limited-time money-back guarantee, but otherwise, once you buy it, it’s yours. In addition to the sale price, buyers pay a buyer’s premium, shipping, and insurance. Also, be sure to read the fine print regarding taxes (state, VAT, and so on). These can add up quickly.

Ready to Buy?
Before finalizing your purchase, speak with your seller in person. Make a connection. “Finding the ideally matched instrument for a musician happens through great communication,” Hans Anderson says. Making that call gives you a chance to voice any concerns, such as if your purchase will have any shipping insurance and just how it will be shipped.

Follow these simple rules: If you’re purchasing from an individual, find out where, when, why, and how the seller acquired the instrument and why he or she is selling it now. What’s the instrument’s size? And in the case of older instruments, has it undergone any repairs (or does it need work)? Can you see and play the instrument before purchase? Is there a trial period, return policy, or insurance policy (for shipping)? If not, reconsider. Keep in mind that the seller may not know enough to answer accurately.

“Buying a violin online is a lot like buying a used car. Only you don’t get to drive it or take it to a mechanic to check it out,” says Van Arsdale. “My advice is to buy from someone who will let you take the instrument for a trial period. But even then you may have problems that develop or that are already present, but not apparent.