

## Your First Instrument - How to Choose it ?

A lot of people get the instrument their best friend already plays, or their girl or boyfriend might think was “cool” “groovy” - “in”. Let’s go through a familiar soap opera type scenario:

You: I’d like to play an instrument...Ma.

Parent: Good - what would you like to play?

You: I don’t know - something really cool, groovy.

Hopefully you don’t go out and buy the first thing that comes to mind. And it goes on and on...but buying your first instrument without first trying it ( or something like it) out first is a bit like wearing your friends popular, top of the current fashion shoes...they look good at first -(but would you really think of trying to walk in them ? )

Always remember that an instrument is just a box with wires, or a tube, or a drum head over a tub - or an electronic equivalent: It’s not a musical instrument until it makes music - and it isn’t YOUR musical instrument until YOU make the music. The music won’t rub off, through the case- just by carrying it around with you - like anything else - the right kind of practice makes it better... . I used to teach large classes of adult beginners to play the guitar. Some of them never opened the case between lessons- and some of these people seemed to be full of questions. It was a matter for me to find the music they loved and help them get the first few notes going.

Think of this instrument as a life partner - bargain as hard as you can, be as suspicious as you can-at first. But when you are sure - then go for it and know forever that you have done your very best to get a worthy partner to your best, most wonderful music making. In time you may upgrade, but for now this is the best deal you can make.

# 1. Don't buy at first. Rent if possible. If you rent -examine that instrument carefully -get someone to play it first, then Inventory every scratch, nick, dent, sticky keys, valves, cracks in soundboard..in writing--with dealer and you signing a copy for each of you. Get the brochures; talk to players of the instrument you are thinking of -and inquire about repair bills- find out if any make or model spends a lot of time in the repair shop.

#2 See several dealers, get several quotes.

#3. If you've never played an instrument before -chances are your school no longer stocks instruments for you to try - music teachers long ago lost their rooms, and instrument collections., and their jobs.

#4. FIRST: Try to find a good music teacher you can talk to; or someone who plays an instrument you think you might like. Listen to records of that instrument - all kinds - not just what is cool today.

#4. The market: There are string instruments- bowed( violins, violas, cellos, basses) and plucked: guitars, lutes, mandolins, etc. And hybrids-like bass guitar.-which is a very limited instrument- although it can help you get a powerful sense of the harmonic foundations of all western music.

The single reeds ( clarinet, saxes -are the simplest, cheapest, and most readily available). Double reeds- oboe, bassoon, and the variations- English horn, Contra Bassoon- are much more difficult, and more expensive to start on - although if you can blow 20 tones on a contra bassoon- you'll probably get a place in any amateur orchestra that already has 45 clarinet players -( but who would want to play in a group like THAT? ).

The Brass instruments: Trumpets, Trombones, Tubas- and a large family of variations for marching bands -all kinds of hybrids- they are really the noisiest- and you need a mountain cave or a triple insulated bedroom to practice without driving your family, and the neighbors insane. ( My first legitimate horn was a trombone - and the first thing I did with it was to climb up in my tree house and blow reveille from-the top of my tree house - and the whole neighborhood went up in arms - and someone offered to tear down my treehouse.) Actually the first illegitimate instrument I had- was the top of an Atwater Kent radio - it's shown on RCA Victor record labels showing the cornucopia horn- with a dog looking as if he is listening. The sounds this made were horrendous- and I still have that horn.\*\* It will be scanned into the photo album.

**TRY NOT TO BUY ON THE FIRST VISIT TO SELLER:** Get your teacher, or a musically performing friend to come back with you to look and advise. If you have to, offer a refundable deposit. A reputable dealer will probably hold it for a day or so without any problem...except in a big urban superstore.

Write down the Make, Model, and serial number - to avoid a 'bait and switch' routine where the seller tries to make you 'trade up' to a higher priced instrument than was described on the phone. Try to Buy a used instrument; ( like a Stradivarius violin used by Jascha Heifetz?)

**THE RENTAL:** A reputable rental agency will allow you to exchange, to try out -etc.

**Want Ads:** Ask to test the instrument first - if a wind instrument - take a cloth and some rubbing alcohol to sterilize the mouthpiece. If the seller says it needs work - forget it. Unless you know a good repair man who the seller **MUST** let you get an appraisal. ( A slight nick in a trombone slide can make it nearly impossible to play. My own trombone slide got stepped by on by half the band when our football team suddenly intercepted a pass and won the game)

**Is a Case Included:** Important since you learn to take care of an instrument by damaging it first - then experiencing the pain of the repair bills, the delays in getting to play again. Believe me- you will do most of your damage during the first 6 months of ownership. After that- care will become automatic. A case is almost as essential as the instrument itself.

**ONE GUIDELINE:** No matter what type of instrument you get - always try to get the very best one you can. You can't listen to the paint job, or the shiny lacquer. - it's the sound, and only the sound that counts. It takes a real expert to make a cheap instrument sound good., and anyone can make at least a fairly good sound on a fine instrument ( except a double reed instrument (Bassoon, Oboe,English Horn), or a bagpipe).

Examine your instrument carefully before you leave the store: Look for dents, cracks, broken or bent parts, scratches, holes where there should be no holes, broken keys.

One thing: Don't rent an instrument carelessly: You will need to have the trust of that dealer for a long time - he can't stay in business very long trusting deadbeats - and he's learned how to make pretty good judgements. If he is careless in lending you any old instrument- you should be cautious about the quality of that instrument in the first place. You are probably not getting his best instrument.

#2: This instrument may be the key to unlocking beautiful secrets in your soul; to connecting you in wonderfully revealing ways to the music you already love. This instrument should be treated as a precious jewel- important for your life. Don't think of it as disposable.

Pick it up and carry it around the store. Are you willing to treat this instrument carefully? To wipe the sweat off it, keep it dry, away from radiators, out of the rain, remember where you put it down, and you DON'T -ever lend it to friends until you are willing to lend your boyfriend or your girl friend to someone else. This must become an extension of your life, of your soul -and it must be respected by you whole family- or kept protected from those who won't respect it.

Develop these habits of care with a rented instrument- and when you come to buy one of your own -you'll have established the tried and trusted ways of preserving it -for that crucial moment when you need it - that's when it plays the music that has always been in your soul.