

How to Choose a string instrument such as Violin, Viola, Cello

By Tony Tam Dang

One of the most common beliefs in choosing an instrument is that the more you pay the better the tone. This is unfortunately untrue. There are some people who get a fine sounding instrument for a small amount of money and there are some who spend a lot of money for a poor sounding instrument.

There are many criteria in evaluating a string instrument. Unfortunately tone is not typically near the top. For the most part here is the list of characteristics of an instrument that determine price, in declining order of importance.

- The Maker
- Country of Origin
- Condition
- Age
- Physical Beauty
- Tone
- Investment potential
- Arching (flat as opposed to high)
- Playability/Wolf tones

The Maker

This problem is more difficult for a cellist than for a violinist. Stradivari made over 600 violins and about 50 cellos. He made some fine sounding cellos, some mediocre sounding cellos and some poor sounding cellos. A cello is made of wood. Each piece of wood vibrates differently. The spruce top is the sounding board. Spruce is generally considered to be the best material for the sounding board of a string instrument. It is the sounding board for the piano, harpsichord, guitar, lute, etc. Each piece of spruce vibrates differently.

In addition to the spruce top the back, sides, blocks, even the fingerboard vibrates. It is impossible to duplicate this combination of vibrating parts from one instrument to another. Therefore don't let the name intimidate you when trying a cello. If it doesn't sound well don't feel guilty if you don't hear the magical quality that is supposed to be in there.

Country of Origin

Most people think the Italian instruments are the best. The Italians have a few advantages here. The cello was invented in Italy and the earliest music written for the cello comes from Italy. Also the Italians have rarely gone in for commercialism in stringed instrument making like France and Germany, for instance, where there are whole factories devoted to stringed instrument making. Chances are if the cello is Italian it was made by one person or if the person had some reputation, with the help of apprentices, assistants or students in a small enterprise supervised by the person whose name is on the cello.

"Handmade" is the catchword here as opposed to machines or many hands making the same cello.

Condition

With an older cello condition becomes very important. A cello with a lot of cracks that have been repaired can give the owner fits. It may sound well when it is purchased, but changes in the weather, bumps, lack of humidity or too much humidity can cause structural and or tonal problems. Cracks can open, form, the neck can drop, buzzes can occur and endless problems can result from many repairs. The cello is structurally much more fragile than a violin. It has proportionally less wood in it than a violin or a viola. It is rare that you see a rib crack on a violin or a viola. With a cello it is quite common as is a broken neck. The cello is bigger and bulkier and gets more than its share of bumps.

Age

There is no question that all things being equal, an old cello will sound better than a new one. With age the wood hardens and becomes more resonant. If the cello has a soft varnish age will make the varnish harden also. However, a good sounding new cello is much more preferable to an old cello with many repairs. A good new cello will improve with age. (On the other hand a new cello with plates that are too thin may deteriorate with age). All in all, the condition of an old cello must be weighed with the advantages of a structurally perfect condition of a new cello.

Physical Beauty

If I line up 3 or 4 cellos for a customer to try, the first one he or she usually goes for is the best looking one. Quite often people will zero in on a cello if it is highly flamed or if it has a generally attractive look to it. The appearance has little to do with the tone. Even if I ask the person before he or she tries the instruments "does the appearance matter?" and they say "all I want is a beautiful tone" they will gravitate to the best looking instrument. It is difficult to enjoy a meal which may taste great if the meal looks horrible. There are many modern makers who take great pains to make the cellos look like an old Italian masterpiece. If there is a connection with the physical beauty and the tone with a modern cello in particular, it has to do with how much time and money the maker has put into working on the instrument and the quality of the materials used. However, antiquing doesn't make the cello sound better. The choice of wood for its beauty as opposed to its acoustical properties will be detrimental to the sound.

Tone

There are hundreds of adjectives that describe the tone of a cello. Warm, lyrical, rich, clear, deep, smooth, brilliant, and on and on. The most important one though, is power. A good cello will be loud. Power is measurable in concrete terms. Over and over I ask these hypothetical questions. Why do you think an orchestra has 12 cellos 4 and flutes? The answer is the flute produces the power of 4 cellos. Have you ever seen a cello drown out a piano? Do you ever watch the violin section while the cello is playing the solo in a cello concerto? The violins spend a great deal of time resting. When they do play watch how much bow they are using. Maybe 1 to 2 inches. Other tonal characteristics are of lesser importance such as evenness, clarity of sound, etc. A cello can never be too loud.