

Thoughts on choosing an instrument from luthier Alexandra Apenberg

A few thoughts on my personal experiences as a viola maker (and player) on sound and the effect of acoustics when choosing an instrument.

First of all I would like to point out that the following observations apply to new as well as to older violas.

Obviously acoustics can greatly vary from one space to another and some places are more flattering than others. Ultimately, no matter in what room or hall you try a viola, it will always give you an indication about the instrument's qualities and weaknesses.

A good instrument will stand out anywhere. This is not really a matter of volume, but more a question of quality and presence of sound and the way it travels through the air. On most instruments one can play 'loudly'. But when it comes to playing a pianissimo that can still be heard at the back of the room, not every instrument is successful.

Of course, when choosing an instrument you ideally want to try it in as many different places as possible. Having said that, testing a viola in a room that is familiar and which holds for you a reliable reference point can be enough to make a decision. If any instrument does well in a place with 'poor' acoustics, it is rather reassuring.

Playing it yourself and getting someone else to play is helpful in order to compare the sound 'under the ear' while you play yourself and the sound when you listen from a distance. Both these sounds might be the same, but they can also differ. Ultimately you want to hear yourself well enough while playing and at the same time you need others to be able to hear you well. You need to be comfortable on the instrument and of course you must like the sound. Often the first impressions prove right in the end, so do trust your 'instincts'.

As the maker I decide on the sound of an instrument first by the choice of material, which really is the foundation of it all. Drawing the outline and determining the proportions of the instrument are also important. All this results in the 'core' voice of the instrument. It is unique to the instrument and unalterable. Every time I finish a new instrument and put the strings on for the very first time, it only needs about ten minutes for me to evaluate the voice of the instrument. In terms of sound no instrument is exactly like another - a bit like human voices. Some can be very similar, but they are always unique. When asked by musicians if I can make another viola exactly the same as a previous one the answer is simply no. The reason is that every piece of wood is different, even if it comes from the same tree. By choosing wood with the same density and similar growth characteristics I can make a viola that resembles another, but it cannot be identical.

Changes to the 'core' voice of the instrument are not really possible unless you dramatically alter the construction of the body. But changes to the quality of the sound can be made by choosing a different set-up, strings, bow etc.

Also each player will, depending on technique and personal preferences, draw out different colours and characteristics, and lead the sound of the instrument in one direction or another. Therefore the same instrument played by different players can sound different.

Alexandra Apenberg, September 2016