

**Q. HOW DO I TELL IF MY CHILD'S INSTRUMENT IS "FULL SIZE?"**

**A.** Ask your orchestra teacher or music dealer. Generally, full size (4/4) violins have a body length of about 14". Full size violas can be between 15" and 17" in length (the correct size is based on the player's reach). Full size cellos are about 30" long. An average-size adult double bass player plays a 3/4 size bass which stands about six feet tall.

**Q. WHEN DOES MY CHILD NEED A FULL-SIZE INSTRUMENT?**

**A.** When a young violinist or violist can extend the left arm under a larger-size violin or viola, wrap the hand around the scroll and point the middle fingers into the pegbox (see photo), he or she is ready for a larger-size instrument. If the fingers



**A.** of the left hand seem cramped when playing, or the elbow is sharply bent, it is time to check for a larger instrument.

The most visible way to judge whether a cello or bass student is ready for a larger instrument is to check the position of the instrument pegs in relationship to the player's ear. The lowest peg should be about even with, or slightly above, the left ear. Another clue for the cellist is that the player's knees are even with the bouts (rather than below) when the endpin is fully extended. It is also important that the cello or bass student's hand be large enough to reach a whole step on a full size instrument.

**Q. SHOULD WE CHOOSE THE SAME QUALITY OF INSTRUMENT IN FULL-SIZE THAT WE RENTED IN THE SMALLER SIZES?**

**A.** Generally not. Instruments which are available in the smaller sizes are most often intended for beginner use. When choosing a full-size instrument, it is important to consider the student's skill development. Instrument quality and volume of tone, as well as response, are important to the advancement of the player's technique. The full-size instrument chosen at the beginning of the middle school or junior high years should at least have the capacity to support the player's best efforts through high school.

**Q. WHICH IS BETTER, OLD OR NEW?**

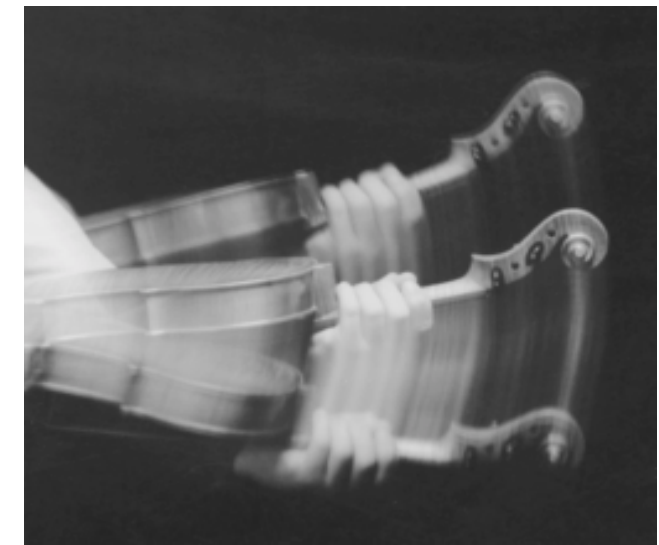
**A.** New is usually better for the junior to senior high school player. Despite the romance of an old instrument, they are often difficult to maintain because of their tendency to open at the seams and develop cracks. Professional players often have older instruments, but are accustomed to the expense of ongoing maintenance. Another problem is that it is often difficult to appraise the actual value of an older instrument resulting in some older instruments being sold at inflated prices. In general, a young student will get more tone for the dollar with a high quality, contemporary instrument.

**Q. EVEN THOUGH I'VE HEARD THAT THE OLDER THE INSTRUMENT THE BETTER THE TONE?**

**A.** Actually, stringed instruments have been made in many different grades of quality for hundreds of years. The "cheap" instruments made a hundred years ago are still "cheap" in construction, tone and appearance today. It is true, however, that well-made fine instruments do improve with age as they season. Fine instruments today are made of seasoned wood that "plays in" quickly and continues to improve.

**Q. WHAT DO I LOOK FOR IN ORDER TO JUDGE THE QUALITY OF A STRINGED INSTRUMENT?**

**A.** There are several indicators to help you judge the relative quality of stringed instruments. Perhaps the easiest to see is the "flame." The horizontal bars of contrasting light and dark under the varnish and in the wood itself are called "flame." Generally, the more densely flamed the back, sides and neck are, the more expensive the wood. Be careful, however, to avoid instruments where the flame has been artificially created in the finish, rather than being in the wood itself. One can tell the difference by looking at the back and slowly lowering and raising the scroll end, keeping the bottom end still (see photo). The flame should appear iridescent, that is, the dark bars become light and vice versa. If the dark bars stay dark and the light bars stay light as you move the instrument, the flame is "painted."



**A.**

The fittings (pegs, tailpiece and chinrest), are usually made of ebony. Better grades of ebony have tighter grain; the very best being so close-grained that it may appear to be perfectly smooth. Streaks of brown, acceptable on the fittings of less expensive instruments, are not typical of the finest grades of ebony. The grade of ebony is usually consistent with the quality of the instrument. Fittings with decorative inlays, or even rarer woods, such as rosewood or boxwood, are often used in higher quality instruments, but they can also be used on lesser instruments to enhance their perceived value.

**Q.**

**WHAT ABOUT THE BOW?  
I UNDERSTAND THERE ARE  
SEVERAL BOW STICK MATERIALS  
AND EVEN DIFFERENT KINDS OF  
BOW HAIR.**

**A.**

There are three main types of bow stick material: fiberglass, Brazilwood and Pernambuco wood. Fiberglass bows don't break easily and are economical, making them terrific for beginners. In fiberglass bows you have a choice of synthetic hair or genuine horsehair. Horsehair is the better choice. Horsehair will enhance the instrument's tone and help the player learn the feel and response of better bows which always

have genuine horsehair. Brazilwood is the next step up from fiberglass. It gives some of the response and tone quality of the more expensive Pernambuco bows, but at somewhat less cost. Pernambuco is the wood used for the best bows. It comes from a very small group of species of trees

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that grow in Brazil. Its strength, resilience, liveliness and controllability can not be underrated in importance in contributing to the overall technique and tone of the player.

**Q.**

**WHAT WILL A QUALITY VIOLIN  
COST?**

**A.**

This is perhaps the most difficult question to answer of all, because the range of prices of stringed instruments is extraordinarily wide. At this time, one could reasonably expect to completely outfit a player with a violin, case and bow starting at \$900 and higher, depending on a particular player's needs. A new, professional style cello can cost \$2500 or more. This choice will depend on whether the student is an average orchestral player, an excellent student or a young person with artist level potential.

## What Every Parent Should Know About Purchasing The First Full-size Stringed Instrument

