

Violin Care for Students and their Parents

John Silzel, October 2004

Violins are fairly delicate instruments. Did you know that:

- Violins are made entirely out of wood with no screws or nails?
- Violins are held together traditionally using glue that is mostly just a strong solution of unflavored Jell-O?
- The four strings on your violin (which usually weighs about one pound) are so tight that they pull on the instrument with a force of over 50 pounds?

With care your violin can be a trusty "friend" that will bring you joy for a lifetime. Here are some basic guidelines to get you started, you will learn over time that many of these "rules" are not hard and fast, but this information will be a good starting point.

Before Playing

I like to wash my hands before I play, especially if I have just been eating, setting up a stage, etc. When you take your violin out of its case, form the habit of giving it a quick inspection. Look for small cracks in the wood that might mean it needs a trip to the "doctor"-- these are always easier to repair if caught early. Look at the strings to make sure they are not frayed or unraveling, a sure sign that you need to get some spares ready if you don't already have them. Be careful with unraveling strings, the metal windings can be razor sharp. Hold the violin out at eye level with the bridge pointing upward at the ceiling and the strings going from left to right. The bridge should make a right angle with the violin top or lean very slightly toward the chinrest, if it is leaning toward the pegs or really leaning badly toward the chinrest, have your instructor or a repairman show you the delicate technique for setting it straight again. Tighten your bow until a pencil just fits between the hair and the stick. Do not touch the bow hair at any time, and when you put the bow down on a surface, try to avoid letting the hair rest on any surface that is not absolutely clean and dry. Rub some rosin on the bow-- ten strokes the full length of the bow hair is usually a good starting point. You will soon learn how much rosin gives you the "feel" that you like.

Shoulder Rests

Almost all players need a carefully selected shoulder rest to play properly. Selecting one can only be done by actual trial and error and is a highly individual matter. Ask your private instructor for help in this process, a good "fit" will help your playing more than many hours of practice with an improper setup.

Tuning Up

Every player needs a way to tune his violin to an accurate pitch. The traditional way to tune, which must be learned by all classical players, is to tune the A string first, by comparing your violin to a known "good" A. For this I would recommend a tuned piano (if you have one), an electronic keyboard, a tuning fork (that has never been dropped on the floor!) or an electronic tuner. Electronic tuners are very inexpensive, they used to cost \$1000 or more but now can be bought for under \$20 and are highly recommended especially for beginning students.

Once the A string is on pitch, the classical player tunes the D string next, then the G, then the E, by ear using the interval of the perfect fifth. This is a skill that should be taught in your lessons. For beginners (and for rock violinists tuning up on a loud stage!), an electronic tuner is the best solution; they are very easy to use and very accurate. The old fashioned "pitch pipes" that are blown into to get the tuning notes are not recommended-- few of them are accurate. All classical players should learn to tune to an A from another musical instrument because this is how it is done in any orchestra. Your violin will probably drift out of tune during playing, it is not uncommon for professionals to touch up their tuning as necessary, even during performances lasting more than 10-15 minutes! Temperature and humidity changes will cause tuning to drift more rapidly.

Fine Tuners

Very fine quality violins that are played regularly can be tuned using only the wooden pegs to adjust the strings, with perhaps a "fine tuner" made of metal used on the high E string. Some violins played by students (and any violin that is not played regularly) lack the smooth peg fit needed to make fine pitch adjustments with the pegs. These instruments benefit from having all four strings equipped with metal fine-tuners. Fine tuners are always faster and surer for fine pitch tuning and I recommend and use them on all four strings for everyone. I frequently use them during a performance to touch up my tuning, something I could never do with even well fitted pegs.

After Playing

Gently wipe the rosin dust off of the wood parts of your bow and violin using a clean cloth. Rosin dust, if not removed, will eventually soften the violin's finish. (For some reason bluegrass fiddlers like to leave that white mess on the violin, I am not sure why!) Wipe off the strings and neck to remove perspiration and skin oils that build up over time. Loosen your bow until the hair just starts to go slack. Remove any mutes or shoulder rests before putting your violin back in its case. The safest place to store your violin between sessions is in its case, safe from dust, drops, curious toddlers, pets, etc. Store your violin in a place where the temperature is fairly constant. Changes in temperature and humidity are a big cause of cracking of wood instruments. Never leave a violin in a closed car parked in the sun. Ask your teacher about a case humidifier (you can make one yourself!), especially during the Santa Ana wind conditions we get in Southern California.

Changing Strings

Changing strings is a common task and you will learn to do this best by having your teacher show you how the first time. Rarely, a string will break while you are playing, more often you will replace strings because they are old. Strings wear out and develop a "false" tone you will learn to recognize. Always replace one string at a time! Never remove all four strings at the same time, because the bridge is not attached to the violin and relies on the strings to hold it in place. The exact position of the bridge on the violin is very important to tone and correct string action, so you do not want to "lose" this adjustment by having the bridge fall off!

Occasionally, a violin will develop a habit of repeatedly breaking one of the four strings in the same place each time. This is often caused by a sharp spot on the fine tuner or an improperly shaped bridge or nut, an easy problem to fix if you know where to look.

There are a bewildering number of different violin string types. Your teacher will recommend a brand based on your skill level, playing style, and the tone of your particular violin. Some types of strings stretch when first put on the instrument, these have to be re-tuned very often during the first 48 hours they are under tension. All strings are carefully designed to handle only the tension of normal use at proper pitch. Never tune the string higher than the correct pitch, this will often break the string or ruin its tone. Bring strings just up to pitch, no higher. Especially once you begin performing, keep a spare set of strings in your case, just in case!!

Cleaning and Polishing

99% of the time, you will just wipe your instrument clean with the clean, dry cloth or rag you keep in your case for this daily ritual. I use a microfiber cloth, these can be bought at most auto parts supply stores. When dirt builds up, cleaning and polishing your violin will help remove skin oils, dirt, and also bring out the beauty of the finish. This must be done very gently and with a special cleaner/polish made for violins. (Use a soft cotton cloth, not a microfiber one, for polish.) Be especially careful around the f-holes and the carved bridge areas. These delicate violin parts tend to hook the cloth and this can easily cause breakage. Apply the polish only to the finished wood surfaces, NOT the bridge, fingerboard, or strings. DO NOT use furniture polish, "Pledge", lemon oil, or other household products. Don't, in fact, even use rags that have residues of these products on them. (See below for recommended violin cleaners.) Do this kind of cleaning/polishing only about twice a year or less, and use the very minimum amount of liquid possible, especially if you have an old instrument with a distressed finish. Polish can soak into the wood and cause swelling and cracking.

I clean my "fiddles" each year when the Christmas season starts-- that way it looks good for festive concerts and it also puts me in the "holiday spirit"!

Occasional Checkups

Your teacher will recommend other fixes, tips, and tricks based on your particular instrument, physique, playing style, etc. Some of these include bow rehairing, fingerboard planing (both done by a violin shop at intervals that depend on how often you play), peg fitting, shoulder rest fitting, chinrest selection, etc.

Recommended Violin Supplies and Suppliers

Strings

- Beginning Players and Fiddle Players:
 - Super Sensitive Red Label, D'Addario Helicore
- Intermediate and Advanced Players:
 - Thomastik "Dominant", Pirastro Black Label
- Electric/Contemporary Playing:
 - Thomastik "Dominant" (with piezo pickups only!), D'Addario Helicore (with magnetic pickups, especially my own eLauna instruments)

Rosin

Any kind is fine, don't spend a lot of money here. The kind in the wooden block breaks less easily. Use dark rosin for more 'bite' in solo or contemporary playing, light rosin if you like a less aggressive tone, as in baroque or chamber music. Rosin will melt into a mess in a hot car, and shatter like glass if dropped.

Cleaners

Fiddlebright, Sacconi special cleaner

Electronic Tuners

Be careful not to get a guitar-only type. A very good deal is the Qwik Tune QT-12 (\$19 at Shar Products, see below.)

Sources for violin accessories and service:

Local "general" music stores: Avoid these if possible, their prices are high and they do not generally understand violins or how to handle them.

Violin shops and stores specializing in violins can be a place to buy accessories but are generally more costly than mail order if you know exactly what to buy. Good places to try out shoulder rests or chinrests. For any kind of actual work on a violin a good violin shop is an absolute must, ask your instructor where (s)he takes his/her instrument.

Shar Products Co. (www.sharmusic.com): Reputable mail order house that has very good selection and quality, and have supplied the string community for many years. Highly recommended, even for buying student and intermediate level bows and violins using their trial policy.

JustStrings (www.juststrings.com): This website sells strings of all types and seems to have a very good selection, but I have not ordered from them.

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