

Some notes for Parents on buying a violin for the first time

1) Make sure you get the right size for your child. A violin which is too big for them will be either impossible or very hard for them to play. If anything it is better to have a violin a bit small than one which is too big.

2) Don't look for the cheapest deal on ebay or on amazon.

If a violin is well made, well set up and easy to play, your child is far more likely to succeed.

In the past I have had pupils bring in violins which have been purchased online, but which have been unplayable. Violins of varied quality come in from China. The bridges need to be fitted properly so that they don't slip around and the strings stay in tune. If the bridge is not properly shaped on top the height of the strings is wrong and it is difficult to play on the correct string. A badly fitted bridge can also make it hard to play in tune. Some violins are sold on line without having had their bridges fitted so you would need to take it to the shop and have it done.

Some of the cheapest violins are very badly made and probably can never be made to sound or play well.

Just be very wary of 'cheap' violins!

Bristol has two excellent violin shops...

'Bristol Violin Shop' on Upper Maudlin Street (opposite the Children's Hospital) and 'Cremona House' on Park Row.

You can also buy violins at Mickleburgh's on Stokes Croft, although it is primarily a piano shop.

Cremona House also has an online business violinvaluations.com but it is separate from the shop. I don't think you can return things bought online via the shop.

Normans also sell musical instruments online and their violins are ok. They may be a bit cheaper but as with everything bought online it's harder if you have a problem.

If you are choosing a make... Primavera start at about £95.

Stentor I at £125. Both are fine. The Prima200 and Stentor II are the next step up.

Vivente is also Ok. There are other makes of which I don't have much experience, but if you are buying from one of the Bristol Shops the violin will have been set up to work and if there is a problem you can take it back.

Second hand instruments are around and can be good value. You could put a 'wanted' notice on the school newsletter. If you need me to look at one I can do so. However, you can also follow the instructions below to assess its quality.

The bow should have a decent number of hairs. It should tighten and loosen as you turn the screw at the end. The stick should have a concave curve when slack and be straight as you look along the length of it.

The violin should have four strings (not rusty). The bridge (which the strings stretch over) should not be bent in the middle (otherwise it may need to be replaced). With time, bridges tend to warp. Look for cracks in the violin. If they have been glued up they may be fine, but don't pay too much for the violin as it will have been devalued by the cracks. The chin rest should be firm.

The case should have functioning catches (or a zip). The hinges should be intact. There should be at least one working clip to hold the bow in place. It should have a handle. It should be capable of protecting the violin for the foreseeable future.

The cost of a new set of strings can be anything from about £12 to £40 and upwards. The lower strings are more expensive than the upper ones. Generally the better the strings the more expensive. However, a good set of strings can make a moderate instrument sound quite a lot better.

Fitting a bridge is a very specialised job and takes time. As such, it is expensive to replace. (£30 plus).

A new case will cost £25-£30

A new bow will cost £15-£30.

If you deduct the cost of any repairs/replacements you can work out if the violin is worth buying or if it would be better to buy new.

Let me know if you have a problem. Schools do have some violins for loan/rental, but we do not have sufficient good ones to supply all beginner pupils.

Finally... when your child does have their violin it is a good idea to insure it. Violins are fragile and children do have accidents with them. It is as well to be prepared.