

What Makes a Violin Better

I often get the question: “What makes one violin better than another?”

Wow, What a loaded question! Of course, a lot of this is the subjective opinion of the listener. However, I do find general observations that are consistent. It is not unlike describing the taste of wine, or chocolate. People use descriptive terms such as “Sweet”, “Dry”, “Warm”, “Bright”, “Clear”, and “Muddy”. What I really feel is that it comes down to clarity and response. A “Bright” violin may be a little harsh under the ear, but carry very well and be easy to hear when playing with other musicians. A “Warm” violin may be satisfying to play solo, but not be so easy to hear when playing in an ensemble.

Some are downright deceptive. For example, a bass I took out this week on a gig sounds really thin by itself, and not very loud. However, in the section it’s the most clear and easy to hear the intonation of all the basses. It’s also very responsive, and easy to get the string going, even pianissimo with little or no bow pressure. I describe sound in terms of “Fidelity”, or quality. Not unlike audiophiles.

So, it really all comes down to the wood. The unique species used, and the climate in which they grow. Generally, the slower growing, higher altitude variety have more clarity and depth, a better “balance” of sound. Of course, these select tonewoods are more rare, and thus more expensive. So, if you invest more money in the material, it is impossible that it would be cheap to make, thus more likely to be the work of a master maker versus a workshop.

So, the main difference these days between Chinese, Romanian, German, French, Italian, etc is the quality of material and the cost of the labor to produce. Generally, the Chinese use local wood which grows in a warmer, more humid environment. These fiddles are warm, responsive, but not so clear. They also use a different varnishing process than the European makers, which makes a difference. However, some Chinese are using the same Baltic “Carpathian” spruce and Bosnian maple of their Euro-colleagues. These, understandably, sound more like the European violins. And, they also cost more as a result.

So, as you spend more money, you tend to move into better material, more careful workmanship, and also into older violins. The more they are played, the richer and more responsive they become. Try that out the next time you ask a violin dealer if he has any “used violins”. His response will be along the lines of, “you mean more expensive.”

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