

About Winter and Violin Instruments

It's winter, and what a doozy. That week before Christmas in Seattle when we were in the teens with virtually no moisture in the air did a number on instruments around town. In the Northeast, they are used to dramatic shifts from Winter to Summer which can result in a number of problems, costly repairs and potential devaluation. What happens do you ask?

When temperature drops below freezing, the dewpoint goes down and the air is not able to carry as much moisture. This causes the air to dry, and wood to shrink. Ever notice your front door closes more easily in the Winter? That's because it shrank! Sometimes the wood warps. A good rule of thumb I use is: if your skin is dry, so is your instrument.

What happens? Most common is that the pegs shrink and begin to slip. This is very frustrating because they slip suddenly and the string goes completely loose. Then, when you tune the instrument, the string is more likely to break, and the bridge/soundpost can go out of alignment, causing further headache.

Solution: If you are inexperienced tuning with pegs, this is not the time to start. You will probably break a string. Worse yet, you could break the bridge and that's expensive! Bring the instrument to your teacher or shop, as they can get it back in tune and check the bridge to make sure it stays aligned. If you do tune, push the pegs in firmly as you are tuning to push them further in, as they have been shrinking in the cold.

Another thing that can happen is cracking and/or seam separation. The wood is shrinking, and it will separate at the edge. This is better than a crack in the middle of the plate. Both are repairable, but cracks are more involved and more likely to devalue the instrument. You can check the moisture in the air with a Hygrometer that measures relative humidity. Ideal range is 30% to 50% for wood instruments

Can I prevent cracks? Not always. Wood is a natural material that acts like a sponge. When it is dry outside, the wood contracts. You can provide humidity in a number of ways, but it will not always keep it from shrinking. A humidifier is, in simple terms, a sponge soaked in water. Some are slid inside the cello, and others are put inside the case. Be careful with anything inside the instrument, that it is dry enough not to drip as this will cause the glue to separate. I much prefer closing the case with a sponge inside. It's a small area and the entire instrument takes on the moisture. Make sure the sponge is not in direct contact with the instrument. the problem here is that, once you remove the instrument from the more humid environment, it dries out quickly. Do your best to keep it in a closed case and humidified as best you can.

The fingerboard can dip in dry climate as well. Most people think that the strings go down in dry weather because the top sinks. Actually, it is much more common for the fingerboard to dip downward when it is dry, resulting in higher string heights. Humidifying can help.