STRINGS

Buying a Contemporary Instrument

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OTHER THAN COMMISSIONING A VIOLIN YOURSELF, THERE ARE THREE OTHER VENUES WHERE YOU MIGHT FIND YOUR MODERN MASTERPIECE

By Cristina Schreil

Looking for a new stringed instrument—specifically, a contemporary one? You're in luck. "If you look at the past 20, 30 years, there's been a total renaissance in new making," says Jason Price, founder and director of the auction house Tarisio. "People are making really great contemporary instruments."

If commissioning directly from a maker isn't for you, consider auctions, exhibitions, and dealers. I spoke with Price, Julie Reed-Yeboah of Reed Yeboah Fine Violins, and Matthew Fritz of Carriage House Violins about navigating each in today's ever-growing market.

Auctions

Auctions, or wholesale markets, are attractive for musicians hunting for less competitive prices than they would find in the retail sphere. But how plentiful are contemporary instruments? "Auctions definitely work better as classic and collectible marketplaces," says Price. "There's never really been a situation where a contemporary maker sells a new instrument at auction." Some exceptions exist (for charity, for example), and while auctions aren't traditionally popular destinations for contemporary instruments, it is possible to find one. But, expect it to be second hand. "You're still getting something that is three years old, ten years old, 20 years old," says Price.

In some cases, modern-made instruments at auction will still be unattainable for most. Especially if an instrument is by an A-list celebrity maker or belonged to a famous soloist—violinists Christian Tetzlaff or Isaac Stern, for example—the price will be much higher than when it was first made.

For those who feel it's worth the hunt:

A common first step is searching by price category, allowing for some flexibility. While Tarisio conducts sales online, it's crucial to attend general viewings or make appointments in person. Become acquainted with auction lingo—it can mean the difference between understanding if a violin was indisputably created by a well-known maker, or is just in the style of that

maker. Request condition reports, assessments by auction-house experts made available to everyone and detailing every flaw and characteristic.

At the general viewing, many players test instruments simultaneously. “Then, it can be an absolute cacophony of everybody playing all at once and you think, ‘How can you possibly make a reasonable decision there?’ And a lot of people can’t,” Price says. He adds that buyers should come for a month ahead of the sale and spend as much quality time with several instruments as possible.

One drawback is that most auctions don’t allow people to take instruments home. “Auctions are for people who know what they want and can make a decision in a reasonable amount of time,” Price says, stressing that it’s not an amateur buying market. “It’s not something that lends itself very well to someone who needs three weeks with [an instrument] to get the level of confidence he needs to buy it.”

Dealers

Players who need more time to consider multiple instruments can do so by working with a dealer, who would have direct relationships with makers and shops. “String players are by and large sensitive to the degree that they should be given enough leeway to make a very well-informed decision,” says Matthew Fritz, director of sales and acquisitions at Carriage House Violins in Newton Upper Falls, Massachusetts. He recounts a common anecdote, wherein a violin sounds wonderful to a player in one space, but leaves a completely different impression at home or onstage. “I’m not saying that everybody needs a full seven days

or more to buy an instrument, but I do think it's important that first impressions are verified by more playing, more trialing."

The price point in this retail realm, Fritz explains, is higher—similar to buying from a maker directly or going to an exhibition. Reflecting market interests, younger instruments tend to be more affordable anyway. "Value is so subjective but in the lower to intermediate price ranges, by and large the best contemporary instruments are simply better-built violins than the lesser antique instruments," Fritz says.

He notes that shoppers might have to attend a dozen auctions to find a handful of the best contemporary instruments, whereas exhibitions and shops can yield a dozen on any given day. He's seen a good cross section of players specifically seeking contemporary instruments. A big draw is the unquestioned attribution. "We have a direct relationship with these makers, we know who they are, we know what their instruments are like," Fritz says. "There's no question about who made this or when."

Other advantages: If a shop has an onsite workshop, players can receive help with instrument setup and maintenance. Should you later change your mind, there are more options here for trade-in or resale than at an exhibition or auction.

So how does a player find a reputable dealer? An internet search can be daunting. Ask teachers and fellow players, Fritz says. He also recommends directly querying makers in your area about shops they trust. While Carriage House's salespeople are all classically trained players, Fritz asserts it's not a requirement to be a great dealer or salesperson.

Left: This Zygmuntowicz violin sold at Tarisio in 2003 for $130,000, setting the auction record for a contemporary instrument. Right: This Joseph Curtin & Gregg Alf violin broke that record at a Tarisio auction in 2013 for $132,000. Photos courtesy of Cozio

Exhibitions

A contemporary-instrument exhibition—a relatively new phenomenon—offers players a wide selection of more than 50 makers' best violins, violas, cellos, and bows under one roof. Before the first Contemporary Violin Makers Exhibition in 2011, Julie Reed-Yeboah was inspired by an exhibition on guitars at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "I thought, 'Well, why not make sort of a boutique contemporary-instrument exhibition? So that

people would be able to try many instruments from many different makers and would be able to at least get some kind of idea in one place,'" she says.

She also thought it would be a helpful alternative to commissioning an instrument. Exhibition organizers, who curate a selection of makers who send their best work, also take away some guesswork. "We basically guarantee these instruments. The makers are people we know and for the most part we trust that they're doing the best work possible," Reed-Yeboah says.

At each annual exhibition in New York City, players can get a feel for the market, the instruments, and what a maker is capable of crafting. For players who've had their eye on several makers, but cannot travel to all of them individually, this can be a golden opportunity.

Like at an auction, it can be challenging to carve out quality testing time. "I think the biggest complaint would be that you can't hear yourself play," Reed-Yeboah says, describing a scene similar to an auction's general viewing. It is possible to make a private appointment. Another possible disadvantage is competition; despite the exhibition's overall positive vibe, it's not uncommon for multiple players to want the same instrument. Disappointment does happen. But, if an instrument doesn't sell during the exhibition, shoppers can typically view it afterward at Reed Yeboah Fine Violins. This shop also offers adjustments and maintenance.

Making the most of an exhibition mirrors the preparation one might do before an auction. Detailed maker biographies and instrument photographs are available beforehand. Reed-Yeboah

advises attendees to speak to string-playing friends about makers they are happy with, and form a list of specific instruments to look for. “And then I think that people should come with an open mind,” she says, adding that concentrating is key. “They shouldn’t just limit themselves to the names that they heard of and people who are the most popular.”

Expect to find prices that makers would charge normally. Reed-Yeboah advises planning to spend at least in the teens, noting there are more options above the $15,000 range. She adds that the price range for violins and violas is from $10,000 to $50,000; cellos from about $20,000 to $68,000; bows from $4,000 to $10,000. Unlike typical auctions, this exhibition doesn’t include superstar makers that have lengthy waiting lists.

While Price and Fritz both say it’s unclear whether all contemporary instruments will go up in value, Reed-Yeboah encourages players to see these contemporary instruments as works of craftsmanship that will only increase in quality—the Stradivaris of our own time.

Play On

All three experts advised consulting people you trust, especially teachers. When testing instruments, have others accompany. “The best thing players can do is play any and every instrument they can get their hands on,” Fritz asserts. “Just play everything. And get yourself as familiar as you can be within the price range that you’re comfortable with so that when the right instrument comes along, you have a better chance of identifying it as the one that’s meant to be.”