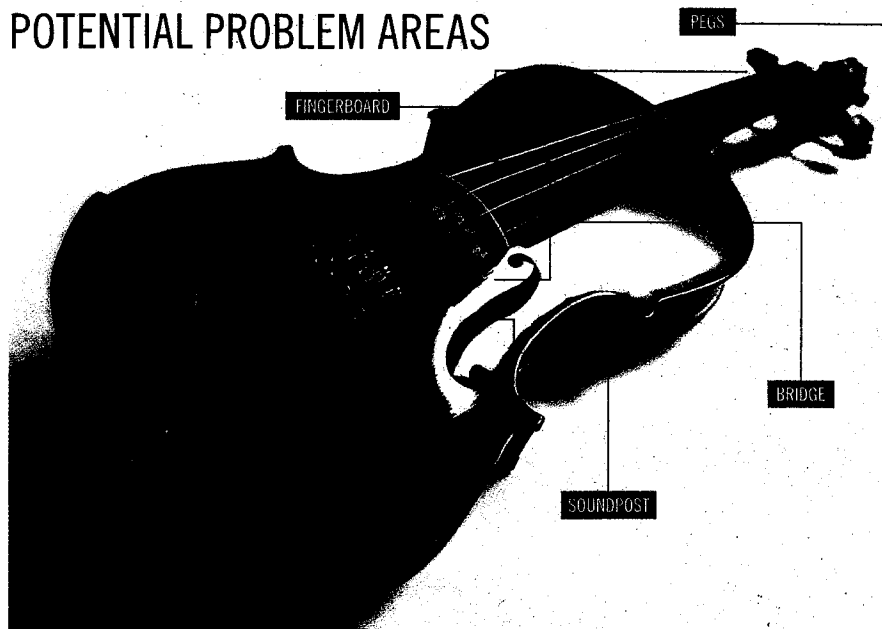


POTENTIAL PROBLEM AREAS



IS IT WORTH IT TO HOT ROD A REALLY CHEAP VIOLIN?

Why choosing that \$100 eBay special can be expensive in the long run

By Richard Ward

At the end of the 19th century, most Americans lived in the countryside and many used catalogs from Sears, Montgomery Ward, or other mail-house outlets to buy almost everything they needed. In those days before radio, TV, or any other kind of sound recordings, people provided their own entertainment. After the piano, the violin proved the most popular musical instrument and the demand for stringed instruments was enormous.

Look at any of these catalogs from the 1890s and you'll see page after page of violin outfits priced from \$2 to \$80, including case, bow, pitch pipe, and extra strings. Almost all of these instruments were made in the regions around Markneukirchen, Germany, or nearby western Bohemia. Though labor was cheap, making a \$2 violin involved a lot of cost cutting.

These old violins are still common and while the body's spruce and maple is often of decent quality (it was plentiful and cheap at the time), the construction, especially on the

interior, can only be described as dreadful. Usually these instruments have no corner blocks or bass bar. The fingerboard and other fittings are usually stained whitewood, typically maple or beech, "ebonized" to look like the more expensive ebony. Most of the time, these violins—which usually have a fake Stradivari, Guarneri, Amati, or Stainer label—are unplayable and are too costly (possibly thousands of dollars) for the owner to bring up to playing standards.

THE INTERNET BARGAIN

These days, the Internet has replaced the Sears catalog and China has replaced eastern Germany and western Bohemia as the primary source of affordable student violins. In the past few decades, a large industry has developed in Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing, making violins that sell for as little as \$50. There also are a number of workshops making exceptionally high-quality stringed instruments suitable for professional musicians. Factoring in the change in the cost of

STUFF : YOUR INSTRUMENT

living over the last 120 years, today's \$50 violin is about the same as the \$2 violin of 1890. And, even though the labor cost to manufacture these violins is relatively low, the factories still must make major compromises to the quality of materials and skilled labor to keep costs down.

Most players want to economize whenever possible, especially on student instruments, and if you want to purchase an inexpensive violin, \$100 seems more attractive than \$500. However, that bargain violin may end up costing you several hundred dollars just to make it playable.

Here is a common scenario at violin shops: a child wants to play the violin, but rather than going to a store with expertise in stringed instruments, the parents purchase a \$100 violin on eBay or Amazon. This seems like a deal until they take it to the child's first lesson, where the teacher takes one look at it and declares that they either need to return it and buy or rent a usable instrument, or take it to a violin shop and have it put into playable condition.

That \$50 or \$100 violin usually needs the following:

A new bridge. The included bridge is normally poorly fitted and of low-quality wood.

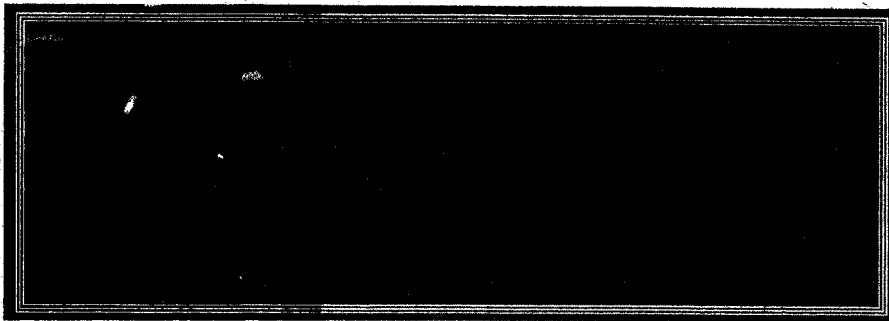
New pegs. The pegs, which are generally "ebonized," often slip and can't hold the pitch. Frequently, those existing pegs can't be "refitted" or repaired because the makers didn't use the standard taper on either the pegs or the peg holes.

New fingerboard. Frequently, the ebonized fingerboard doesn't have the correct shape and needs to be resurfaced. The problem is, a whitewood fingerboard is more difficult (and more expensive) to work on and will wear out much more quickly. In addition, the angle of the neck (which determines projection) is often too high.

Soundpost. Normally, the soundpost needs adjustment or replacement. I've even seen instruments shipped with the uninstalled soundpost taped to the fingerboard.

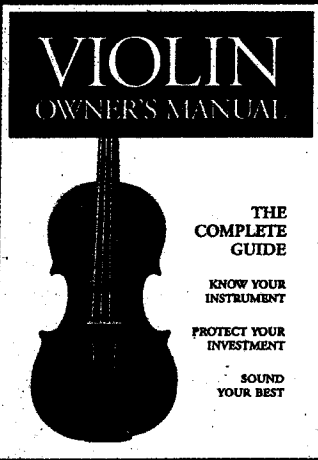
Other fittings. On occasion, the tailpiece, tailgut, tailpiece saddle, and strings also will have to be replaced.

If you can find a shop willing to take on this work, it can add up to several hundred




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dollars of labor and parts to make the violin playable.

The catch?

After all the work is done, that \$50 or \$100 violin hasn't increased in value.

WHEN IS IT WORTH IT?

Some inexpensive violins are worth fixing up. If it's structurally sound and built from decent materials, upgrading a few of the parts might be in order. If you find a new stringed instrument (or have an older instrument) that you want to fix up, make sure it has an ebony fingerboard; ebony, boxwood, or rosewood pegs; a correct neck angle; and no major cracks or unrepaired damage. If the strings are old—or unidentifiable—replacing them with good-quality strings will reveal if the instrument has the potential for a good sound. If it doesn't sound terrible, take it to a good violin shop to have it checked out.

It might be salvageable.

It's worth keeping in mind that . . . you can't make dramatic changes in the inherent tone of an instrument.

Once you have your overhauled violin, you can fine-tune its sound by experimenting with better strings and adjusting the soundpost and bridge. It's worth keeping in mind that these are adjustments—you can't make dramatic changes in the inherent tone of an instrument. For example, if the violin has a deep, full dark tone, you can't change it into a violin with a brilliant, bright sound.

If you are purchasing a new, inexpensive violin that meets your basic playing needs for comfort, sound, and features, I wouldn't go much below \$400. Then you can try different strings and adjustments to fine-tune it to your tastes and needs.

So, is investing in your \$100 eBay special worth it? The bottom line is that every stringed instrument has a basic value that isn't appreciably enhanced by potentially expensive repairs and adjustments.

Only you can decide if your inexpensive violin is worth it. ■