



How to Talk to Your Violin Maker

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By Samuel Zygmuntowicz

It is fun to sell a violin, but less exciting if it just sits in its case. Soloist [Leila Josefowicz](#) had bought a violin of mine long ago, but it was seldom used. Her primary instrument was a Carlo Bergonzi (1683–1747) that she had been playing for years, and the moment of truth came when she was offered the chance to buy it—or return it. As a performer of contemporary music, she was open to performing on a violin that I might make now, but only if it actually did the job she needed. For both maker and musician, this is where it gets real.

We began with questions: Why did she want a different violin, and why did she come to me? What did she like about her current violin, and what was less likable? What other violins had she tried? What did she want from a new violin? What size and model would work best?

Words can be vague, so how can we get real answers?

She played her Bergonzi, and I listened. I needed to play it as well to understand and confirm her impressions, all the while commenting and discussing, establishing a common language about sound. At the earliest stages, it's less about music than it is about tone color, response, range, projection, stability, size, comfort—a list of specific factors that make the music possible.

We found an open concert hall, where she played the Bergonzi for me. She sounded great, but to my ears the sound lacked some sizzle and scope. Under my chin, it was hard for me to play, and it felt almost dull. She then played one of my new violins, and liked the full sound, but found distracting hot spots high on the G string. The picture began to clarify. She plays with incredible intensity, and her contemporary-music repertoire is full of technical playing, so the violin had to be rock solid and dependable—no soft spots or wolf tones. She didn't want to have to think about the violin at all.

Her Bergonzi had a compact body, shorter string length, and rounded upper bouts—comfortable to handle. The parameters of the new violin emerged. I used my small-bodied “Panette dG” Guarneri pattern. To produce a robust

sound, I used a relatively massive bass bar, a sound post–patch reinforcement, and wood that was light but thick. Our collaboration yielded a stable instrument with a similar feel to her Bergonzi, but with a richer and more powerful sound. She decided to return her antique instrument, and has been playing this violin ever since. It was thrilling to hear her performance of John Adams' *Scheherazade.2* with the New York Philharmonic last year—a new piece on a new violin!

Every person and project is different, but the questions are similar. What is the problem? What is the goal? How will we decide, what will it cost, and what happens if it doesn't work out? Openness, detail, and honesty are essential to a satisfying result, plus a clear and relatively painless escape route—if it comes to that. I am passionately committed while I am making an instrument, but once the player is involved, I cultivate a little emotional detachment. Now, it is about the player's experience, and it is vital that they feel free and comfortable to express any concerns and requests. This gives me a chance to respond, to adjust or alter, all in the search of the perfect fit. I rely on the player's reactions to guide my course.

Not long ago a client picked up his long-awaited violin, but as he first played, I didn't sense the immediate delight I want to see. After a few days and a few adjustments, I still didn't feel the bond forming. I'll go to great lengths to improve an instrument, but on the rare occasion when the fit just isn't right, sometimes it is best to start fresh. The insight gained will help me customize his next instrument, and another fine player will love this violin.

The relationship is more important than the object, and if communication is open with obvious goodwill, then the violin can be altered or exchanged, and the mission is still fulfilled. That rapport remains a powerful asset as an instrument develops over time.



I recently did some yearly maintenance on Leila's violin and she asked if was possible to add a personal symbol to her violin. I tried to understand what this signified. For Leila, her identity as an expressive contemporary performer was evolving, and she wanted something strong, fierce, fiery. Many discussions and sketches followed, and now her violin back bears a gold leaf image of a flame-breathing, spiked-winged dragon—full of fire and life!

The goal is not just to craft an object. We're helping to create an experience, based on function and practical concerns, but infused with emotion and energy that will become a part of the player's expression! ~~~

Leila Josefowicz with her 'Dragon' violin, Samuel Zygmuntowicz 201

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