

Considerations When Purchasing an Instrument

When someone tells me that they want to purchase an instrument, and what do I think, I always ask them the same two questions: “Do you like it?” and “Do you have the money?” These are, of course, simple, obvious questions, perhaps too simple and obvious. But a considerable amount of thoughtful consideration should be put into them before acting. Ultimately, these really are the only two questions you need answer.

When I ask if you like it, I am actually asking if it suit your needs. There are a number of factors to consider when answering this question.

Obviously, if you can afford an instrument, you can buy it, but should you? If you love an instrument, no amount of money is too much, is it?

How can you determine if an instrument suits your needs and what a fair price is? There are no definitive answers to these questions that will suit everyone, but there are some guidelines that all should consider.

In all cases, you must do your homework. The Internet and your local music stores are good places to start. Do some research to get a feel for what is available and how prices are running. Your most important action in this regard is to talk to as many other bass players as possible, trying to extract pertinent information from their experiences.

Does it suit your needs? Consider this question without thinking about the price. Try to answer these secondary questions first to determine your needs.

How experienced of a player are you? Are you a beginner? Are you sure you will be playing after five years? Are you playing gigs now? What don't you like about your present instru-

ment? Are looks important? Do you require some bells and whistles? Are you looking for new or used? Is a brand name important? Have you considered a custom-made instrument? Do you know exactly what you want? What kind of music are you currently performing? Might you need several different instruments to meet your performance needs?

I could go on, but I think you might be getting the idea. You need to analyze your personal and professional requirements of an instrument. As you answer questions such as these, a clearer picture of what you think you need from an instrument should begin to appear to you. It is your answers that will ultimately teach you about the instrument that you need.

You need to play instruments that fit your criteria of what you think you want. Be sure that you do lots more homework here. Unless you are a beginner, you should play as many instruments as possible, so as to get a feel for all of the options available. Do not consider price at this point.

My advice to beginners, in this regard, is to seek counseling from a professional player of fifteen or more years, who has no vested interest in selling you a bass. A performer such as this can lend his experience to your research. Also, try to avoid a more complex bass for your first instrument, as beginners should be concerned with basic musical technique, not instrument types and options. Beginners have no concept of what they need from an instrument, and in most cases, a basic Fender, or the like, is the right choice in an electric. A used Kay or King plywood, or the like, is a fine choice for your first double bass. Many players form entire careers around instruments such as these, and you may be pleasantly surprised to find that you never need to purchase another bass.

The money issue is a little more cut-and-dried, but no one wants to overpay for something unnecessarily. If you can afford the instrument you have settled on, then go for it, but if you are short money, you may need to adjust your thinking somewhat. Comparison shop. Shop like you might for a car. If you are selling your present instrument, try to sell it outright rather than trading it in. This will help you to obtain top dollar. If you can afford to keep your present instrument, it may just come in handy as your career changes, matures, and sometimes circles.

With the tax laws as they are presently, your instrument purchase is a depreciation write-off, as long as you use it to generate income. This is, of course, the case for all of your musical equipment used to generate income, so you can consider a yearly savings in this manner, depending on your method of depreciation. The tax laws concerning depreciation and self-employed musicians are quite complicated, and you are well advised to research this subject thoroughly. The IRS has a number of free booklets related to this subject available to the public.

Prices of new instruments are not as negotiable as used ones, but you always stand a chance of lowering the price if you have done your research or can pit one seller against another. You need to be an informed consumer.

In general, buying a used instrument is a lot like buying stock. The price depends greatly on supply and demand. Naturally, prices will be higher in areas of large musical communities, and supplies will be low in out-of-the-way places. But the world is connected via the Internet now, and for those of you savvy in its use, there are many fair deals to be obtained.

The prices of good electric basses can be as little as \$300 or so and as much as \$5,000 or more, so your research can pay off in lots of dollars to fill your hatchback's tank many times.

Double-bass prices can be a little more off-the-wall. Used plywoods needing some cosmetic or other minor work can often sell for under \$1,000. Better quality plywoods can sell for up to \$3,000 or more. Decent carved instruments usually start in the \$3,000 range, and quality newer carved instruments are usually in the \$10,000 to \$15,000 range. If you think this is a lot of money, consider the fact that fine old instruments, like those used by the major orchestra players, are often valued from \$20,000 to \$50,000, or more!

If you are purchasing a carved double bass, it's a good idea to find out as much specific history related to the instrument as possible. Knowledge of previous repairs and owners, along with locations where the bass resided, can help you to anticipate future repair and maintenance needs.

Double bassists may also need to purchase a different bow. Of course, they come new or used, light and heavy, stiff and flexible, and as discussed earlier, are made from a number of materials. Again, I cannot tell exactly what you want to look for when shopping for a bow; only playing experience can teach you this. I do, however, believe that it is foolish to spend more than \$200 to \$500 on a bow unless you are a professional, working for a living, and know exactly what you want from it.

Many musical equipment catalogs offer a number of varying quality bows, which usually must be purchased sight unseen. Most often, you can send them back and try again, if you don't like them. This is a fine way to obtain a first bow or a fiberglass bow, but the experienced player will be best served to find a local source where many quality bows can be compared first hand.

Beginner to expert players can often make beautiful music for a lifetime with bows selling for under \$500. If you do decide to purchase a more expensive bow, you can keep your old bow to use when your good bow is being rehaired. As with purchasing a bass, the most impor-

tant thing you can do is to play as many bows as possible. Try not to consider the price as you first compare bows. You may just find that you like the least expensive one the best.

Do you like it, and do you have the money? It's really very simple, if you do your homework.