



Stringed Instrument Care and Maintenance

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Cleaning/Polishing and Removing Dust Bunnies

1. Never use any household products on an instrument; only use those products especially designed for violins. Rubbing alcohol and four-in-one oil are the only two exceptions I can think of; rubbing alcohol for the strings, and a tiny dab of oil on the bow screw if it's fussy. No Elmer's Glue, furniture polish, chemicals of any kind, varnish remover, etc.
2. Use a small amount of polish/cleaner and gently buff with a dry cloth until dry.
3. Let the instrument sit out for a while (out of its case), so it can air dry.
4. If you are going to use polish, don't polish over twice a year; in between times, just dust the instrument off with a clean, dry cloth after playing. Too much polish can lead to build-up and attracts dirt.
5. If you're not clear whether your violin has a French polish, test a tiny spot before using any product. Discontinue immediately if the area becomes sticky.
6. Don't let rosin, skin oils or dirt build up on the strings or the wood; the best way to keep the instrument clean is to wipe it off with a dry cloth after every playing session.
7. In the process of cleaning/polishing the instrument, if you see any cracks, take it to a

- luthier and have them repaired. Don't polish the instrument until this is done; polish in the cracks will interfere with the repair.
8. In the process of cleaning/polishing, make sure not to move the bridge or damage the f holes; take care that you don't snag your cleaning cloth on the intricate carving of the bridge.
 9. If the instrument has a really thick build-up of rosin and dirt, you should take it to a luthier and have it cleaned.
 10. Carefully shake the polish before using, and use a small amount, about the size of a small coin.
 11. Fiddlebrite: A luthier told me that it's really not a polish, but a cleaner. And it may be used to clean the stick of the bow (don't get it on the hair), the violin wood, and the strings. It is appropriate for all so-called "student instruments," but you should not use it on expensive instruments with French varnish (which young beginners should not have anyway, in my opinion.) For very expensive instruments, you should use regular cleaner and polish, or better still, just dust the instrument and have it professionally cleaned periodically.
 12. **Cautionary note:** Don't confuse Fiddlebrite with the regular cleaner and polish products. Fiddlebrite may be used to clean not only the wood, but the strings. Other products are designed *only for the wood of the instrument* (not the fingerboard, either, but the wood of the body of the instrument) and must not be used on violin strings.
 13. An alternative way to clean violin strings, is to take a couple of clean, dry cloths, folded several thicknesses; place one, several thicknesses, on the violin wood directly under the "playing area" (the area between the end of the fingerboard and the bridge), and place another cloth, at least double thickness, on the fingerboard, between the fingerboard and the strings. Then take another clean, dry cloth and put just a tiny dab of rubbing alcohol on the tip of a corner of the cloth, and clean your strings with that. You must not get any of the alcohol on the wood of the violin, or on the fingerboard. Make sure that the cloths you use don't have soap or chemical residue on them. Using alcohol to clean the strings must be done very carefully, as any drop of alcohol on the wood may damage the wood permanently. I prefer using the Fiddlebrite. An additional alternative way to clean the strings is to use the cork from a wine bottle. I've never done this, but it's often mentioned.
 14. The common way of removing dust bunnies from inside the violin is to put 1/2 cup of DRY uncooked rice in the f holes, and then turn the instrument upsidedown, and shake out the rice.
 15. **Other issues:** when you take the violin out, check the strings to make sure they're not unraveling, make sure the bridge is sitting up straight, make sure the chinrest is not loose, make sure the fine tuners are not rattling. Don't forget to loosen the bow and remove the shoulder rest when you put the instrument away.





Cleaner/Polish



Untreated Microfiber Polishing Cloth

How to change a violin or viola string

If you're going to replace all the strings, I would not take them all off at once, but replace them one at a time, the outside strings first, then the inside. By doing them one at a time you can retain the placement of the bridge and also better avoid having the soundpost fall. It's also crucial that you put the strings in exactly the correct/same peg, and not change that. If the pegs are lower left, upper left, upper right, lower right, the violin strings need to be: G, D, A and E. Viola strings: C, G, D and A.



Violin Scroll

1. Carefully examine the strings and the way they are attached to your tailpiece and to the pegs in the peg box.
2. Remove the string.
3. Attach the new string to the tailpiece, either to the fine tuner or looping through the hole in the tailpiece, depending on the way it was before, if you're not changing the setup; the top string (E on violin) will normally always have a fine tuner; the other strings may or may not use a fine tuner. If you have a Wittner style tailpiece, all four fine tuners will be built in.
4. If you're changing the E (E on violin, A on viola), make sure the "doughnut"—the little either sleeve or black, doughnut shaped rubber ring—is going to be in place under the string when it crosses the bridge.
5. Pull the string towards the pegbox, and insert the tip of the string into the hole of the appropriate peg.
6. Turn the string in the direction away from you, if the violin or viola is facing you. As you turn the peg away from you, be sure that you wind the string against the side of the peg box. Never force a peg; always turn it down (towards you) first, and then back up. Again, make double sure that the strings are attached to the correct peg; otherwise they may cross each other and cause a problem, and the balance will be off.
7. Tighten it a bit but not too tight, get the pitch from a tuner or another violin, and tighten the string slightly higher than the prescribed pitch (so it can stretch).
8. Repeat this process on other strings you wish to change.



Viola Scroll

9. While doing this, you might also want to examine the nut to see that it's not too deep, or so rough that it may break the string, especially on the top string. If it needs smoothing, you may need to take it to a luthier to do that.
10. When you're through changing the strings I would tune the one(s) changed up slightly, and leave the instrument out (or with the case open, if you can), so the new string(s) can adjust more quickly. Before you play, you will of course tune carefully.

Setting up the bridge on budget instruments shipped with the bridge down

Violin bridges have a flat side and a rounded ("belly") side. [See photographs, below.] The "belly" side needs to face the scroll. Loosen the strings and set the feet of the bridge between the nicks in the F holes, with, as mentioned, the rounded side of the bridge facing the scroll and fingerboard. Make sure the bridge is straight up and down, at right angles to the top of the instrument, and not tilted in either direction. Please contact customer service if you experience any difficulties. We will be happy to help you.



"Belly" side should face toward the scroll



Bridges are not glued on, but are held up by the strings. Bridges tend to tilt towards the scroll, but should be kept perpendicular to the top of the instrument. Grasp the bridge very gently on both sides and wiggle it back in place.

Contact email: customerservice@beststudentviolins.com or call (877) 288-5257

How to protect the violin from extremes of temperature and humidity

There is a lot of disagreement about whether the two items used to manage this problem are necessary: **hygrometers** measure humidity levels; **humidifiers** correct dryness.

Hygrometers in cases are either digital or analog (dial), and are not always accurate; in some cases the hygrometer has to be recalibrated regularly.

Sometimes there is a plastic vial (a **humistat**) which contains water and supplies humidity for the case. It clips in place somewhere down around the pegbox/scroll portion of the case and can be adjusted to allow more or less water vapor to escape. If there is not one of these vials accompanying the hygrometer itself, you can purchase a humidifier to put in the f holes of the violin. Both Strettos and Dampits seem to work well, although Dampits are more of a hassle since you have to resoak them frequently. Many musicians keep a humidifier in the music studio (aim for a steady 50-60% humidity), which protects stringed instruments and pianos.

Certainly there are players who question the usefulness of these products and wonder whether any kind of humidification is a good idea for string instruments, in terms of avoiding cracks. Humidifying an instrument in its case may be unnecessary except in extremely dry environments. It's conceivable that too much humidity could cause problems with insects and otherwise damage the wood. The constant changing of the moisture content of the wood can't be good for the instrument; if the maker has selected well seasoned wood, the best thing to do is let the instrument adjust to the prevailing humidity or lack thereof.

For example: like Italy, Los Angeles is classed as a Mediterranean clime by geologists. Violins sound better in L.A. than they do in the humidity of NYC, but players often don't have any problems- or use humidifiers. Dryness may be good for fiddles - avoiding extremes, of course.



[Humistat](#)



[Humidifier](#)



[Hygrometer](#)



[Violin](#) | [Viola](#) | [Guitar](#)

For more information on *dampits*, please see:

- [About Humidity](#)
- [Availability](#)
- [Instructions](#)



[Digital Thermometer/Hygrometer](#)

Categories of strings

Many students start their study of the violin with a so-called "student" outfit. To improve the sound of this instrument, a better set of strings (Dominants, for example, versus the metal strings usually shipped on the cheaper instruments), and some better rosin (such as Hill), is recommended.

Strings are usually available in Weich, Medium and Stark: Yielding, Medium, and Strong (respectively, lower, medium, and high tension). I always order the "Medium."

How often you change your strings depends on how much you play. Students should probably try to change their strings every year; professionals who play a great deal, every six months, or sooner. Always change a string if it begins to sound dull or begins to unravel.

Regarding ball-end and loop-end strings:

- Ball-end strings can work either with a tailpiece slot or with a tuner. Which is appropriate depends on the material of the string. Synthetic core strings are meant to be used without a fine-tuner, most metal-core strings meant to be used with one.
- Loop-end E-strings work only with a tuner designed for loop-end E strings. Ball-end E-strings work either with a tuner designed for ball-end strings or (usually? always?) with a loop-end tuner if you take the ball out.
- Gut core strings generally end in a knot and loop of gut, but this is not designed to be used with a fine tuner.

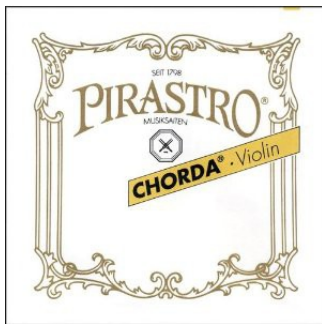
I think it may be accurate to say that the Dominants are the most purchased strings, followed perhaps by the Evah Pirazzi; players frequently choose a different E-string from the one that comes in a set with the other strings they use. In the viola world, for the past several years, it seems to be Dominants, followed by Obligatos. I use the Pirazzi's on both my violins and violas; they sound rich and warm to me. I don't use a different E string on the violins.

The steel strings are frequently fitted on the so-called "student" instruments, and also by "fiddle" players. However, most Celtic fiddlers prefer synthetic core strings. Steel core is an "old-time" fiddle thing — they like the brightness. It may even be more an Appalachian old-time than a New England old-time (contra) thing.

Some kinds of steel-core strings (with a steel rope or similar core rather than a plain steel wire as core) are intended for classical playing and do not have the extremely bright "steel" sound (e.g., Helicore). They are more popular on viola and (especially) on cello than on violin. They are also suitable for electric instruments with magnetic pickups (as are the plain-steel core strings, depending on what sound is required). The better sounding strings are wound aluminum over perlon, a synthetic which replaces the old gut strings used in baroque instruments.

For Baroque instruments, affordable gut strings are available in the Pirastro Chordas (see: [Baroque Violin Strings](#)) or for high end instruments, may be purchased, hand made, by [Damian Dlugolecki](#).

Pirastro Chorda - Baroque Strings



- [Violin Set](#)
 - [Violin E](#)
 - [Violin A](#)
 - [Violin D](#)
 - [Cello Set](#)
 - [Cello A](#)
 - [Cello D](#)
 - [Cello C](#)
 - [Cello G](#)
 - [Viola D](#)
 - [Bass Set](#)
 - [Bass E](#)
 - [Bass A](#)
 - [Bass D](#)
 - [Bass G](#)
-

Bridges, soundpost setter, pegs

Sometimes, (though rarely), a bridge will break. So I keep an adjustable bridge in my case:



[Adjustable Violin Bridge](#)

Though one can purchase bridges, pegs and soundpost setters online, these tasks should really be left to a luthier who has the equipment, training and experience to do the job correctly.



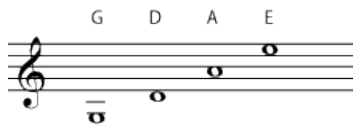
[Boxwood Pegs](#)



[Violin/Viola Sound Post Setter](#)

Violin/Viola Ranges and how to tune the instrument

On a violin, the strings are E, A, D and G, as indicated on the treble staff, below; the viola strings are a fifth lower: C, G, D and A, and the viola clef is the alto clef. Click on the link, below, for a free online tuner. For further help with where the notes are on the violin and viola, please see [Violin/Viola Fingerboard Charts](#).



Violin strings

Violin Range: From G below middle C to four octaves above middle C (the highest note on the piano).



Viola strings (and range)

[Online Tuner](#)

(Interactive!)

[Online Metronome](#)

(click on outside ring to change setting)

[Violin Diagram](#)

(parts of the violin)

On a chromatic tuner the red light indicates the pitch is too high, the yellow light indicates the pitch is too low, and the green light indicates the pitch is correct. Make sure the A is set to 440, which is the international pitch standard. With violins it is standard to tune the A first, then the D and G and then the E. The A=440 is the pitch played by the oboe to tune the orchestra. This is the A above middle C on a keyboard (assuming the keyboard is in tune). One can also purchase a pitch pipe or tuning fork, but the chromatic tuner is a recommended choice, as the tuner will indicate whether the pitch is too high or too low.



[Intelli Metronome/Tuner with Temperature/Hygrometer Meter](#)

Also see:



[Intelli Chromatic Metronome/Tuner](#)



[Boss Metronome](#)



[Wood Metronome](#)



[Orchestra Tuner](#)

Metronomes - No Tuner (for pianists)



[Seiko SQ50-V Quartz Metronome](#)



[Wittner Taktell Super-Mini Metronome](#)



[Musedo Pendulum Metronome](#)

My pegs are not working right; how do I fix them?

Sometimes pegs may not be shaped correctly. The optimum thing to do is have them shaped by a luthier, but that may be too costly for that particular instrument:

1. Pegs are not sticking: Gently try to press them inward toward the peg box but never force a peg. In emergencies you can use a small amount of blackboard chalk, but it's better to use peg drops;
2. Pegs are too sticky, and won't move: In emergencies you can use pencil lead as a lubricant, but it's better to use peg compound.



Hill Peg Compound



Peg Drops - helps pegs stay in tune

My chinrest came off; how can I fix it?

The chinrest can be tightened, using the following little tool. You can also use a bobby pin (hair pin) if you don't have anything else. Make sure that the cork between the metal of the chinrest and the wood of the violin, is in place, so you don't damage the instrument. As always, it's best to have a luthier do this, if you can. See: [What on earth is a "Violin Hickey"?](#)



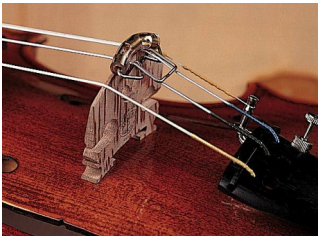
My tailpiece came off; how can I fix it?

You can, if you need to, replace the tailpiece yourself if the leather bit at the end is broken. There is a great deal of pressure at that spot, so you will need to replace the tailpiece or take it to a luthier and have them do it. Below are some examples of tailpieces you can purchase online.

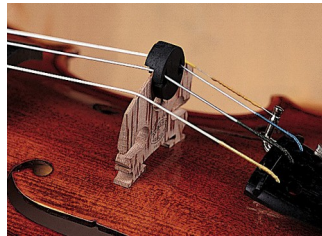


Mutes

Con sordino: With mute. Passages with mute end with the phrase "senza sordino" which means to remove the mute. There are several varieties of violin mute. One is a "Sihon" or slide-on mute, often used by students, which slides up upon the bridge, from between the end of the tailpiece and the bridge. Costs about \$2-\$3US. There is the Tourte mute, which also can hang behind the bridge in that area. There is a Heifetz mute, which clips on rather snugly and has to be put on by hand. There is also the heavy practice mute of silver or gold, which is not used in orchestral studies, but to practice without disturbing neighbors or roommates. [Con sordino.](#)



[Sihon Mute](#)



[Tourte Mute](#)



[Heavy Practice Mute](#)



[Gliesel Practice Mute](#)



[Ebony Violin Mute](#)

Rosin

Most new student violin outfits are provided with a cake of rosin. Take this out of the case and scratch the top of the rosin in a cross-hatch pattern. Just for the first time, not after. Hold the rosin steady in one hand and draw the bow hair over the rosin; a good deal on either end, and then back and forth. Shake off the excess and then take a clean, dry rag and dust off the bow stick and frog. Keep a clean, dry rag in your case and dust off the violin after playing every time.

Rosin is needed to "catch" the strings; a new violin will not play without rosin on the bow. Normally, a bow should be rehaired once a year, or every six months if you play a lot, depending on the quality of the original hair. I've seen the costs of rehairing a bow anywhere from \$25 to \$45, or more, depending on what part of the country you live in.

Sometimes new players confuse "hair" with "strings." Strings are the E-A-D-G on the violin, which one tunes (or A-D-G-C on the viola - the viola is a fifth lower than the violin); "hair" is bow hair. [See: [Tuning Instructions](#), below.]

How to rosin a bow: Take a straight pin and scratch the top of the rosin in a cross-hatch pattern. Just for the first time, not after. Hold the rosin steady in one hand and draw the bow hair over the rosin; a good deal on either end, and then back and forth. Shake off the excess and then take a clean, dry rag and dust off the bow stick and frog. Keep a clean, dry rag in your case and dust off the violin after playing every time.

Note that in order to prevent the bow stick from being warped, it is very important to remember to loosen the hair (with the end adjuster) before you put the instrument away, and then tighten the bow hair again when you play. Hair should be about a fingertip width between the stick and the hair.

Several of the most popular brands of rosin are as follows:



[Kaplan Light rosin](#)



[Hill Dark rosin](#)



[Jade rosin](#)



Larsen rosin



Clarity rosin - Hypoallergenic

Currently my favorite rosin. Purchase [Magic Rosin](#)



Fingerboard tapes and pinky pads

I use the following products to set up new students' violins:

- [Fingerboard tapes](#): Normally tapes will start to "migrate" (move out of the correct position), at which time you can determine if a second or third set of tapes is productive. The "ringing strings" caused by sympathetic vibrations of fingers being put in just the right place should be the goal; fingerboard tapes are used initially, as introduction only.

Some teachers like the *Don't Fret*:



See also: [Violin/Viola Fingerboard Charts](#)

- Pinky pads: Used for the tip of the pinky finger on the bow hand. There are other products you can buy, but I feel that they are too restricting and possibly could cause damage. A pinky pad should be placed slightly on the inside (toward student) of the bow stick, rather than the very top of the stick. These pads will need replacing several times before they're abandoned. You can use [Fiddlebrite](#) to clean off any messiness caused by the pinky pads (or by fingerboard tapes). Make sure not to get Fiddlebrite on the bow hair.



- Masking tape: I still use small strips of masking tape to "fence" the initial middle area of the bow for the Twinkle. I find that masking tape stays in place better on the tiny bows, than the fingerboard tape does. (Masking tape is the brown packaging tape that comes in 1" strips.)

What on earth is a "Violin Hickey"?

A violin/viola hickey is a dark, usually roundish abrasion on the neck, caused by extensive playing or practicing, perhaps from skin sensitivity to metals in the screws (chrome, nickel) and the chin rest itself (chemical dyes). Metal parts made of titanium alloy are more expensive (but lighter); some producers have started making the screws out of surgical stainless steel. A violin/viola hickey can be serious if it becomes infected.

To address this concern, some players use the Wittner hypoallergenic chinrest and a Strad pad. It is recommended that the neck and chin rest be kept very clean, perhaps with witch hazel. And experiment with different chin rests and shoulder pads, to find the most comfortable setup. See:



Wittner hypoallergenic chinrest
center mount



Wittner hypoallergenic chinrest
side mount



Strad Pad

Urban Dictionary

<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=violin%20hickey>