

Caring for Your Instrument

Monitoring Humidity

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Humidity. Violins like it. Cellos like it. Pianos like it and people like it too. In the fall and winter when the humidity drops, especially in heated environments, the humidity level can get down to single digits. However, Instruments need to be kept at a humidity level of no less than 40% to stay in optimal condition.

When humidity drops, the wood starts shrinking. Loose strings are the first sign that the instrument is dry because the peg box and the pegs shrink and let go of the strings. The instrument may start sounding a bit tight, and cello players will notice that the bridge comes down. Eventually, when there is no more to shrink, the dryness will force an opening either at the seams or a new crack will appear.

I therefore recommend that you invest in a good-quality hygrometer. Hygrometers (an instrument that measures humidity) do come in different qualities; some work accurately, some only give a range, so read labels carefully before purchasing. You might find a reliable hygrometer at places like Radio Shack, suppliers of archival material (things needed for long term storage of perishable items like manuscripts) like Gaylord, and industrial suppliers like Hanna Instruments.

So how do I overcome environmental dryness? Among the ways to humidify your instrument are:

- Using a Dampit® to add humidity inside the body of the instrument. Unfortunately, Dampits® require constant attention because they need to be refilled up to twice a day, and could actually harm the instrument if not used properly. And they don't protect the tuning pegs.
- Use a humidity system inside the case, like the Stretto®
- A home made method: use a soap dish, poke holes in the lid and fit a kitchen sponge in the box. Attach the box to the case with double Velcro®
- Keep the instrument in a room with a humidifier. A wide array of room humidifiers is available, including tabletop versions with warm or cold steam for rooms and bigger units for a whole house. Automatic humidifying systems can also be installed in your home that works in conjunction with your heating system.
- The most economical and effective solution I have found is the warm steam humidifier. It does not produce white dust and no filter is required. It acts like an additional heater and does not need chemicals for lime build up. Maintenance is simple with only weekly cleaning with vinegar. Bigger units need even less maintenance but they do use a filter and a chemical to prevent lime build-up.

Whichever option you choose, do make sure to stick to the proper routine according to manufacturer instructions. In the end your instrument will thank you.

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Biography:

Ute Brinkmann's shop in Connecticut specializes in the sale and repair of fine bowed instruments. Among her many credits is the position of foreman of the violin restoration department for the prestigious W. E. Hill & Sons of England.

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