



# POWER UP!

How to find your ideal electric violin without getting zapped

*By Patrick Sullivan*

**A**sha Mevlana first plugged in some two decades ago. A classically trained violinist and violist, Mevlana went looking for an electric instrument after joining a rock band in New York City. Her bandmates' instruments were overwhelmingly loud. And they were playing bars and clubs like CBGB that were full of people smoking and drinking—raucous environments that made Mevlana fear for her expensive viola.

"I thought, 'Oh my god, I don't want to ruin my nice instrument, and I really want to be heard,'" Mevlana recalls with a laugh. So she bought virtually the first electric instrument she saw. Adjusting to the electric sound was tough, she says.



Asha Mevlana and her Wood Violins Viper

But these days, Mevlana is happily playing electric with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, performing with the likes of Alanis Morissette and Gnarls Barkley, and making high-profile appearances at the Grammy Awards and on the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*.

Electric violins have also come a long way, says Mevlana, who now owns six. "There are so many choices today," she says. "And they all feel very, very different."

Around 30 companies or individuals are now seriously manufacturing electric violins, says Chris Guin of the Electric Violin Shop, which sells instruments online and at a storefront in Durham, North Carolina. Demand is high. In the last ten years, the electric-violin market has grown 30 percent,

according to Ken Dattmore, Yamaha's strings marketing manager.

A big share of that market is commanded by five larger companies: Yamaha, NS Design, Wood Violins, Bridge Violins, and Zeta. Cantini and Aurora are notable up-and-coming brands, Guin says. And individual makers, like John Jordan of Jordan Violins, custom-craft instruments for musicians, offering unique designs and exotic wood choices.

But with so many to choose from, how does an aspiring electric violinist find his or her ideal instrument?

The first step: Consider how and where you want to use it. Do you want to play with a praise-and-worship band in church? Or are you aiming to start a rock band with your friends?

Will you stick with a four string? Or do you want a five string, which lets you play viola and even cello parts, or even a seven string that turns you into an entire string section?

"If you want to sound like a violin most of the time because you want to play bluegrass or country or Celtic, that's one set of instruments," Guin says. "If you want to play metal, that's a different set."

Next, try a lot of violins before you buy, advises Mevlana. "It's so personal, just like with acoustic instruments," she says. "Something that another person might not like, for you it's perfect." There's not as much of a range within a brand, she says. "But between brands they're very different in terms of both sound and weight."

## SPECIAL FOCUS

Gary Byers, managing director at NS Design, suggests keeping in mind three important considerations. "Since you already have an acoustic, the key in choosing a bowed electric is to find one that can perform well within that range, but also take you beyond that realm," he says. "Ideally, it's designed to perform well on its own, but also go toe-to-toe with other electric instruments in any amplified performance setting, and allow you to take full advantage of effects such as looping, delay, distortion, and so forth."

Second, he suggests that because electric work differently to create sound than an acoustic, players should look for ergonomic advantages, including "comfortable support, stage mobility, and easier fingerboard access in the upper positions." And third, if the buyer is a performer, "It should also look great!"

Be sure to avoid junk—and be aware that the price structure for electric violins is quite different from acoustic instruments. Today you can find a decent acoustic violin for a few hundred dollars. But any electric under \$500

was likely made in an overseas factory that uses cheap pickups and pre-amps, Guin says. "We usually get a bunch of those brought in here after Christmas by people hoping we can make them playable." That shop work typically costs as much as the original instrument. But go up to \$600 or so, Guin says, and suddenly you've got a good-quality instrument.

If you must start cheaply, says violinist Chuck Bontrager, who plays rock as well as classical, stick with your acoustic and get a wraparound pickup like The Band, which sells for a couple hundred bucks. "And then maybe get a practice amp with some basic effects," he says.

The good news: The high end of the electric market commands far lower prices than the high end of the acoustic world. At the Electric Violin Shop, the most expensive violin is a handmade seven-string electric selling for \$5,000. "Even a handmade guitar would be four or five times that," Guin notes.

Bontrager, who paid about \$4,700 for his seven-string Viper from Wood Violins, says rock bandmates are astonished by what they

see as the instrument's high price tag compared to an electric guitar. "They ask me, 'Does it also clean your house for you?'" he says with a laugh. "But if I'm talking to folks at the Chicago Symphony, they're pretty much saying, 'I think I have that much money in my couch cushions.'"

What should you expect from an electric at a higher price point? Byers says you'll find instruments with "a more expansive and useful tone palate," in addition to "the ability to tailor the action to your playing style. Being able to raise or lower the height of the bridge allows you to choose low, fast action, or go for more aggressive playing without buzzing." Instruments will also have more support and mobility options.

Bontrager calculates that you can get a world-class electric rig—including a top-notch instrument and carbon-fiber bow, plus a top-of-the-line processor and speaker cabinet and other equipment—for \$13,500. "That wouldn't even get you out of the advanced student range in a classical instrument," he notes.

## NEW BOW FOR GOING ELECTRIC

It could have been an epic disaster, recalls violinist Chuck Bontrager. During a rock performance, Bontrager's 200-pound bass-guitar player came stomping across the stage. "There was my bow, leaning against an amplifier," he recalls. "And he just stomped right on it."

The accidental stomp would have left any wooden bow in pieces. But Bontrager, who was playing an electric instrument that day, was using a carbon-fiber CodaBow. And it wasn't even scratched. That episode illustrates one reason violinists who are going electric might consider buying a new bow.

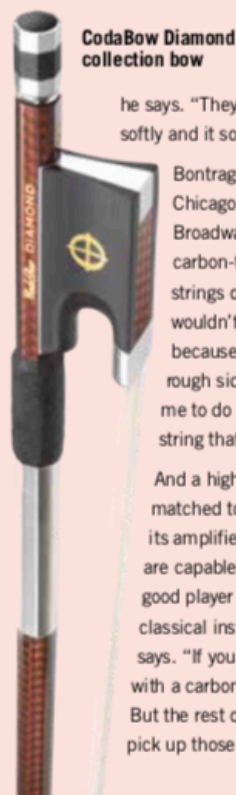
Broadly speaking, however, you can use the bow you already own.

"An acoustic violin bow will work just fine, and just like with acoustic instruments, a better bow will work better," says Chris Guin of the Electric Violin Shop. "But if you're playing metal in a cinder-block club and someone

comes out of the mosh pit and knocks that expensive wood bow out of your hand, you might end up in jail."

Even aside from accidents, intense shows may take an extra toll, says the Trans-Siberian Orchestra's Asha Mevlana, who decided to stop using her expensive wooden bow. "When I'm on a big stage I play really hard, and I didn't want to be rehairing all the time," she says. Now she uses carbon-fiber Glasser bows, which stand up well and come in different colors, allowing her to match her bow to her white instrument.

Some players find that a heavier bow works better on an electric instrument, according to Yamaha's Ken Dattmore. "With a heavier bow they can actually play lighter,"



CodaBow Diamond collection bow

he says. "They can turn the amp up and play softly and it sounds great."

Bontrager, who also plays with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Broadway shows like *Hamilton*, says his carbon-fiber bow helps with the extra strings on his electric instrument. "I wouldn't use it in the pit in *Hamilton*, because it would sound a little on the rough side," Bontrager says. "But it lets me to do things on the sixth and seventh string that my wooden bow wouldn't."

And a high-end bow might not be well matched to an electric instrument and its amplifier, he notes. "Those systems are capable of hearing fewer colors than a good player with a really good traditional classical instrument can create," Bontrager says. "If you're afraid you'll lose something with a carbon-fiber bow, you might be right. But the rest of your signal chain might not pick up those subtleties anyway."

NS Design Fretted CR4 Violin



## GEARING UP TO GO ELECTRIC

If you're going electric, your new instrument is just the first item on what could be a very long list of equipment purchases, from amplifiers to effects pedals and loopers. "It's literally endless," says violinist Asha Mevlana of the Trans-Siberian Orchestra. "There are so many options."

But don't let that intimidate you. Start with the basics, which can be as simple as a mini amp that allows you to practice at home—Mevlana uses a Roland MICRO Cube.

"We mostly recommend acoustic guitar amplifiers," says Chris Guin of the Electric Violin Shop. The one company he's aware of that makes dedicated violin amps—Acus—sells a high-end product that costs about \$1,800. "It's beautiful,

and it sounds really good," Guin says. "But you can get a good sound without spending that much."

If you're playing coffeeshop-style gigs, the Fishman Loudbox Mini is a good, lightweight option. It's 19 pounds and costs about \$330. A little heavier and louder is the Fishman Loudbox Artist, which has phantom power for a condenser mic and costs a couple hundred more. "They both have a good, clean, transparent sound that doesn't color the music that much," Guin says.

If you can't plug into an outlet, one option is the Bose S1Pro. "It's kind of the ultimate travel rig for folks who have to play without wall power," Guin says. "It's way louder than you'd think it would be."

An effects pedal is another item to consider early in your electric journey. "I 100 percent recommend exploring pedals," says Mevlana, who uses a Boss GT pedal she's had for years. "If you're not used to the electric sound, I wouldn't recommend playing one dry. You're going to want reverb and other things added on to get the sound you're looking for."



Boss GT-10

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## SPECIAL FOCUS

**W**hatever their budget, violinists confront another choice: Whether to get a solid-body or an acoustic-electric. Solid bodies command the market, but Yamaha, Wood, and other companies make instruments with hollow chambers aimed at achieving a more acoustic sound, and one of the Electric Violin Shop's top suppliers—David Gage/The Realist—offers no solid-body instruments.

Feedback problems were traditionally the big drawback of amplifying hollow-bodied violins.

But that's relatively rare with good modern instruments. Mevlana, for example, says feedback just hasn't been a problem for her.

Keep in mind that even the best electric isn't going to sound like your fine acoustic. "You have to look at it as a completely different instrument," Mevlana advises. "It's going to take some getting used to."

Byers agrees. "Enter the experience understanding that the electric violin is not intended to duplicate an acoustic. Instead, understand that it's an opportunity to go beyond the capabilities of an acoustic in much the same way as a

good electric guitar lets you travel beyond the boundaries of where an acoustic guitar can go."

Mark Wood, founder of Wood Violins, who has played electric for three decades, says it's also important to keep your standards high. "Musicians look for tone with an acoustic instrument, but with an electric instrument, they tend to not be as sensitive to it as they should be," he says.

Tinny-sounding instruments stem from the use of electronics better suited to amplifying a guitar. "They're very high treble and overly bright," Wood says. "When you draw horse hair across a string it behaves differently than when you strum it with a pick. With an electric bowed string, we need to pursue a full-bodied, high-fidelity low-end to high-end sound experience."

Weight is also a key consideration for electrics, which used to be stuffed with heavy electronics before makers began finding ways to lighten them. "Nobody wants to play a heavy instrument under the chin," Wood says. Mevlana, for example, says buying a low-weight Viper helped her overcome back pain she attributes to using a heavier electric instrument.

Lindsey Stirling famously plays Yamaha's SV-250, a lightweight, wireless instrument. "If she had to stay in the same 10-foot area, tethered to an amp, it's hard to even imagine her act," Dattmore observes.

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Electrics also present another new aesthetic frontier for players accustomed to acoustic violins that are roughly all the same color and shape. Do you want an electric instrument that looks and feels as much like an acoustic instrument as possible? Or do you want something very different?

Aesthetic of the instrument is important, Wood says, pointing to the striking electric guitars used by Jimmy Page and Eddie Van Halen. "Their instruments are as interesting and as beautiful as their playing," he says. "If it looks beautiful, that has tremendous impact on a performance." ■



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