
STRINGS

January 2015

The Quest for Tone

16 pros—from concert soloists and chamber players to fiddlers and jazz musicians—share their string set-up

ATAR ARAD

Violist, composer, professor at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music

I use a set of D'Addario Kaplan viola strings, heavy tension. I find that these strings are a wonderful fit to my viola made by Nicolò Amati. They provide me with a warm and powerful sound, so important for any viola, let alone an old one. It takes between four days to a week for a set of new strings to reach its peak and gain evenness, but I find the wait fully worthwhile.

ZACH BROCK

Jazz violinist, composer

I was experimenting with different strings when I started playing my Leandro Bisiach (1895) violin. The strings that I had used before were not responsive enough for the Bisiach. For a while, I was trying a combination of Thomastik-Infeld Vision Titanium Orchestra and the plain Vision Titanium strings. When I had a chance to try a set of the Peter Infeld "PI" strings they all worked incredibly well together for my instrument. They had more colors, the tension was comfortable, and I really liked the Gold and Platinum E strings, too. I found that I could alter the sound of the entire instrument just by alternating those E strings. I ended up preferring the aluminum-wound D over the silver-wound D and that's what I'm currently using: Peter Infeld Silver G, Aluminum D, Aluminum A, and Platinum E, courtesy of Connolly Music.

DAVID AARON CARPENTER

Concert violist

I have been using the Pirastro Evah Pirazzi line for nearly a decade, and love the sound, response, and quality that the new Evah Pirazzi Gold strings produce. They are a perfect complement to my 1766 Michele Deconet viola.

SARA CASWELL

Jazz violinist, fiddler, chamber musician

I'm trying a variety of strings these days, seeking that union between what's pleasing to my ear and works best with each instrument. Right now, I'm using Thomastik Infeld Reds on my Collingwood and Scarpella violins, and D'Addario Fiddle strings and a Helicore long-scale viola C string on my 5+5 Hardanger fiddle.

JEREMY COHEN

Violinist; founder of the Grammy-Award winning Quartet San Francisco

I started out in the late 1970s using Dominants by Thomastik. They were a new breed of synthetic string then and offered a strong and consistent tone. Some years later, I changed over to Helicore strings by D'Addario, which I liked for their smooth continuity of tone from string to string. They had a smaller diameter and were so consistent and hold their pitch amazingly well. Later, for soloing with orchestra, which I do from time to time, I wanted to use a thicker and somewhat more punchy string with a more beefy tone and stronger projection, so I switched over to the Zyex by D'Addario. These have been my main strings for the last decade or so—very reliable and consistent. The Zyex set has a fine Kaplan E string, but I personally had grown accustomed to using a Hill E string since the old days with the Dominant set which has a slightly softer tone (and consequently less edgy on my 1868 Vuillaume violin). On a recent trip to Boston and Cape Cod, I visited Paul Dulude at New England Violins and after a soundpost adjustment, he offered me to try a Warchal E string, which I'm currently trying and still adjusting to, but I find it has a full warm sound with very interesting character. I have yet to try the new D'Addario strings called Vivo and Amo, but am looking forward to giving them a drive as well.

Currently, I change my strings about every two to three months depending on the intensity of playing. Itzhak Perlman freaked me out when he told me he changes strings once a month, but I understand how useful that is. Strings are most brilliant when they are newest . . . but duhhh!

DAVE EGGAR

Cellist, composer, A-list session player

For my classical cello, I have used the same lineup of strings for quite some time and I really love it! For A and D strings, I use the Larsen Soloist line. I love the warmth and clarity of these strings.

They also sound great right when you put them on the instrument. For G and C strings, I use the Spirocore, which are great—they have both bite, which is great for my rock solos, and also depth of sound. For my rock instruments, I also use D'Addario strings as they are very durable and strong, which is so important for touring.

I try not to change my strings that often as I have such a busy performance schedule that I need to keep my instruments in balance. I do change A strings every couple months because the heavy playing required in some of the rock projects I do tends to wear out the A string pretty quickly. The lower strings I change maybe once a year.

NATALIE HAAS

Concert cellist, chamber musician

I use Larsens for my A and D strings, and Thomastik Spirocore Tungsten for the G and C. This is the recommended setup from the couple who made my cello, Joe Grubaugh and Sigrun Seifert. I like the punch and power of the Spirocore for all the rhythmic playing I do and the fullness and sweet tone of the Larsens for more melodic playing.

KELLY HALL-TOMPKINS

Concert violinist

After much experimentation, I have put together a string cocktail that complements my violin very well. My violin is well balanced across the full register, with singing clarity and a fullness and warmth of tone. So I like to have strings that bring those qualities to their full potential. On the lower three strings, I use Pirastro Evah Pirazzi, with a stark G for even richer tone and bigger projection. I love the fact that Evah Pirazzi strings adjust quickly when new and produce the perfect blend of bell-tone clarity plus warmth, fullness, and sensitivity. I once briefly tried the Pirastro Evah Pirazzi Gold, but on my violin, they sacrificed too much clarity and the warmth became muddled. But the standard Pirazzi for me is perfect! For the E string, I love the Lenzner Goldbrokat, 27 gauge.

I continue to be amazed at how such an inexpensive string can be so wonderful compared to its high-priced counterparts. It's a very reliable string that doesn't break easily and the tone is a dream: it's like warm liquid crystal. I usually buy several at a time.

I choose all three elements—my instrument, bow, and strings—to work together to give voice to the same qualities. It's a wonderful feeling to discover a winning combination!

MARI KIMURA

Violinist, composer, subharmonics researcher

I use Thomastik Dominant for G, D, A, and Corelli for E. The reason for G, D, A, is economical, as well as for their tenacity and flexibility. In my case, subharmonics on the G seem the most stable using the Dominant strings.

For the E string, I like the color and brilliance of Corelli, or so I think

PHILIPPE QUINT

Concert violinist, chamber musician

I find that as with everything that has to do with violin and music, string set ups are very personal and will work differently on different instruments. My string set up has been the same now for a few years since I've started playing on "Ruby" [the 1708 "Ruby" Antonio Stradivari violin]. It is Thomastik Vision Titanium Solo for G, D, and A, and a Jargar Solo E. When it comes to lower strings, I always look for three main components: clarity, warmth, and quick response. With the E string, I am looking for brilliance of the sound and, frankly, durability. With this set up, I feel I am getting all the necessary qualities while achieving an overall balance of sound for "Ruby."

On average I change strings once a month. Strings get worn quickly and their durability and quality really depends on the amount of work I have during certain periods. When it's particularly hectic, with lots of performances, I need to change strings once every two weeks. When the schedule is less intense it's back to once a month. Changing strings is probably my No. 1 strategy if I feel the sound is not coming out the way I'd like it to be. Fresh strings really do make a huge difference.

However, with frequent climate changes and/or occasional open seams, especially when it comes to older instruments, the sound issues could be more complex and not easily solvable by just changing strings.

NEYVELI RADHAKRISHNA

South Indian classical violinist (also uses a stereoscopic double-neck violin)

Right now I am using Pirastro Chromchor, for higher and middle range. It is a smooth single-filament steel-core wound string not affected by hand perspiration or scratchy noise on the strings—that's important because I play Indian classical music, and need a clear sound, but it also suits electrically amplified instruments.

For deeper range, I use Super-Sensitive Sencore strings, Perlon strings custom made to my instrument. Those have a more mellow tone and the sound balance is very good. Of course, all of this is based around player preference. I am still researching different brands, and a portion of my concert remuneration goes to research.

I'm still looking for a brand of strings that I can use for both necks when I amplify my double-neck violin.

Apart from these strings, I have to process the sound [electronically] to make it more soothing to the ears.

LARA ST. JOHN

Concert violinist, chamber musician

I use Thomastik Dominant A, D, and G because they are consistent and stretch out quickly. They don't last very long, but the break-

in time is so short, and they're so reasonable, that it's easy to replace them every month or two. I have heard great violin makers and restorers say that often, when a violinist comes in and complains about their violin, it's often just a string that needs changing. I always do that first now! And if that doesn't work, well, it's usually travel stress, open seam, or something else. But I have a super resilient old fiddle (a 1779 Guadagnini), and he has gone a million or so miles with me these past 16 years—and still seems happy.

As for E strings, I tend to just get an assortment, find one I like and then play on it until it breaks. I have never found any one company to be consistent at non-squeaking (sometimes called “whistling”) E strings. They say a wound E is less susceptible to whistling, but I have found that to be untrue. I often stick with a Goldbrokat for a month or more—if I get a good one, which is half the time.

MADS TOLLING

Jazz violinist and violist, chamber musician (former member of the Turtle Island Quartet)

I use Thomastik strings, and I have for the past 10 years. I like the consistency of the strings and their big selection of options. Throughout the last 10 years I have used different combinations of Vision, Infeld, and Spirocore strings.

For viola, I like the Vision set and sometimes with the Spirocore with Tungsten for the C string. I am biased, being from Denmark, so I like the Jargar or Larsen A string for viola. For all my choices, they have a clear warm tone while really projecting the sound and still sounding nice under the ear.

For violin, I like the Vision Orchestra strings, but I have lately fallen in love with the Peter Infeld strings, which sound fantastic on both my violins. In addition, the platinum-plated E string is wonderful out of that set. I feel the Infelds have a richness in tone and they last for a long time. They play easy and the sound really pops, which is important, since I play a lot of jazz and groove-based music. There is really nothing about them that I don't like, and that is pretty rare!

I change my strings every four months for the A, because it tears apart, likely from sweating, and the rest more like eight months, if they sound dead. The E string is changed every three months.

MATT TURNER

Improvising cellist

I use D'Addario Kaplan strings. On my Yamaha electric, I use the medium-tension Kaplan strings, and on my acoustic cello I use the heavy tension strings. I like the Kaplans because they have a round and even tone—not too bright and yet they provide a dark sound, which is something I like. I used an “old school” setup for almost 30 years with A and D Jargars and G and C Dominants. This past year I switched to the Kaplans. With the Kaplans, I have better control on the lower two strings, especially with my acoustic cello during recording sessions. The medium-tension Kaplans work really well on my electric. I get a smoother, more consistent sound. Something worth mentioning is that people often think it isn't important to have good strings on an electric instrument, but if one uses a less than stellar string, that person will probably get a less than stellar sound.

MELIA WATRAS

Viola; chair of the strings department at the University of Washington School of Music, Adelaide D. Currie Cole endowed professor; associate professor, viola

My strings are: A, Larsen medium; D, Larsen medium; G, Thomastik-Infeld Spirocore Silver medium; and C, Thomastik-Infeld Spirocore Silver medium. The Larsen A has a warmth and roundness on my viola that I like. Also, it doesn't stick out from the rest of the strings. The D has been a little tricky for me to find the right one for my instrument. I used a D'Addario Helicore D in the past, but over the last few years have gone with Larsen. It is a better match, and has been more stable while also sounding warm and wide. For the G and C, I like power on the lower end. I find that silver-wound Spirocore gives me an extra gear that I can go to, while still maintaining a clean sound. I tried the tungsten-wound, but they didn't speak as well as the silver on my 2001 Samuel Zygmuntowicz viola. In general, I find that this combination allows for evenness across the strings, but also enables me to get a variety of colors while keeping the overall sound full, strong, and deep.