

Strings Editors' Top 10 New Products

10 noteworthy products from the past 12 months that can enhance a string player's experience

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By Erin Shrader

Over the course of a year, *Strings* editors come across a multitude of nifty new products. And though a great number are useful tools that can freshen up a player's gear collection, there are, of course, items that stand out from the crowd. From an acoustic-electric violin to an ultra-light case to keep that fiddle in, these products will aid the musician in playing, recording, amplifying, and humidifying. So check out these ten editor picks from the past 12 months. The perfect string product might be just a page away.

Acoustic Electric Strings

Wouldn't it be nice if you could simply plug a cable into the side of an acoustic violin that you really like and just be louder? Plug it in at a gig for a purely acoustic sound, or run it through an effects box and play ala Hendrix? Now you can. **Acoustic Electric Strings**—an acoustic violin that comes pre-equipped with a built-in pick up—is the brainchild of **Gary Bartig**, who invented the Eminence Portable Upright Bass and the Dahlia five-string violin. After years of work developing an electric violin, Bartig realized that the best-sounding electric violin is an amplified acoustic violin. And that, he says, only sounds as good as the violin being amplified.

Bartig starts with the best-sounding instruments he can find, pops off the tops, and installs his own bass-bar mounted piezo pickups and a quarter-inch jack. He then does a complete setup with high-quality strings and fittings. "Of course, you can't take one spot and get the whole tone," says Bartig, who finds the bass-bar placement gives the best representation of the instrument. He prefers violins with a warm, clear tone to balance the piezo's brightness. The four-string Acoustic Electric Strings acoustic-electric violin comes in three models at various prices. The main differences among models are the quality of wood, varnish style, and choice of fittings.

The entry-level **Marinette** (\$699) features a lightweight Schatten element mounted on the bass bar. Bartig inlays his own ultra-light piezo element in the bass bars of the **DuShane** (\$999; a new five-string model is available for \$1,699) and the **London** (\$1,999).

I tried out the mid-level DuShane. It arrived in a sturdy Concord oblong case and I was pleasantly surprised by its appearance—good-looking wood with clean, stylish workmanship, and a tasteful, lightly antiqued varnish. The setup was excellent, it was comfortable to play, and had a warm, even tone, as described. It wasn't a complex sound, but better than expected in that price range.

I took it to a dance gig in a big hall for a test drive. The DuShane sounded fine plugged directly into the soundboard with plenty of gain, no hum, and no feedback, no matter how close to the monitor. The small amount of audible bow noise in the monitor disappeared when the guitar came in. According to the sound man, the DuShane sounded great out in the hall, no bow thud, just pure tone, although he personally missed the driving bow percussion that a microphone picks up. acousticelectricstrings.com



Mini-Mic, Minor Miracle

As many gigging string players know, getting a natural bowed sound through a microphone or pickup is a huge challenge. Now DPA, a familiar name in pro audio, has launched the **DPA 4099 Performance Series** of tiny, clip-on condenser mics that deliver a transparent, natural sound. The tiny boom-style mics, housed in a windscreen and shock-mounted on a gooseneck, clip gently but securely anywhere on the edge of the instrument with non-marring feet. The clip, a crucial detail where many miniature mics fall short, is an elegant design: it's stable, yet it can be moved or transferred to another instrument with little effort and just one hand. The gooseneck bends easily for ideal placement, but is stiff enough to retain its shape when you put it away. The included XLR adapter allows the DPA 4099 to work as a regular 48-volt phantom-powered mic, or you can order it with an adapter designed for wireless use. The adapters have a balanced output and built-in low-cut filter that minimizes wind and handling noise.



I took the 4099 on a test drive with expert sound man Marty Brenneis at a Valentine's Day dance in a cavernous hall. The band was just fiddle and acoustic guitar. Time for sound check: the fiddle sound from the monitor was strikingly clear and natural. In fact, it sounded like no monitor at all, just louder. "It sounds just like you," Brenneis called from the back of the room. "Out here!" Even with a hall full of dancers the sound was loud, free of feedback, clear, and remarkably detailed. I played better, so did the guitarist, and the crowd responded accordingly. *DPA 4099 Violin Microphone, \$599 (MSRP).* dpamics.com

Playing cello with Passione

Building on the success of its new Passione gut strings for violin, Pirastro recently launched **Passione C and G strings for cello**. Passione strings are designed to deliver the tuning stability, power, and quick response of synthetic-core strings without sacrificing gut's sonority and complexity of tone. Our test cellist writes, "The strings seem very well made. They respond well and are very warm and deep. On my cello, I found that the C was wonderful and warm and resonant and the G was a little muffled sounding. I would think they would be great for darkening the sound a bit on brighter cellos." Pirastro notes that one gauge does not suit every instrument and that top-quality cellos are often quite sensitive to differences in string tension, so Passione cello strings come in three gauges. In general, the thicker the string, the more powerful the sound and higher the tension. Thinner strings create less tension and produce a brighter sound without necessarily losing power. *Pirastro Passione C and G strings for cello strings, \$57-\$73 (Internet).* pirastro.com



Record It in a Flash!

The compact, affordable **Zoom H2** handy flash recorder has four built-in microphone capsules that record in surround sound as well as stereo. It also functions as a USB microphone and sports an onboard tuner, metronome, and compressor. Fairly easy to use. Excellent deal for the price of \$199.99 (MSRP). It's heftier counterpart, the **Zoom H4**, records in stereo and four-track modes. It has many of the same features as the H2, but adds onboard recording effects. As of this writing, the Zoom H4 is the only handheld flash recorder with XLR mic inputs and full 48-volt phantom power for professional condenser microphones. It does not offer low-voltage plug-in power. Very powerful and versatile, but the H4 can be a bit more cumbersome to use. *Zoom H4, \$299.99 (MSRP).* www.zoom.co.jp



A Brilliant Idea!

The name might not ring a bell. But father and son violinists Bohdan Warchal and Bohdan Warchal, Jr., makers of handmade strings, founded their family business just five years ago in Slovakia on the premise that "sound fascinates us." Their newest strings, **Warchal Brilliant Vintage Violin Strings**, are a special adaptation of their Brilliant line for antique instruments. "Antique instruments often provide a specific kind of quality," says Warchal, Jr., who coordinates research for the company. "They 'play themselves.' In other words, they don't need to be forced. Such instruments require a bit different construction of the string and also a different tension. Thus, for the new line the construction and the tension of the strings were adapted to such instruments. We paid a lot of attention to adjust the tension very precisely." The new strings performed very well on our test instrument, a fairly bright-sounding contemporary violin. The sound was focused, the response quick and exceptionally clear, especially on the E string. Yes, the timbre is on the brilliant side, at least on our contemporary violin, but also rich, and without the annoying surface noise typical of some synthetic-core strings. *Warchal Brilliant Vintage violin strings, \$59.95 (MSRP).* warchalstrings.com



Core Values from CodaBow

Traditional bows are not designed for today's extended-range instruments. Whether it's a five-string acoustic fiddle or a seven-string electric violin, the demands made by



those additional strings are quite different from what is required of a traditional violin or viola bow. The **Joule**, from **CodaBow**, is an adaptation of the traditional violin bow, using 21st-century materials, designed especially to meet those requirements. Inside the woven carbon-fiber exterior of each CodaBow is an “acoustic core” composed of a blend of synthetic materials, such as Kevlar and aramid fibers, that determine many of the bow’s unique characteristics. Though designed specifically for extended-range instruments, musicians have found that they draw a strong core sound out of standard instruments, as well, says CodaBow founder Jeff Van Fossen. “Most [of these bows] are going onto traditional violins,” he says. For instance, the designers at CodaBow were able to engineer some of the additional stiffness and mass of a viola bow in order to draw a solid, core sound out of the low C without crushing the E. Other elements of the new design include the unique “swept back” shape of the frog, which offers a slightly longer hair length for more string control yet preserves the familiar balance and feel of a violin bow. *The Joule*, \$675 (MSRP). codabow.com



Everest—Improved

Based on feedback from customers, David Cheng has launched a Second Generation line of his popular, affordable shoulder rests and added a brand new model, the **Everest Collapsible Shoulder Rest (EC-4)**. The EC-4 sports a simple, sturdy folding mechanism that won’t pinch fingers. The feet of all Everest models are now made of a softer, more flexible material for a better grip, and can be ordered in extra-tall. The foam pad and adhesive holding it have also been improved. The Second Generation 1/4–1/10 size (EZ-1A) rest has been redesigned to better fit the littlest instruments. As a limited-time introductory offer, the new collapsible rests will include a free black velvet storage pouch that can attach to the outside of cases. *Everest EC-4 Collapsible rest*, \$39.99 (MSRP); *Second Generation EZ shoulder rests in four sizes*, \$25.99–\$27.95 (MSRP) depending on size. olivermusic.com



No Water Worries

The Blue Oasis sound-hole humidifier has proved popular on the guitar market for awhile. Now there’s an **Oasis Case Humidifier** for bowed strings. The Oasis is a blue tube made from a special fabric that allows water vapor (but not water) to pass through it. As the water evaporates, it creates a vacuum and the tube shrinks to compensate for the loss of water. There’s no guessing about when to rehydrate: when it looks like an empty toothpaste tube, it’s time. The included syringe makes it easy. Inside the tube, crystals of Humigel, a super absorbent polymer, absorb up to 500 times their weight in water and hold it in a gel matrix, making leaks even less likely. The Oasis attaches with tiny magnets to a small stainless steel strip that adheres to any flat surface inside the case. *Oasis Case Humidifier*, \$19.95 (MSRP), \$17.95 (street). oasishumidifiers.com



A New Classic Violin Case

The new **BAM Classic 3** is a stylish, compact violin case that rests somewhere between a contoured case and a half-moon in terms of size and shape. A single block of high-density foam, injected around a violin-shaped mold, and covered with a single piece of black fabric, forms the interior. Outside the foam is a corrugated structure filled with a shock-absorbing material. The cover is made of water-resistant cordura nylon in a choice of dark green, black, or navy blue with rubber feet, a subway handle, and D-rings for straps. The interior sports two bow holders and a detachable zipper compartment for small accessories. Two additional compartments, one on the front for a shoulder rest and an expandable pocket on the back for sheet music, are recessed into the mold and accessed from the exterior of the case. The sturdy six-pound case comes with two backpack straps. The Classic 3 is made entirely in Thailand, hence the relatively affordable list price. *Bam Classic 3*, \$230. bamcases.com





An Ultralight Cello Case

Looking for an ultralight cello case with strength, durability, and the ability to accommodate a seated cellist's posture needs? **Musilia's** new **carbon-fiber cello cases** were designed by a professional cellist from a family of cellists, and seem to have addressed all the familiar issues: weight, safety, nonstandard dimensions, ease of carrying, and even the irritating noise of rattling hardware. Starting with weight, the lightest model, MCC301, weighs just five pounds, thanks to the use of ultra-lightweight materials. The more affordable MCC201 weighs 6.3 pounds, while the hybrid carbon/fiberglass MCC101 weighs in at 7.7 pounds. The no-frills interior sports a unique suspension system that adjusts easily to fit any full- or near-full-sized instrument. A foam block at the upper end holds the cello button firmly in place with the neck suspended in air. A cross bar keeps the case rigid at the neck. The lower bouts are suspended on foam pads mounted on carbon-fiber springs, each adjustable by a two-way screw for a custom fit. The case holds two bows.

Latches, handles, and simplified strap hardware are all designed to reduce noise. A classy touch. Since so many accidents involve torn straps or the hardware used to secure them, Musilia has devised a system with a single nylon strap and simple plastic strap adjusters. Several smooth-edged strap-holder inserts are inset into the case to reduce snagging, and reinforced with layers of carbon fiber for strength. The strap can be rigged in various backpack or over-the-shoulder configurations to suit the player. It comes with high-quality shoulder pads and even a wedge-shaped back cushion that detaches to turn a regular chair into a cellist's slanted seat.

Musilia carbon-fiber cello cases: MCC101, \$1,045; MCC201, \$1,655; MCC301, \$2,280. musilia.net
