

From the Darol Anger Forum archive (<http://www.darolanger.com/daquestions.html>)

I was wondering if you know of any cheap 5 string ACOUSTIC fiddles out there.

Thanks,

Robert Olds

Hello Robert

Most fiddle players and many violinists are curious about 5 string instruments. Is the extra string that useful? Is it too difficult to make the adjustment? Most players are surprised when they pick up a 5 string violin or viola because the position of the extra string changes the bowing rules in unexpected ways, and the neck is usually somewhat larger and seems clunky at first. New tuning issues crop up with the extra resonances. Should you tune the E string to the A string or the C string? 5-string instruments often seem to be slightly muted and the approach to tone is different, though they generally sound terrific close-miked.

But the attraction of extra range, color, and convenience of having a viola and violin in one's hand is considerable, and for some, irresistible. Electric violinists in the jazz and rock fields have been using 5 (and more) strings for years, and miss the extra string when they return to their acoustic instruments. Bluegrass fiddlers have embraced 5 strings. Old-time Appalachian-style fiddlers, who often tune their instruments to a chord, are discovering the tremendous sonorities possible with the extra string. And string teachers in every style are discovering the convenience of not having to juggle violin and viola when working with their orchestra students and other classes.

But how many musicians have the money to gamble on a brand-new custom instrument which may not work out for them, and would likely not be their main instrument?

Gary Bartig's "Dahlia" brand 5 string fiddles are a very well-thought-out solution to the 5 string fiddle question. Manufactured in China by a father-son musician team and set up individually by Bartig, these instruments are incredibly inexpensive for the quality, which is high student grade. The 5 string violin project is a labor of love for Gary, who makes a living manufacturing a very popular acoustic-electric upright bass, the Eminence Bass, which he developed for touring musicians.

I had the opportunity to play 6 Dahlia 5 string violins recently at Bartig's workshop in Minneapolis, and was impressed with the thought and care put into these 5 strings. They remind me of the that special category of good travel guitars, which many players fall in love with for their flexibility and ease of playing. These instruments fit that classic mold: humble, balanced instruments, solid and well-made with a decent tone, fun and incredibly easy to pick up and play.

As I am fairly used to the bowing adjustments necessary for five-strings (it seems to take about 3 hours of playing time to get comfortable with an extra string) my first impression of the Dahlia violin was the size of the neck; it seemed large, larger than other 5 string necks, even. The next thing I noticed was how comfortable and entirely normal the string spacing was, and how easy it was to play double stops and stay clear of other strings. The strings are the same spacing as a normal 4-string fiddle, which really makes a difference. After about 5 minutes of further playing, I noticed how relaxed my left hand had

stayed. The larger neck, excellent radius, and comfortable dry-feeling neck finish encourages a more 'open' left hand which contributes to relaxation. Even with my relatively small hand, I didn't notice that stretches were any more of a problem than with a small neck.

The tone of all the instruments was not the tone of a fine handmade violin, but it was extremely 'friendly', with an attractive evenness and a decently strong E string. The C string was by no means capable of bone-rattling power, but it fit well tonally with the other strings and was not embarrassing or mooney.

Gary said he had worked hard on the dimensions and had arrived at a decision, after the first batch, to go slightly heavier in the backs and slightly larger for the F- holes, to contribute to a more powerful top end. He also listened closely to many players for his decision to make the string spacing the same as a 4-string, which will ease most players' transition enormously. These instruments, while close to normal violin length and size, are very broad across the belly and have a modified, rounded lower bout recalling some of the old "pochette" dancing-master fiddles, and echoing the design of his ubiquitous basses. The finish is appropriate to a good student instrument in these times: nothing incredible, but a tasteful and nice thin finish, with a small amount of figure here and there in the wood.

I finally gravitated to 2 out of the 6 fiddles which seemed to sing and speak to me. One in particular seemed like the kind of sweet little darling that would inspire me to pick it up as I walk through a room of my house, play, and explore musical ideas. Those of us who have played for so long know it's priceless to have daily inspiration like that. The other one was an instrument with which I would be comfortable to walk into any fiddle jam session.

Speaking of price, it is almost uncanny what these instruments sell for. Gary is really down to the bones with this, and one can tell that the Dahlia is more in the nature of a personal quest for him. The great thing is that the price makes it possible for many violinists and fiddlers to have a nice 5 string fiddle as an adjunct instrument, to put a pickup on, to play for jam sessions, or to teach with. Many old-time fiddlers would be perfectly satisfied with one of these as their main instrument.

I think that anybody who is curious about a 5 string should check out these instruments as a reliable, affordable option. They are comparable to the Toyota hatchbacks of the 80's: they hold a ton of music, run forever with ease, and the price is right.

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