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Investigating the Marketing Language among Online Retailers of Violin Strings to Determine the Implied Aesthetic

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Investigating the Marketing Language among Online Retailers of Violin Strings
to Determine the Implied Aesthetic

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to the College of Creative Arts
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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this research is to determine if language in the advertising of violin strings is acting as an exclusionary tool in favor of a Western art music “sound” produced by “classical” violinists. It posits that the marketing of strings to violinists is a topic laden with unacknowledged biases and values of musicians within Western art music. The aesthetic values attached to playing Western art music for the violin in the United States are passed on through pedagogic practice and acculturation of language. Product descriptions for strings in the United States employ language which adheres to these cultural values and appeals almost exclusively to practitioners of the Western art canon to the exclusion of other traditions, such as fiddling, which use the same instrument. After establishing the case of aesthetic language as imprecise and exclusionary, the author then proposes that empirical data may be used in combination with said language. Such an approach could provide a more objective perspective on the capabilities of strings and therefore appeal to a more diverse consumer.

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CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE

When choosing strings for the violin there many options available based on factors such as material, tension, gauge, price. Due to the wide variety of strings available and the general lack of knowledge on the part of musicians as to how each of these variables impacts the sound profile of their specific instrument, violinists are left with the product descriptions available from manufacturers and retailers in order to make their decision. The descriptive language used in the marketing of strings is highly subjective and nuanced, with each word having the potential to mean something different for each person. Therefore, the product descriptions, while seeming to provide insight into the sonic capabilities of strings within the aesthetic priorities of the culture to which they are marketed, are instead rather imprecise. This ambiguity in descriptive language and meaning limits the accessibility to those situated within said culture, which in the case of violin strings is primarily that of Western art music

For these reasons, this study will examine a few of the various influences which have shaped the aesthetic and cultural values of Western art music. Even though there are other traditions and styles of music which use the same instrument, the online retailers sampled for this study were directed more towards classical players than other styles. It will begin with an overview of current pedagogic theory and praxis as a common starting point for determining musical taste and correctness, before digging deeper into how musical taste acts as a social signifier. From here an overview of marketing practices involving language and music in Western culture will be presented. Thusly the concept of an unspoken – though still understood – set of values is determined which sets the classical violin aesthetic apart from other musics employing the same instrument.

PEDAGOGY

At the collegiate level, many musicians are making the transition from student to professional. This affair is replete with considerations beyond that of performance facility, including such matters as learning how to teach and self-promotion or marketing. In order for musicians to be able to obtain employment, they must not only achieve a high standard of academic excellence and technical proficiency, but also find a way to create a unique product. Their musical product must be distinctive from others while still fitting within the parameters established by cultural values of taste. Through pedagogy, students are taught these values and use them when making decisions as to what sort of strings to purchase for their instrument.

The development of a unique musical product for string players necessarily begins with fundamental instruction in performance of the instrument in question. While paradoxical in nature, it is important for a student to obtain knowledge and experience in order to make informed creative decisions. For the violin, pedagogy is a long-debated subject going back to Leopold Mozart's treatise on the subject. It focuses on how to produce sound on the instrument including aspects of posture, efficiency of movement, and sustainability of playing. Since then, several pedagogic ideologies have developed with such names as Ivan Galamian, Paul Rolland, and Mimi Zweig situated at the fore. Each has their own individual take on how to manipulate the instrument and musician to produce the best performance.

With these various options, it may happen that one becomes too firmly situated into one pedagogic approach to the point that questioning and innovation have been silenced. This is not to say that an individual might not be very successful with one or another approach; rather, that there is a reason a practice works (the *how* of performance) and understanding that reason (the *what*) seems to be secondary. In an article reviewing current pedagogic practice, David Sogin

presents the “need to better understand what it is we need to teach and how best to teach it.”¹

While the individual technical instructions will depend on the particular pedagogic family tree, as it were, he appeals to string teachers as researchers. In this way, one may begin with any pedagogic approach, but not find oneself limited to said approach. This strategy of the analysis of and relation between approaches is what Sogin says is a necessary part of progressing the field as it may provide a differentiated approach to both teaching and learning.

For students to themselves become researchers in their own right, the conveyance of proper technique must needs include discussion not only about the physical movements, but about the sound produced by means of these various manipulations. In essence, students not only learn the idiomatic language in music discussion, but also how the variables in sound production affect one another. In Leopold Mozart’s *Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing* much attention is given in the fifth chapter to the concept of tone production. The words used here describe a pure, strong, earnest, and manly tone which the student ought to be able to produce with the proper application of bowing technique.²

Ivan Galamian approaches the same concept of bow control and tone production in his book *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*³. In the second chapter he details the precise positioning of fingers on the bow and the sorts of movements to make with the hand and arm. Rather than describing the quality of sounds, he instead focuses on the three primary variables of

¹ Sogin, David W. “String Pedagogy for the 21st Century: Catching up with Research.” *String Research Journal* 4 (January 1, 2013): 5–13. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=4453d539-823e-3e21-8767-ff4b1d7081ca>.

² Mozart, Leopold. *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, trans. Editha Knocker (1948; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). 96-97.

³ Galamian, Ivan. *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*. Prentice-Hall, 1962.

speed, pressure, and sounding (or contact) point which when combined in various ways alters the tone produced.

These two treatises highlight two aspects of musical instruction – technical proficiency and creative expression – which may at times be considered to be in a causal relationship. By focusing on proficiency in one or the other of these facets, one might assume that the other will naturally come about. One might argue that creativity is not something that can be taught, that it must be something internal which comes out through technical facility. One might also argue that the technique will be honed by producing the creative voice, and that technical criticism from teachers and peers in a studio setting may dampen a student’s individuality. However, creativity and technique are not separate entities, but are instead in partnership. Therefore, in the process of teaching either one exclusively, the other will be lost.⁴ In order for students to become professionals it is then necessary for both creativity and technique to be taught together.

It is in this combination that one may begin to see the role of musician as researcher take shape; a role which pedagogue Mimi Zweig has taken upon herself. In her own pedagogic approach, Zweig employs what *String Ovation* (a publication of Connolly Music) calls a “trial-and-error approach.”⁵ This approach is built on patience and trusting the process, during which students are encouraged to view mistakes as valuable information to be gathered on what does or does not work in technique and musical expression. This, combined with the emphasis on

⁴ Lysaker, Mercedes Yvonne. “Creating a Judgment-Free Environment: Strategies for the Classroom, Ensemble, and Applied Studio.” *American String Teacher* 70, no. 2 (January 1, 2020): 39–41. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=61ac4380-60e0-3140-8f56-fe626252198a>.

⁵ Harrison, Michael. “Stringovation Exclusive: Mimi Zweig – the Petite Giant of String Pedagogy.” *Connolly Music Company*. Accessed July 3, 2022. <https://www.connollymusic.com/stringovation/mimi-zweig-the-petite-giant-of-string-pedagogy>.

helping students to be “physically aware and comfortable while playing their instrument,”⁶ – adopted from Paul Rolland’s style emphasizing freedom of movement – enables students to make the connection between the creative and technical process for themselves.

The initial balance between critical feedback and creative exploration may be complicated for one coming from an either/or background and is a concern which Mercedes Lysaker takes on in “Creating a Judgment-Free Environment: Strategies for the Classroom, Ensemble, and Applied Studio.”⁷ In this article, Lysaker presents the problem that teachers and students face in trying to encourage the creative process while pursuing technical proficiency. While she supports the need for an environment in which students are free to be vulnerable with their music, creativity, and emotions, she recognizes that this is something easier said than done. She takes inspiration from the string pedagogue Mimi Zweig who encourages students to set “healthy expectations” and “not to compare themselves to others.”⁸ Lysaker also draws on her personal experience in order to develop some options for implementing such an environment in the classroom; a practice which relies heavily on the use of language.

This is not to say that criticism is a bad thing, only that perhaps the language used in criticism may potentially be rerouted from potentially problematic terms such as *good* or *bad*, in favor of allowing the student to express their awareness and curiosity, thus engaging in performance research of finding what works and what does not in technique to bring about the

⁶ Michael Harrison, “Stringovation Exclusive: Mimi Zweig's Pedagogy Style - Patience, Practice, and Freedom,” Connolly Music Company, accessed July 6, 2022, <https://www.connollymusic.com/stringovation/mimi-zweigs-pedagogy-style-patience-practice-and-freedom>.

⁷ Lysaker, Mercedes Yvonne. “Creating a Judgment-Free Environment: Strategies for the Classroom, Ensemble, and Applied Studio.” *American String Teacher* 70, no. 2 (January 1, 2020): 39–41. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=61ac4380-60e0-3140-8f56-fe626252198a>.

⁸ Michael Harrison, “Stringovation Exclusive: Mimi Zweig's Pedagogy Style - Patience, Practice, and Freedom,” Connolly Music Company, accessed July 6, 2022, <https://www.connollymusic.com/stringovation/mimi-zweigs-pedagogy-style-patience-practice-and-freedom>.

desired musical affect. This change in language describing the process helps students to view mistakes as valuable results of experimentation rather than failure, and from there the curiosity and creativity continues to grow rather than diminishing as a result of frustration.⁹

The issue of creativity in performance of Western string music is examined by Rose Sciaroni in an article titled “Mapping the Mountain: An Open Model of Creativity for String Education.” Within this article Sciaroni approaches “standard definitions and ontological ideas of musical creativity”¹⁰ as a problem of rigid thinking that requires a solution. She posits that creativity is “a continual process of exploration and rethinking”¹¹ that does not necessarily require fluency in the Western musical canon. Following an ideological solution involving the cooperation between awareness of existing models of teaching and imagination when implementing those models, she adds that an openly exploratory model of learning might work in conjunction with traditional pedagogy.

One area in which violin pedagogy seems to fail musicians is that it is rather exclusive to classical music. While the violin is a product of and primary instrument within that genre, common pedagogy ignores folk traditions using the same instrument.¹² Fiddling is one such tradition and involves the ultimate expression of creativity in performance: that is, improvisation. Mark O’Connor in his article for *Strings* titled “It’s Time to Reinvent String Pedagogy for the 21st Century” provides a brief overview of three famous violinists – Nigel Kennedy, Maxim Vengerov, and Eugene Fodor – and their own frustrations as regards improvisation. While

⁹ Sciaroni, R. “Mapping the Mountain: An Open Model of Creativity for String Education.” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 4–20. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=bfd7a9b6-22f9-31a9-87fa-b753fec3254d>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² O’Connor, Mark. “It’s time to reinvent string pedagogy for the 21st century.” *Strings*, 09, 2012, 15-17, <https://wvu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/time-reinvent-string-pedagogy-21st-century/docview/1032813578/se-2?accountid=2837>.

technically proficient as a result of traditional pedagogy in the 20th Century, they each relayed to the author a frustration with their inability to play freely music that was not written down.¹³

O'Connor then presents his belief in the correlation between classical instruction and the ability – or lack thereof – to improvise creatively.

It is a general argument in favor of classical training that the techniques learned in this system can be applied to folk music and other genres. However, while O'Connor does not disagree with the technical transference, he does write that the musical environment during the learning process strongly influences the way one approaches music. In the case of Western art music transferring to other traditions, there may be difficulty when going from written to improvised music.¹⁴ In order to foster the creativity of violin students, more instructors are including other styles of music into the repertoire. Janet Farrar-Royce wrote on this phenomenon as a result of a panel at the National Conference for the American String Teachers' Association (ASTA). In her article "Creating and Maintaining an Alternative Styles Program for Strings" she outlines some of the ways in which a string teacher could incorporate other musics in her students' instruction, thus broadening the understanding of musical taste and aesthetic.

¹³ O'Connor, Mark. "It's time to reinvent string pedagogy for the 21st century." *Strings*, 09, 2012, 15-17, <https://wvu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/time-reinvent-string-pedagogy-21st-century/docview/1032813578/se-2?accountid=2837>.

¹⁴ A similar phenomenon may be present in how one thinks and speaks about Western art music and music of other origins. By experiencing enculturation in one or another of the string traditions, one might develop an unconscious bias toward other traditions. By incorporating other styles of music – as equals – into one's training, it may unify the descriptive language used to classify the timbre and tonal characteristics. In this way, an inclusive pedagogy may lead to inclusive language used to market the strings.

TASTE

The focus on Western art music among violinists ultimately stems from the fact that it has been notated¹⁵ and held in esteem by the upper class. In order to be taken seriously by members of the upper class and to promote social mobility, those from lower class positions adopted the cultural values of the upper class. The influence of musical taste provides an interesting conundrum when one begins to pick it apart. It presents as something entirely subjective and formed largely by enculturation, however, Western art music, while being an excellent and well-documented art form, is firmly embedded in the Western musical culture as a signifier of class and taste.

Pierre Bourdieu, in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*,¹⁶ focuses primarily on musical artifacts in the form of pieces or works of art and how various pieces of the supposed “high” art have the ability to signify high and low class based on popularity of said pieces. One such example is that of the reception of Strauss’ “Blue Danube Waltz” where Bourdieu found it to be more familiar and popular among the lower class, whereas among the upper class it was far less popular. He examines the ways in which certain works of Western art music are consumed – for example the concert hall or the radio – by members of the various classes and the influence of one’s habitus (social standing) on the acquisition of cultural capital. His work sets the foundation for applications of music research in sociology. Essentially, knowledge of the high culture, and the musical works associated with it, provide a measure of

¹⁵ Now, obviously, violin music is notated, but the reason why this is an important feature is that it sets Western art violin music apart from the primarily oral fiddle tradition, in that Western violin music was written down at its inception as opposed to later notation.

¹⁶ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste / Pierre Bourdieu; Translated by Richard Nice*. 1984, repr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=82fc1920-3f7b-3f5b-8e57-e9869d29e886>.

cultural capital. Similar to the way in which material capital may allow one entrance into the upper class, so cultural capital – as acquired through knowledge – provides the potential for upward mobility through societal classes by separating oneself from lower culture.

Nick Prior’s critique of Bourdieu’s perspective touches on the fact that Bourdieu had a preference for examining how such works of art are adopted by members of society and demonstrate trends in class preference. Bourdieu employed the methods of interviews and questionnaires to gather his data on class-based preference for what Prior calls “more or less well-disseminated musical works.”¹⁷ For example, Strauss’ “Blue Danube Waltz” was found to be quite familiar and popular among the working class, while Bach’s “Well-Tempered Clavier” was less familiar to the working class and more popular among the upper class as compared to its reception by the working class.

While taking the reader through various methodologies for investigating the interplay of sociology and aesthetics – including occupational sociology, cultural anthropology, neo-phenomenology, and technological sociology – Prior takes care to point out the limitations of sociology as it stands. One such limitation is that when questions of cultural criticism finally came into play in the twentieth century, “art had been inserted into an analytical frame comprised of institutional and economic forces.”¹⁸ Essentially, the cultural influence and discourse both toward and from musical art had already been firmly entrenched within a capitalistic narrative. Within the capitalistic framework, music is viewed as a commodity as opposed to something tied

¹⁷ Prior, Nick. “Critique and Renewal in the Sociology of Music: Bourdieu and Beyond.” *Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 121–38. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5e6b543d-f6f4-3566-9333-b0da47d06a57>. 126.

¹⁸ Ibid. 124.

to community. This may be viewed as a limitation due to the potential for bias among researchers who originate from within the Western culture and its traditional narrative.

From this standpoint, Prior points out that Bourdieu viewed art in all its forms as “dynamic entities...characterized...by social structural co-ordinates of power and history.”¹⁹ As such, works produced under the umbrella of art act as signifiers of their “external economic and political forces.”²⁰ In this way, art attempts to serve the “ideology of the ‘pure work’,” that is, to be separate from societal constraints or concerns, but at the same time may be constrained by its origins within “structures of power and class inequality.”²¹

Through Bourdieu’s categorization and study of the social relations to musical works of art, it becomes apparent that he believes in the concept of a pure work of art, which is seen as the ultimate cultural signifier. Only those with the right knowledge could ever appreciate the work to its fullest, though as a piece of pure art, it may still be enjoyed by the uninitiated. Prior points to this “capacity for aesthetic enjoyment...among all human beings”²² as a distinctly Kantian belief: that there could be a universal taste.

Far from being an act of pure love, however, time spent with art is misrecognized investment in a game of social elevation through which certain dispositional orientations are produced and reproduced. So the sociological truth of art is, for Bourdieu, the uncomfortable truth of its adhesion to objective logics of structural and systematic inequality. It behooves the sociologist of art to shine a light into the murky waters of artistic fields to show what really guides them, to reveal the hidden depths of inequality in what appear to be disinterested practices and to demonstrate how power relations in such fields fulfil a grander role of hardening structures of social and cultural inequality at large.²³

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

This idea begins to branch off into discussions of whether there is such a thing as a “pure work,” but that is best saved for another time.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. 124-125.

For the purposes of this research, what can be seen in collegiate music study is the engaging in educational and creative processes that are almost exclusively informed by the internal history – that is, pedagogy, style, and taste – of Western art music with somewhat less regard for other traditions of music. There is a level of reproduction of the indoctrination of rhetoric taking place with limitations placed on what is considered correct and artistic. Distinctions between what is typically considered to be legitimate art in music and other musical traditions can be seen to uphold the systems of power – such as, sales, dissemination, and media attention – present in the musical realm.²⁴ The ways in which musical objects are talked about, produced, taught, marketed, and consumed all afford varying degrees of what Bourdieu calls “cultural capital.”

This is mostly because access to live performance of musical works, quality education, and venue is primarily limited to those with means. However, it seems that at some point, value is assigned by those with high social status because it is “supposed” to be assigned in a particular way. Beethoven and Bach compositions are art music because one has been educated – to one degree or another – that they are, when there is music not considered to be art music that is of equal value. While focusing on what Bourdieu calls “legitimate culture”²⁵ – as characterized by recognizable pieces from the Western canon – he does not consider music of the latter half of the 20th century that is categorized as part of the art music lineage or that of popular or folk music. Bourdieu instead keeps a narrower focus on the appreciation of more mainstream and conventional mediums of “classical” music.

²⁴ These distinctions are not derived solely from societal power agendas.

²⁵ Prior, Nick. “Critique and Renewal in the Sociology of Music: Bourdieu and Beyond.” *Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 121–38. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5e6b543d-f6f4-3566-9333-b0da47d06a57>. 126.

In a review essay about Bourdieu's "*Distinction*", Graham Murdock neatly summarizes the theoretical content of the book and clarified that cultural capital is more about the educational and social status rather than one of economic capital. The means to acquire cultural capital to any measurable degree frequently necessitates a position within a higher economic class, although a position with higher socio-economic status does not equate to having good "taste."²⁶ Nick Prior reinforces this reading of *Distinction* by noting that Bourdieu seems to believe that music is "a relational set of objects bound to logics of social differentiation."²⁷

Musical taste engages in social psychology; influencing how one perceives themselves and others while making judgements of value, a point which Adam Lonsdale investigates in his work "Musical Taste, In-Group Favoritism, and Social Identity Theory: Re-testing the Predictions of the Self-Esteem Hypothesis."²⁸ He outlines how musical taste acts as a sort of signifier of membership and that one will perceive others with the same musical tastes in a better light than those whose tastes differ. These value judgements have the potential to transform musical quality into the judgements of social value among people. Those with greater exposure or performance experience of "great works" from the high culture of Western canon are equated with having positive qualities or ethos,²⁹ while those who engage in lower culture are deemed

²⁶ Murdock, Graham. "Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 16, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 63–65.

<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=efaf8fec-01bf-3f47-97ae-adf12abcc738>. 64.

²⁷ Prior, Nick. "Critique and Renewal in the Sociology of Music: Bourdieu and Beyond." *Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 121–38. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5e6b543d-f6f4-3566-9333-b0da47d06a57>. 126.

²⁸ Lonsdale, Adam J. "Musical Taste, in-Group Favoritism, and Social Identity Theory: Re-Testing the Predictions of the Self-Esteem Hypothesis." *Psychology of Music* 49, no. 4 (July 1, 2021): 817–27.

<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d36831c4-8e96-3a92-8cd9-401834953171>.

²⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste / Pierre Bourdieu; Translated by Richard Nice*. Harvard University Press, 1984. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=82fc1920-3f7b-3f5b-8e57-e9869d29e886>.

lacking in strong social qualities³⁰ from the perspective of high culture and class. This sort of system of meaning only acts as a means for perpetuating inequality.³¹ The social psychology of musical taste is also explored by Adam Lonsdale in “The Social Psychology of Music and Musical Taste.” He posits that taste in the context of music is a “sociocultural construct”³² which influences the interactions between groups of people.

MARKETING

There are many elements to music marketing, and it is truly an entire industry including such things as recording, production, and promotion of a product. In some cases, the product might be the recording or even digital reproductions of instrument sounds,³³ while in the instance of this study, the product is the strings used to produce the musician’s desired aesthetic based on the instrument’s characteristics. For a classical violinist this will often mean adjusting the instrument and its accessories to achieve the desired sound as determined by the predominant cultural values of taste and one’s own creative persona.

While there exists a great deal of literature on the subjects of marketing popular music or using music as a marketing device, there is very little accessible research into how music *accessories* are being sold to musicians. Companies use aural music as a marketing tool to

³⁰ Murdock, Graham. “Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 16, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 64.

<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=efaf8fec-01bf-3f47-97ae-adf12abcc738>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Lonsdale, Adam J. “The Social Psychology of Music and Musical Taste.” 2009.

<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=9b60edfc-871a-3d9c-be0e-db8bd9f85472>.

³³ Buhler, James. “Blank Music: Marketing Virtual Instruments.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Advertising. Series: Oxford Handbooks*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY, U.S.A, 2021. Pages: 93-118.

<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=01d76134-0fb5-3391-ab86-3edcc9fdb91b>.

convey the cultural meanings embedded in that music and transfer those same meanings onto their product.³⁴ When the product is itself a musical object, as in the case of violin strings, it is then that the language used to advertise said product conveys those implied meanings.³⁵

In an article contained within *The Routledge Companion to Consumer Behavior* titled “The Influence of Marketing Language on Brand Attitudes and Choice,”³⁶ authors Ruth Pogacar, Tina Lowrey, and L. J. Shrum examine the means with which marketers communicate with the intended consumers. They explain that one may appeal to the emotions, rationality, and aesthetic of the consumer in order to persuade them to purchase the product. In these appeals, the authors claim that subtext plays an important role in word choice.

To this point, the unacknowledged bias in language use can hold implied meanings without being explicitly stated. Research by Kristen Hourigan into the marketing language used for McDonald’s Happy Meals showed significant differences in the supposed mental and physical abilities between boys and girls.³⁷ While this may not seem immediately relevant to a study in the marketing of violin strings, it nonetheless provides insight into the cultural values being communicated through marketing to children. Hourigan argues that the almost subliminal

³⁴ Brodsky, Warren. “Developing a Functional Method to Apply Music in Branding: Design Language-generated Music.” *Psychology of Music* 39, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 261-83.

<https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=a81c8be8-9a06-3365-a438-e6e95f809422>.

For example, in a commercial for the 2022 Infiniti QX60 a youth orchestra is performing Richard Strauss’ *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, but the performance is not perfect. The mother inside the car at the center of the stage then rolls up the windows and blocks out all sound allowing her to take a nap. The scene then cuts to the car moving down the road while a recording of a professional orchestra performing the same piece is heard in the background. The use of this piece connotes the idea of an epic event and therefore that this car is also epic.

³⁵ This study does not take variables such as the graphic design of labels, brand name, or celebrity endorsement into account.

³⁶ Pogacar, Ruth, Tina M. Lowrey, and L. J. Shrum. “The Influence of Marketing Language on Brand Attitudes and Choice.” In *The Routledge Companion to Consumer Behavior*, 263–75. 711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017: Routledge, 2018. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=a7b98578-f924-3b96-8e53-cf0828b7d36f>.

³⁷ Hourigan, Kristen Lee. “Girls Try, Boys Aim High: Exposing Difference in Implied Ability, Activity, and Agency of Girls Versus Boys in Language on McDonald’s Happy Meal Boxes.” *Sex Roles* 84, no. 7/8 (April 1, 2021): 377-91. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=80461e29-02fc-3cd0-9d41-4b237d064771>.

messaging serves to continue gendered stereotypes and strengthens the gap in privilege, as well as perceived and actual power, between men and women; to say nothing of how the complexity of the gender spectrum factors into the issue.

Gender in music is already a complex issue but bears consideration as a possible marketing tool in the language used. Ruth Pogacar researched the way in which the complexity and processing of marketing language influenced brand loyalty. In her research she found that brands with a feminine gender implied warmth and produced more customer loyalty than comparable brands with a masculine implication. She does point out that this advantage of products with feminine names decreases when the average user is male or utilitarian.³⁸ This could lead to interesting research into how gender is perceived and acted out in music, and how it relates to the marketing of music-making products, but is largely outside the range of the current study.

STRINGS

Changing strings is a regular part of violin maintenance, but also can alter the sound produced depending on several variables and their interactions in each line or brand of strings. Such things as length, gauge, core and winding materials, and tension have the capability of

³⁸ Pogacar, Ruth, Tina M. Lowrey, and L. J. Shrum. "The Influence of Marketing Language on Brand Attitudes and Choice." In *The Routledge Companion to Consumer Behavior*, 263–75. 711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017: Routledge, 2018. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=a7b98578-f924-3b96-8e53-cf0828b7d36f>. This study gathered data using brand names, both real and hypothetical, in order to determine if brand loyalty is based on the linguistic features of the name in question. An example taken from the study would propose a consumer searching for a sneaker from one company called Nimeld and another called Nimilia. The user is taken through a series of statements for which they rate their level of agreement. For this study, women's sneakers with a feminine sounding name performed 1.3 times better than those with masculine sounding names. This advantage was decreased for men's sneakers where those with feminine names performed only 1.04 times better than those with masculine names.

Ruth Pogacar et al., "Is Nestlé a Lady? the Feminine Brand Name Advantage" (*Journal of Marketing* 85, no. 6, November 2021), last modified November 2021, accessed July 9, 2022, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022242921993060>.
https://osf.io/ekq2h/?view_only=8bc3e931655e4000b548d92129083404.

interacting with the instrument in different ways. As a beginner, students are generally told which strings to buy, and it is only after they progress to a certain level that the choice becomes more independent. This can be a rather daunting task as there are many options for strings and they can be a significant investment. Due to the price of strings, violinists who are purchasing new strings have the potential to become “stuck” with that set, if it does not produce the anticipated sound, until it is time to change strings again: on average anywhere between nine and twelve months.³⁹

In order to aid violinists in this process, Richard Ward wrote an article in *Strings* wherein he says that the first step in choosing strings is to understand the current sonic character of the instrument and the sort of adjustments one might want to make.⁴⁰ For an instrument that has been correctly adjusted, the next step is comparing the different available strings. A search for strings leads one through a maze of variables such as the core, winding, tension, gauge, and the character or profile of these strings, which Ward describes in some detail. Ward also takes care to point out that the musician’s unique body chemistry – the acidity or alkalinity or one’s perspiration – will play a role in the choice of strings as the strings may corrode.

Since this information is rather complex, some online retailers such as Shar Music provide visual information on a sliding scale from *warm* to *brilliant* and from *subtle* to *direct* with the string’s placement on the slide indicating relative tonal quality. The following example

³⁹ “When to Change Violin Strings,” *When to Change Violin Strings | Johnson String Instrument*, accessed June 23, 2022, <https://www.johnsonstring.com/resources/when-to-change-violin-strings/>.

⁴⁰ Ward, Richard. "A Guide to Choosing the Right Violin Strings." *Strings*, 10 (2012): 49-54. <https://wvu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/guide-choosing-right-violin-strings/docview/1039137265/se-2?accountid=2837>.

of a “String Profile” is taken from sharmusic.com and their listing for the *Pirastro Obligato* violin strings.⁴¹

Figure 1.1: “String Profile”



When examining the descriptions of string sets, however, the primary indicator for the quality and performance of the product is in the language used. The descriptions for the sets use very creative and artistic language, making generalized claims about how these strings respond and sound. Drawing from the example above, the description for this set uses these adjectives to attempt to describe the sound produced when using these strings: warm, sonorous, rich, impressive, dynamic, great, and excellent.⁴² A very interesting aspect to consider here is that language, even within a specific context, is highly subjective and prone to change based on the current market.⁴³

When one enters the Western art music world, one goes through the process of language acculturation; assimilating words and phrases of how to talk about music.⁴⁴ In his research on

⁴¹ “Pirastro Obligato Violin Set - Ball e - Aluminum d - 4/4 Size - Medium,” *Shar Music*, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.sharmusic.com/Pirastro-Obligato-Violin-Set-Ball-E-Aluminum-D-4-4?quantity=1>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Ian Inglis presents the way language indicates status or power among members of performing groups in his article “The Politics of Nomenclature.” He presents the notion that not only do labels influence the interactions between musicians, but they also shape the way consumers assess relative musical value.

Inglis, Ian. “The Politics of Nomenclature.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 3-17. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=aaf2c002-7a19-35be-aef6-5b2b4fc491b8>.

⁴⁴ This is different from enculturation which is the process of learning one’s own culture. Acculturation is the adoption of another culture.

aesthetic language, concepts, and enculturation, Adam Croom argues that not only the learning, but also the *application* of aesthetic language is based in the enculturation process. By essentially being immersed in musical culture, one learns to make sense of things and speak of them in an aesthetic context; and the use of such language serves to express certain attitudes.⁴⁵ These attitudes will reflect the tastes and values of the culture being assimilated. Looking at the adjectives used to describe the strings, it may be possible to quantify the aesthetic values attached to the violin within Western art music.⁴⁶

In some ways it would be much simpler to understand the sonic properties of strings if there was some standardization of the language employed. All the variables listed above have the potential to be measured in a more scientific way. Norman Pickering, an acoustician who studied the output of strings, wrote extensively on the subject to provide a greater understanding of how strings are made and how sound is produced.⁴⁷ However, his pursuit of a standardization of objective measurements is not easily accessible or understandable by the layperson without training as an engineer or physicist.⁴⁸

Across the literature there seems to be a common thread that acknowledges the existence of a Western art music sound for the violin. The pursuit of this sound is reinforced through pedagogic practice which has the potential to quash legitimate creative endeavors (even while

⁴⁵ Croom, Adam M. "Aesthetic Concepts, Perceptual Learning, and Linguistic Enculturation: Considerations from Wittgenstein, Language, and Music." *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science* 46, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 90–117. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=df124b34-2a0d-3ff6-8561-39bd7faffbd2>.

⁴⁶ This approach does not account for the differences in aesthetic priorities generated from solo, chamber, or orchestral playing. It also does not account for string preference based on education or regional differences.

⁴⁷ Pickering, Norman C. "Problems in String Making." *CAS Journal (Series II)* 2, no. 3 (January 1, 1993): 1–4. <https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=fdbdd7a3-8811-3fad-af26-58f8537900ed>.

⁴⁸ The problem of accessibility and cross-field utilization of Pickering's work is a concern noted by Murray Campbell in his review of Pickering's book *The Bowed String*. Campbell, Murray. "Review of *The Bowed String: Observations on the Design, Manufacture, Testing, and Performance of Strings for Violins, Violas and Cellos* by Norman C. Pickering." *The Galpin Society Journal* 49 (1996): 231–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/842410>.

channeling undisciplined flailing) in favor of recreating a performance of a piece of music. This is not to say that pursuit of reproducing the Western aesthetic is wrong, rather, that other aesthetics might be just as valuable. The cultural capital associated with privilege in studying classical music tends to exclude other musical traditions from consideration as legitimate art. It is because of this that strings for the violin – based on the sample for this study – are marketed using language which implies aesthetic qualities in line with Western art music values. Since language is highly subjective and suggestive, and since the accuracy of aesthetic claims made in advertisements has not necessarily been verified, there is a need for standardization of terminology.

This is not to suggest that aesthetic descriptions of sound ought to be thrown out altogether (although it is one of the goals of this paper to scrutinize their hidden biases), rather that understanding the empirical side may help string players to choose the best strings to match their aesthetic preferences. String manufacturers could attach empirical information to the language used in their advertisements⁴⁹ where, for example, a *warm* string would have a measurement of average sonic output on a given instrument.⁵⁰ The education in physics or engineering may not be feasible for all violinists, but at the very least, the objective information on the sonic output of strings could be made more accessible. If language could be standardized and attached to concrete data, it would be shifted away from culture taste and implied meanings toward an empirical approach that enables violinists to focus on the optimization of their

⁴⁹ Empirical information alone may not appeal to all consumers and so it is proposed that it should be used in combination with the aesthetic descriptions already in use.

⁵⁰ This is where large-scale implementation becomes difficult. Since language is subjective, each musician may have a different notion of what something such as “warm” might mean. A great deal of measurement on many instruments and with input from a large body of observers could strengthen the correlation.

instrument toward their preferred acoustic aesthetic, however unconforming that aesthetic might be.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

This chapter will provide an outline and discussion of the research methods employed to address the questions posed by the study. The first part of the research conducted is primarily rooted in the positivist model for data interpretation: relying on quantitative data from my sources to draw conclusions. The second part of the study relies on the interpretivist model to assign qualitative values to the data previously collected in the first part of the study and subjectively interpret the meaning of the language present. It is important to note that due to the quantity of strings and instruments for which they are intended, this study will deal with violin strings only. The ultimate aim of this research is to determine if language in the marketing of these strings is used to imply subjective values that are in favor of the Western art music aesthetic and culture. The price of the sets of strings is often indicative of the internal systems of value within classical music as evidenced by the words used to describe them and the ability to purchase them as individual strings, in a set, or multiple sets at once.

In order to understand the intended consumer of the product, I chose to look at a variety of strings available at a select few online retailers. Those used for this study were chosen as a representative sample from the many options available (The websites and their web addresses may be found in **Table 2.1**). Shar Music was chosen as it is more of a specialty store catering to private students and their parents and/or instructors. It offers itself as a sort of “one stop shop” for orchestral string needs with a focus on the classical music tradition. Woodwind & Brasswind (WWBW) is used primarily by educational institutions for both orchestral and band ensembles, thus making it an important contributor to this study. In contrast, Amazon was chosen due to its reputation as a more budget-friendly alternative to online specialty stores. Finally, Just Strings was considered because – as the name implies – it is an online store for strings. This website was

chosen as it caters to a more diverse consumer base with strings and accessories for instruments and styles outside of the Western art music tradition.

The first site visited was that of Shar Music (hereon referred to as Shar) for the simple reason that it was the first one thought of from my own string purchasing experiences. While on the site, I looked through the product menus and found that Shar offered such products as orchestral string instruments, guitars, and instrument accessories to players ranging “from beginners to seasoned professionals.”⁵¹ From this statement, it was assumed that the instruments and, more relevant to my purposes, the strings would be diverse in their supposed quality.

I entered a search specifically for violin strings available as a set in any price range. This particular choice was made because of the high degree of variability in purchasing options for strings. It is possible to purchase strings singly or in recommended sets and there are multitudes of tensions and materials for sets that are marketed as the same brand. By narrowing the search parameters to complete sets, it was much simpler to then go through the entire selection,⁵² where I took note of the manufacturer, specific brand, the price of each set, and the adjectives used to describe the strings in question, some of which required the omission of conjunctions and reclassification of phraseology (the full list of which may be found in **Table 2.2**). The process for gathering information on this site was then replicated with the others so as to maintain the same set of conditions and variables.

The next website considered was Woodwind & Brasswind (WWBW), a supplier of instruments and accessories for educational institutions. The violin string offerings on this site

⁵¹ “The Premier String Instruments Shop Online,” *Shar Music*, accessed July 14, 2022, <https://www.sharmusic.com/>.

⁵² Without narrowing the search, the listing included individual strings which contained the same description. By limiting my parameters to include only sets of strings, the data was consolidated.

were more numerous and diverse than those found on Shar. While the previous site offered some strings intended for beginners, WWBW had more variety of strings that catered specifically to those seeking a lower price point while also offering price matching with other retailers.

The next retailer explored was Amazon.com,⁵³ whose self-proclaimed focus is “to be Earth’s most customer-centric company” and servicing of “customer obsession.”⁵⁴ The free shipping for Prime members and the generally lower prices of items through this company seems to have made it into a serious competitor against specialized retailers of music and other merchandise. This website seemed to offer the widest selection at a price that was lower than that of the other merchants thus far examined.

One common argument against Amazon, however, is that there is no guarantee that the product advertised and ordered will be the one received. This risk tends to be mitigated by Amazon’s customer service in such matters, and with their lower price point, Prime membership shipping, and the fact that some of their suppliers include such companies as Shar Music, Amazon is a legitimate option for the purchase of strings and other instrument accessories.

When I visited the Just Strings website, I was impressed with the incredible assortment of string instruments beyond orchestral strings and guitars to which they cater. The list of instruments was front and center on the main page with a high number of folk or “world” instruments for which they provide strings. Instead of having to use a search function to find violin strings, I simply selected the instrument from the previously mentioned list. I was redirected to the page for that instrument, at the top of which there was a brief description of how

⁵³ Note: this is the URL for those using Amazon from the United States.

⁵⁴ “Who We Are: Amazon,” *US About Amazon* (US About Amazon, September 18, 2020), last modified September 18, 2020, accessed February 9, 2022, <https://www.aboutamazon.com/about-us>.

to navigate the offerings of the site with a small notational hyperlink indicating that one may also accomplish the same by going to the Fiddle page. Below this description was a list of string brands and the associated logos which the consumer could click on to see strings offered from each of those companies.

One other feature unique to this site was a relatively brief history of the violin and other related string instruments. The site described the evolution of strings for the instrument, changes made to the violin, and the variety of musical contexts within which it may function. It provided useful information on the sizing information for violins and how to interpret that information when seeking to purchase strings. I found this particularly appealing as it did not presume the level of consumer knowledge and presented said information in a manner considerate of novices and initiates alike.

While looking for violin strings on Just Strings I was particularly interested in the fact that the violin and fiddle were listed as separate instruments on the home page as it is generally understood within the classical realm that the difference between a violin and a fiddle is one of methodology and style. This seemed to indicate a sensitivity to consumer background by using the instrument name with which players of different traditions would be most familiar. While initially this line of inquiry may seem tangential to the primary research, it is actually relevant, as the purpose of this study is to view marketing of strings to determine whether language is being used as an exclusionary tool by establishing and differentiating values of music standard. Having already collected information on violin string offerings, I then returned to previously viewed websites to search again, this time for fiddle strings.

A search for “fiddle strings” on Shar yielded only violin methods and fiddle tune books, thus demonstrating not only the aforementioned understanding of the instrument, but also

highlighting the hierarchical separation between Western art music and fiddle/folk music. Specifically, this seems to imply that fiddle or folk music does not have its own technique worthy of an independent method and is rather only a type of repertoire: “fiddle tunes.” The results on Amazon reinforced this concept as a search for “fiddle strings” automatically corrected to “violin strings.” On WWBW the same search brought up a “fiddle outfit,” several books of fiddle tunes – one of which was “Fiddle Tunes for the Violinist” – and just one set of strings. This set has minimal descriptive information only claiming that it is “a perfect choice for musicians of every style.”⁵⁵ The lack of information in combination with the classification as “fiddle” strings seems to imply that fiddle players have no concern as to the quality of strings or implied tonal production, although there are certainly other possibilities. For example, the lack of information may reflect a lack of specific feedback on the strings. Finally, I returned to Just Strings where I found that the brands specifically offering fiddle strings by set were far less numerous. Here, just as on the violin page, Just Strings provided a brief description of the fiddle and the strings offered. The difference highlighted between the violin and fiddle was the method of playing. The difference between the strings described classical violin strings as warm while fiddle strings are bright.

At this point, having collected my data, I set about the process of analysis. Since the focus of this study is on the language being used, I wanted to see the frequency of adjective usage. To do this I went to wordclouds.com, a free website for creating word clouds. I extracted the adjectives and reclassified phrases found on retailer websites and put them into a list which the website then processed to generate the word cloud (see Graphic 1.1). Words were sized in the

⁵⁵ “Black Diamond Silver-Plated Fiddle Strings,” *Woodwind & Brasswind*, accessed September 9, 2021, <https://www.wwbw.com/Black-Diamond-Silver-Plated-Fiddle-Strings-102862-10286200000000.wwbw?rNtt=fiddle+strings&index=2>.

graphic relative to the frequency of use,⁵⁶ but the initial results were somewhat difficult to interpret as multiple fonts were utilized and drew the eye differently. I therefore edited the fonts so that they were uniform and used a neutral shape for the layout. The graphic and word list were then downloaded for later reference.

By using a word cloud to view frequency, I planned to analyze the adjectives used to indicate relative priorities of musicians and teachers seeking to purchase strings. After all, what good is it to have a product if it does not appeal to consumer needs and priorities? Some product descriptions mentioned a specific target consumer by claiming that they were good for students or teachers, novices or professionals, or simply musicians of all levels of expertise.

More than this, I was interested in the potentially hidden meanings behind the adjectives used and so I codified each one using different systems such as gender, class, and quality. Here is where the interpretivist model truly comes into play as there is no universal system for coding of words in the English language, because language is so tightly tied up with culture. As a musician trained primarily in the Western art music canon, I recognized that my own biases would influence the outcome. However, it provides a basis for further exploration with a larger test group that is currently outside the scope of this research.

The first system coded for was gender by using the colors pink, blue, and yellow representing female, male, and neutral respectively. As previously mentioned, while English is not in itself a gendered language, the words were coded by means of conventional usage and cultural connotations. (For example, the word *warm* is typically associated with the feminine

⁵⁶ While interpreting the data, it may be important to note that, while some words or phrases could be interchangeable, I decided to stay as close to the original description as possible. For example, one string may be advertised as “affordable” while another as “budget-friendly” which, if reclassified using common terminology, this new word would appear more frequently than either of these terms on their own.

while *direct* is generally associated with the masculine). Each word was considered and assigned one of the above colors until the entire list was completed. When the coding was completed, the new word cloud was generated with the newly assigned colors showing alongside frequency. The process was then repeated to code for class and then again for quality, between which I downloaded the codified lists and graphics. In order to determine the implications of the adjectives used a new list was made which compiled the data and classifications of each word to check for correlation, the results of which are discussed in Chapter 3.

Limitations to the study include the possibility of gathering further information by looking at strings created for orchestral instruments other than the violin. Due to the properties and usages of each instrument, there would be a greater variety of marketing language based on the values and concerns associated with the performance goals of each instrument and musician. Taking it even further, one could consider a larger test sample for the single strings themselves. There are multitudes of materials and tensions even between individual strings marketed under the same label. One could reasonably assume that such variances would alter the sonic capabilities of the string, yet that is not addressed when only considering sets. It would also be worthwhile to determine whether the target consumer is male or female (based on whether the violin is played more by males or females) as this could also be a source of biased language.

CHAPTER 3: DATA

The use of language is highly subjective, and the meanings drawn from it are often the result of enculturation. For this reason, the codification of the words by class, quality, and gender was also subjective and therefore arguably somewhat arbitrary. In some instances, words clearly suggested a link with higher class values and sensibilities, with the inverse being the case for words associated with lower class status. However, in some cases the meaning was more obscure, yet indicated the presence of an “other.” By then codifying the “other” word by its meanings at multiple levels, it was then possible to go back and do the same for the original word.⁵⁷ By examining the word clouds and word classifications, it may be possible to determine an intended consumer and supposed values of sound.

Figure 3.1: Socioeconomic Class Word Cloud



⁵⁷ Due to the highly subjective nature of interpreting language and for the sake of brevity, the full reasoning for the codification of each word will not be discussed. However, as an example of the process for gender codification, the word “warm” is generally associated with other feminine qualities such as being nurturing, kind, loving, and passionate. This is set against the traditionally masculine qualities of being cold, dispassionate, and unemotional. The word “brilliant” implies charisma which I have generally associated with the masculine and is in opposition to the word “bright” which might imply being more effervescent and therefore, feminine. The word “responsive” did not stand out as either strongly masculine or feminine and so was categorized as neutral.

The first set of classifications for consideration is based on socio-economic class.⁵⁸ In this word cloud adjectives were coded according to the implied socioeconomic class; words that coded for a higher class were colored yellow and those suggesting a lower class were colored blue. At first glance, the most prevalent color is yellow while words colored blue are rather sparse. Additionally, the most frequently used words – as indicated by relative size – are primarily yellow with a few blue words in the mix.

In the following table the top twelve most frequently used words are presented along with their frequency of use and the assigned class status. By examining the word usage by class, the overwhelming majority indicated upper class values or priorities of sound. Of the 134 individual words used, only 33 of these pointed to lower class considerations while 101 were directed at the upper class. In looking at the frequency of use of words, even among the top 12 as seen in the table below, those most used were in favor of the upper class.

Table 3.1: Socioeconomic Class (Upper/Lower)

Word	Frequency (<i>f</i>)	Socioeconomic Class
Warm	28	Upper
Brilliant	24	Upper
Stable	20	Upper
Responsive	20	Upper
Clear	20	Upper
Easy	19	Lower
Rich	17	Upper
Excellent	17	Upper
Durable	16	Lower
Quick	15	Lower
Powerful	15	Upper
Focused	12	Upper

⁵⁸ While data was gathered on the price of each set of strings, using this as a means for classifying words is too far outside the scope of this study. For example, a brand of strings may have variations such as the winding material, tension, or tail-piece fitting. Despite these variations, the brand is still the same, as is the general product description for that brand.

The dichotomy between student and professional is evident in the way that language indicates either high or low quality. Looking at the tables one can see the high priority on using language to make a particular string stand out on the basis of quality. Of the of the 134 distinct words or phrases used, 93 of them suggest that the strings are quite good and therefore the sound produced would be similarly good. On the other hand, 41 words were coded as lower quality. This brings up the question however of just what is the nature of a “good sound.”

In this instance it is especially important to consider the frequency of use, as 86.1% of the top 12 terms implied higher quality strings. However, when taking each word on its own, the percentage of higher quality coded words from the total of 134 drops significantly to 69%. Considering the frequency of the entire list, the percentage comes to just a little above the average of the two at 78.7%.

Table 3.3: Quality (High/Low)

Word	Frequency	Quality
Warm	28	High
Brilliant	24	High
Stable	20	High
Responsive	20	High
Clear	20	High
Easy	19	High
Rich	17	High
Excellent	17	High
Durable	16	Low
Quick	15	Low
Powerful	15	High
Focused	12	High

Table 3.4: Percentage of Usage

Quality	Top 12	All Words (134)	Top 12 by <i>f</i>	All Words by <i>f</i> (540)
High	83%	69%	86.1%	78.7%
Low	17%	31%	13.9%	21.3%

viewed, those which have been feminine-coded are on average 13.73% less frequently used than those which have been coded as neutral. This suggests that feminine qualities are less desirable or marketable than masculine or neutral qualities.⁶⁰

Table 3.5: Gender (N/F/M)

Word	Frequency	Gender
Warm	28	Feminine
Brilliant	24	Masculine
Stable	20	Masculine
Responsive	20	Neutral
Clear	20	Masculine
Easy	19	Masculine
Rich	17	Masculine
Excellent	17	Neutral
Durable	16	Masculine
Quick	15	Neutral
Powerful	15	Masculine
Focused	12	Masculine

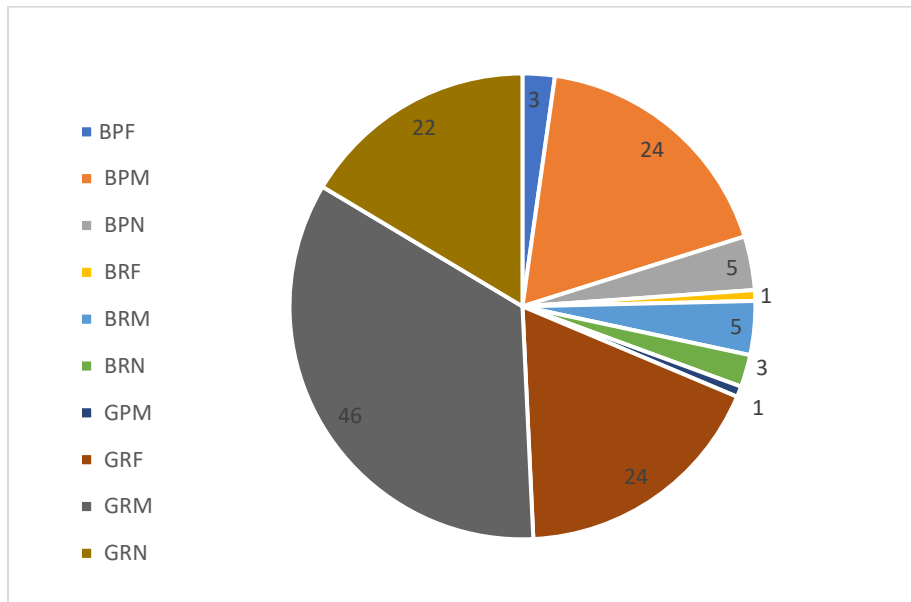
Table 3.6: Percentage of Usage

Quality	Top 12	All Words (134)	Top 12 by <i>f</i>	All Words by <i>f</i> (540)
Neutral	25%	22%	23.32%	120 (18.89%)
Feminine	8.3%	21%	12.56%	125 (23.15%)
Masculine	66.7%	57%	64.12%	295 (57.96%)

The next step following the evaluation of each variable on its own was to determine areas of overlap. Taking each word and consolidating the three categories and their subcategories resulted in ten broader classifications for the adjectives. In the chart below, the combinations of variables present are listed on the left while the number of words that fall into that category are illustrated on the right.

⁶⁰ Data concerning the gender of actual consumers was not examined for the study at this time.

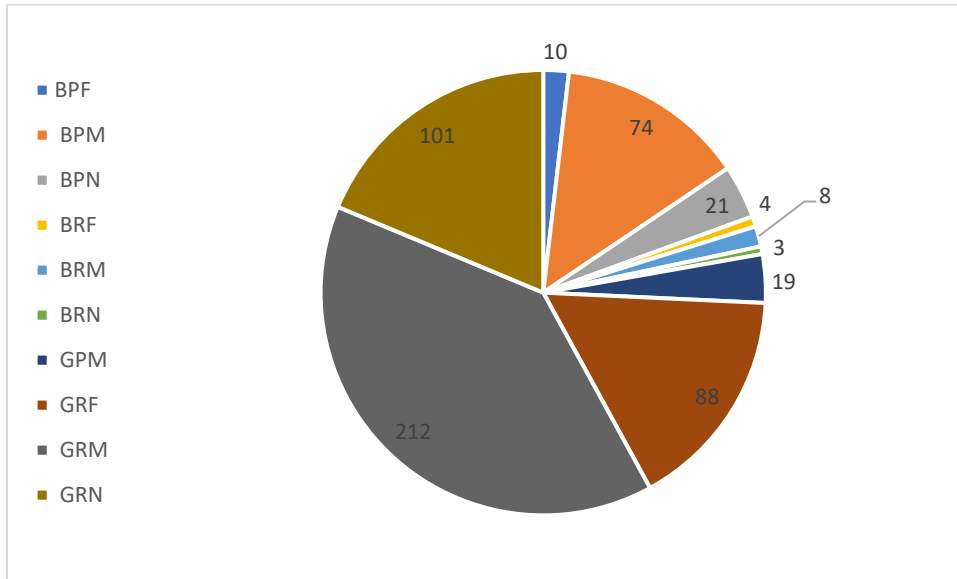
Figure 3.4: Intersection of Codifications



The codifications were simplified for this portion of the data with the letters in the new category representing quality (Good/Bad), class (Rich/Poor), and gender (Masculine/Feminine/Neuter) respectively. For each, the first letter of the simplified codification was used. Here it can be seen that the largest single category of adjectives (GRM) implied high quality, the upper class, and masculinity.

Taking frequency of usage into account in the following chart, it is clear that the same category (GRM) accounted for 212 of the 540 total instances of adjective use: more than double that of the next largest category (GRN) and nearly thrice that of the third largest (GRF). While it came as no surprise that the majority of words would imply good quality and upper-class sensibilities, it is interesting to note the evident preference of neutrality over femininity and the even greater preference for masculinity over that. This is evidenced by the fourth largest category (BPM), where the quality of masculinity is so preferable that it is grouped with the less-desirable traits of low quality and low social class.

Figure 3.5: Categorized Adjectives by Frequency



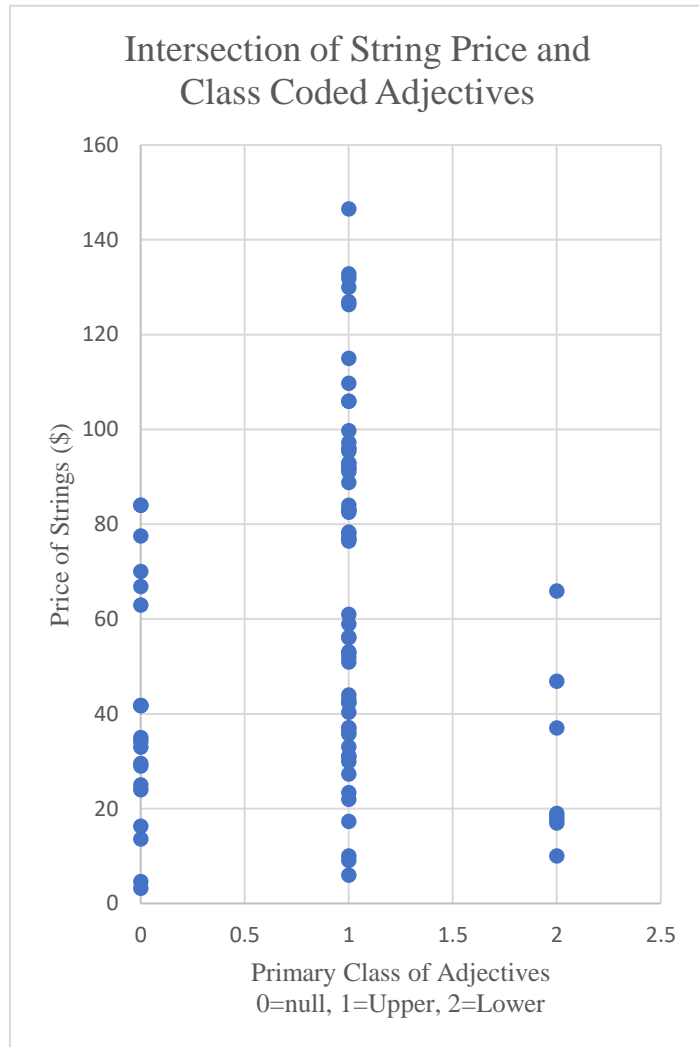
Now that the adjectives have been fully codified, it is possible to examine their applied use in the advertisement of strings. The process was a bit more difficult considering that there is no apparent standardization of number of terms; some advertisements used close to 20 words while others used just 3. This being the case, the most frequently used qualification for a set was used as the representative on each of the three levels. The tables below illustrate the intersection of these values with the prices of string sets as advertised on retailer websites in the fall of 2021.⁶¹ For each of these tables the values were given numbers to allow for plotting the data.

In the instance of class, string sets which were primarily indicated as “upper class” were assigned as 1, with the “lower class” as 2. Some sets of strings did not have any data available, or the adjective codification came out equal (i.e., two words which indicated lower class and two

⁶¹ The retailers and specific strings viewed in this study are a snapshot of the general offerings, with the understanding that prices and availability is constantly fluctuating.

which indicated upper class). When this happened, results were regarded as null and entered in as 0.⁶²

Examining the chart below, it is easily seen that most string sets are coded as “upper class” based on the adjectives used in their advertisements. This should come as no surprise given the information previously discussed which showed that more than 75% of the adjectives coded for upper class. Looking at the price of string sets, those whose adjectives indicated lower class sensibilities remained well below \$80. Sets which were null in their adjective classification primarily were found at or under the \$40 mark with a few outliers between \$60 and \$80. While upper class implications can be seen across the entire price range, it is also the only class indicated for strings at a higher price point.



Taking this all together it seems that upper class sensibilities are being advertised across the board with the idea that such concerns apply to all regardless of actual class status. This is not to say that people do not themselves seek upward social mobility; rather, that class status is

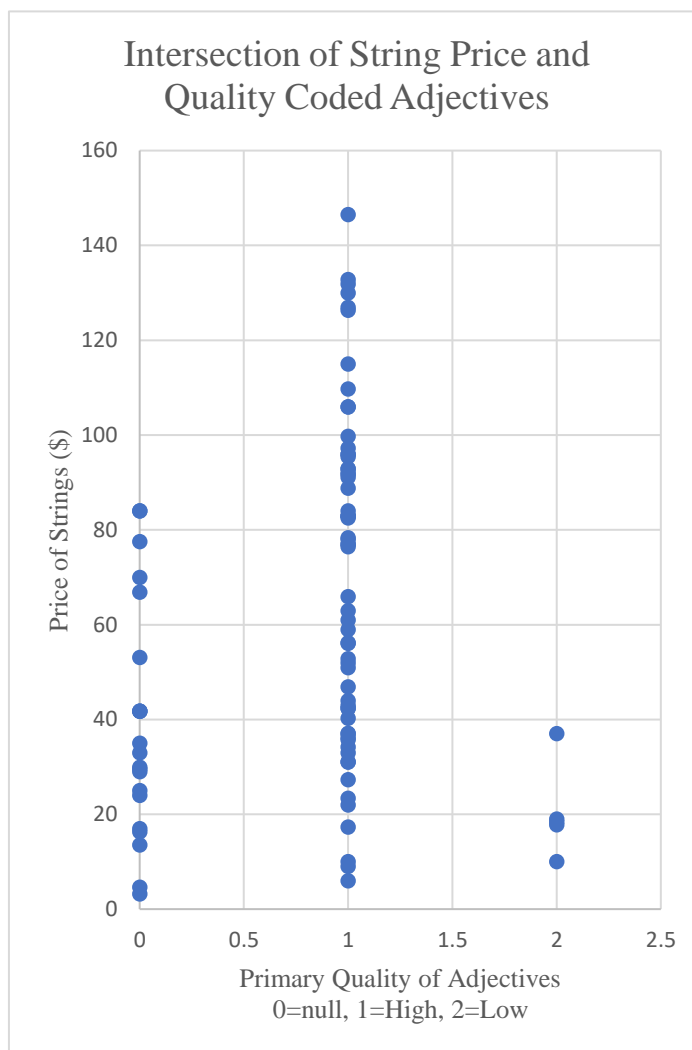
⁶² Each plot contains a legend under the x-axis.

laden with perceptions of relative ethos.⁶³ Along those lines, sets which primarily cater to lower-class concerns would have to be at a lower price point to allow access. This is not to say that concerns about stability, durability, and resistance to temperature and humidity are not applicable to the more expensive sets, only that the primary indication of class is not geared to such concerns. At some point the price is understood to be indicative of quality.

A similar trend is seen in the chart of price compared to the overall quality implications of adjectives for string sets. For this plot, a similar numerical system was applied to the majority of adjective type for each set of strings.

Those which primarily employed adjectives indicating higher quality were assigned as 1, those indicating lower quality were assigned as 2, and once again those without information or a clear majority were assigned as 0.

Looking at this chart it can be seen that the majority of string sets contain language that imply higher quality and are spread across the entire range of prices. The sets with adjectives primarily indicating lower quality are few and exclusively under the \$40 mark. Sets in which there was

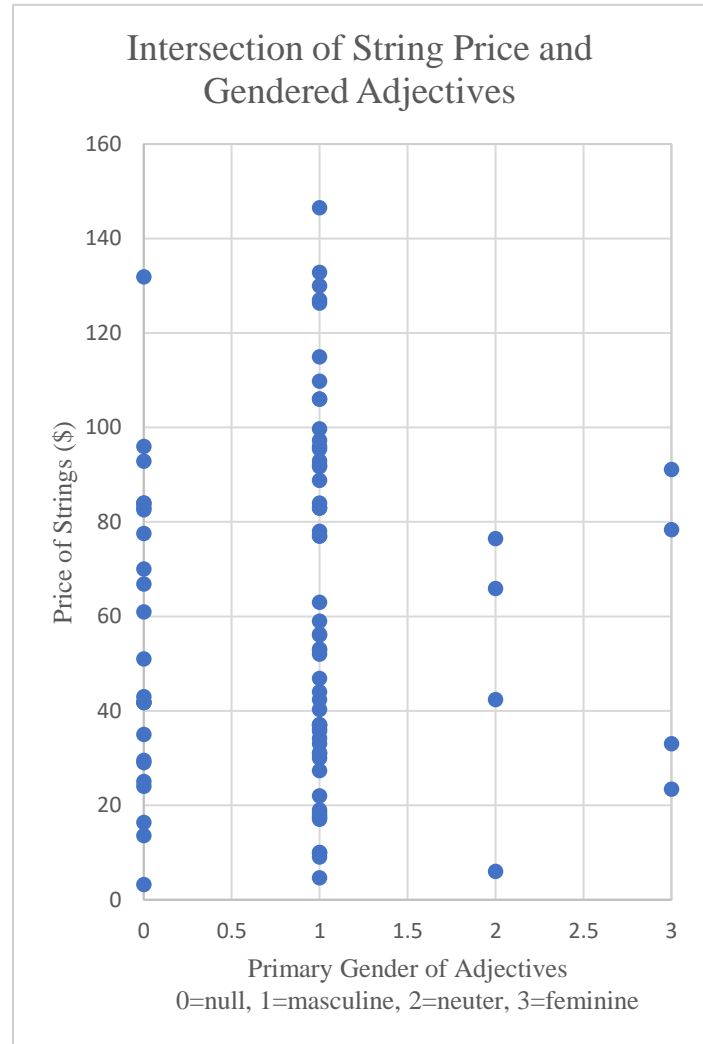


⁶³ This concept is discussed on page 12.

no clear leading adjective type are more frequent, but there is also a cutoff point in price around the \$80 mark. String sets above this price are exclusively dominated by adjectives implying high quality. Once again, this does not mean that no adjectives coded as low quality were used, only that most of the language for that set implied high quality.

An examination of the chart detailing how gendered adjectives are related to price once again demonstrates the trend of preference for masculine-coded words. For this chart each string set was examined and the number of words coding for each gender were counted. Then taking whichever was the majority as the primary signifier, was assigned a number. String sets with primarily masculine-coded language was assigned as 1, neuter as 2, and feminine as 3. As previously, sets with an equal number or missing that information were assigned as 0.

Given that the majority of words evaluated for this study were identified as masculine (57% see table for the Percentage of Usage for Gender) it is not surprising that these words are used most frequently in comparison to others across the variety of string sets. It is interesting, however, that once again there is a cutoff point around \$100 where



all save one string set above that mark use mostly masculine-coded adjectives. Very few sets – only 4 of each – employ predominantly feminine or neuter adjectives. The fact that the second largest grouping is that in which the numbers came out even suggests that feminine and neuter adjectives are equal to or less compelling than masculine words in their connotations of positive qualities.

Overall, the data presented here indicates a strong preference in favor of words that imply upper class, high quality, and masculine connotations. Although the English language is not a specifically gendered one in the way that Latin or Germanic languages are, it does seem that the adjectives used specifically in this cultural context promote a specific sound concept. This elusive concept of sound is not only coming across as desirable, but also by its nature has the potential to exclude other aesthetic concepts by the language.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Having now established the background for the research and concluded the gathering of data, it is now possible to draw the connections between the two. The general purpose of this study was to determine if the language used in the descriptions of violin strings pointed to a particular sound aesthetic. To accomplish this, a survey of strings from a selection of retailers was taken in which the price and descriptive language were noted. Adjectives were then categorized in three different ways by implied gender, socioeconomic class, and quality, and the trends for usage were analyzed.

When the adjectives were analyzed by these three aspects, the majority of words coded for masculine, upper class, and high quality.⁶⁴ Now, it is not surprising that words used in advertising would imply high quality; it is hardly likely that a retailer or manufacturer would promote any negative qualities of their strings. In fact, all the adjectives taken at face value sound like good things. This is the reason it was important to attempt to ascertain the hidden layers of meaning embedded in the context.

RESULTS

In looking at the intersections among adjectives by frequency of use, the top three categories each implied high quality and the upper class. Since this accounts for more than half of the adjectives used, it is then by the third category of gender that one is able to understand the priorities of the culture attached to these words. Of the 401 instances (out of 540 total) of use categorized as GR (good/rich), 212 of them were coded as masculine, 101 as neutral, and 88 as

⁶⁴ See Figure 3.4: Intersection of Codifications

feminine. This serves as a clear indication that the desired aesthetic is strongly associated with cultural perceptions of gender with feminine characteristics being marketed as less desirable.

One might argue that this preference for masculinity may be contextually associated with the upper class and high quality as is commonly understood in regard to gender roles. However, adjectives which coded for the opposite in terms of quality and class as BP (bad/poor) followed a similar trend. Of the 105 instances of BP coded words, 74 were coded as masculine, 21 as neutral, and a mere 10 as feminine. Thus, it is understood that even among words appealing to lower class and quality sensibilities, femininity is the less-desirable trait. It is important to note here that the trait of masculinity was not explicitly stated as desirable with the very notable exception of its presence within Mozart's *Treatise* where he states that one must "...take pains always to play with earnestness and *manliness*" (italics added).⁶⁵

A similar trend in priorities is seen when one looks at the way sets are primarily coded and the relation to price point. String sets priced above \$100 were almost exclusively classified as upper class, high quality, and masculine with one exception for gender where no information was given. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the language applied to these sets indicate more privileged concerns such as overall tonal nuance than those associated with lower price points (i.e., stability, durability, resistance to temperature/humidity). This does not mean that such concerns are no longer a factor for consumers of this level, but that such needs would be met since price is at a certain point assumed to be indicative of quality.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Mozart, Leopold. *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, trans. Editha Knocker (1948; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). 97.

It should be noted that this may not be the only mention of preference for the masculine within violin pedagogy. This example is to demonstrate the existence of this perspective as significant given its presence in a foundational text on the subject.

⁶⁶ UKEssays. "Price As A Quality Indicator Marketing Essay." November (2018). Accessed 1 April 2022. <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/marketing/price-as-a-quality-indicator-marketing-essay.php?vref=1>.

LIMITATIONS

This study, while covering a broad range of literature and analysis of strings available, is by no means exhaustive. Given the pervasiveness of music in culture, there is no shortage of analysis on the ways in which it influences and is influenced by said culture. As such, it is important to keep in mind that this study offers only a brief introduction to the larger topic of the classical violin as a symbol and vehicle of cultural taste.

The analysis of descriptive language was firstly limited by the number and type of retailers examined. This study exclusively considered only online retailers and then only a few which were spread across the spectrum of intended consumers. To gain more detailed information, one could draw from a larger sample size of online retailers. One might also expand the research to include other retail and marketing vehicles such as local music shops, music conferences with vendors, or advertisements in publications such as merchant catalogues or paid advertising space in magazines. It would also be worthwhile to examine the gender of marketing specialists, consumers, and violin instructors to determine how each of these affect the other.

Expanding on the point of retailer survey, this study took only websites geared toward American consumers into account. As such, the aesthetic priorities will necessarily be reflective of the musical hegemony in the US. One could examine how strings are described and marketed in other countries and on those websites, however, such an endeavor would be best suited to fluent or native speakers of those languages to fully grasp the subtext of descriptive language.

As regards the language used, this study was limited further by the availability of product descriptions. While each website offered a variety of strings, not every set of strings contained a description of the tonal aesthetic as evidenced by the “null” inputs in the charts on pages 36, 37,

and 38. To remedy this situation, one might find the same set of strings at a different retailer and use that information.

This study also does not attempt to evaluate the claims made in the product descriptions. Such an undertaking would come across some of the same complications as when investigating the retailer descriptions. For example, not every consumer will leave a review of the product, and those that do might only focus on the negative aspects. There is also the fact that since strings are mass produced, there are bound to be defective sets on occasion. Furthermore, as already discussed, language use is highly subjective and so product reviews are subject to the positionalities of consumers and their interpretation of the implied performance promises made by the descriptions.

In order to move away from the subjectivity of language and perception in music and the evaluation of sound characteristics, a move could be made toward a more objective measuring system of the sonic output of strings. Norman Pickering did engage in this work, but even then, was criticized for his use of language that was embedded in a different system from other engineers and physicists,⁶⁷ not to mention the difficulty with which musicians would be faced in trying to understand his work. It should be possible to measure the physical properties of strings and the sounds produced on a given instrument and thereby to attach specific language to measurable qualities of tone.

⁶⁷ Campbell, Murray. "Review of *The Bowed String: Observations on the Design, Manufacture, Testing, and Performance of Strings for Violins, Violas and Cellos* by Norman C. Pickering." *The Galpin Society Journal* 49 (1996): 231–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/842410>.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This chapter will conclude the study by synthesizing the research data and observations. There will be a brief summary of findings and their relation to the purpose of the study including further questions that have arisen and discoveries made. Value of findings and contribution to the field of study will also be evaluated. It will also provide further insight into the limitations of the study and offer other avenues of investigation for future research. In order to draw everything together, it would perhaps be helpful to restate the original intent of this study. The aim was to determine if language in the advertising of violin strings is acting as an exclusionary tool in favor of a Western art music “sound” produced by “classical” violinists.

In order to evaluate the language used in the advertisements, it was first necessary to set the foundation for understanding the cultural positioning and implications of the adjectives in use. Results indicate that the marketing of the violin sound is the product of careful cultivation by pedagogy that is primarily geared toward the study of Western art music. Therefore, the adjectives used reflected the timbral aesthetic of the Western art music tradition.

In the examination of actual advertising language, adjectives were evaluated from a representative sample of retailer websites and the string brands available there. The majority of adjectives used were subjectively found to be implying values aligning with masculinity, the upper class, and high quality. However, the lack of consistency in vocabulary and the absence of readily accessible objective measurements of the sonic properties of strings makes it extremely difficult to assess the claims made by retailers. Furthermore, each instrument and person is unique, with a plethora of other variables (such as instrument size, shape, age, rosin, bow hair,

tension, etc.), so that a set of strings that produces a certain tonal profile on one instrument, might produce a different one on another instrument.

This further demonstrates that the language used – which makes specific assertions regarding the sonic production of strings – is generalized and not necessarily accurate when applied to different instruments. It may be beneficial to provide musicians with information as to how the material, tension, and gauge of the string cause the sound to change by using neutral language. There has been some effort made to analyze the way strings vibrate and sound on instruments, but there is a distinct lack of substantiated data available to the public, let alone accessible to the lay person.

Unfortunately, the physical testing of strings was not feasible within the scope of this particular study but would be a possible avenue for further research. It may be possible with collaboration between musicians, physicists, and engineers to produce a means for physically measuring the sonic properties of strings on specific instruments. Through the testing of various strings and opening the research to a survey group, it may be possible to assign adjectives to specific measurements of sound and thereby eliminate a level of subjectivity and cultural bias. Furthermore, this testing could be applicable to musical traditions with a different aesthetic than that of the violin within Western art music, allowing string players to find a product that enables them to produce the timbral aesthetic of their tradition.

APPENDIX

Table 2.1

Website	Web Address
Shar Music	sharmusic.com
Woodwind & Brasswind	wwbw.com
Amazon	amazon.com
Just Strings	juststrings.com

Table 2.2

<i>f</i>	word/phrase	code
28	warm	grf
24	brilliant	grm
20	clear	grm
20	responsive	grn
20	stable	grm
19	easy	gpm
17	excellent	grn
17	rich	grm
16	durable	bpm
15	powerful	grm
15	quick	bpn
12	focused	grm
9	advanced	grm
9	complex	grf
8	bright	grn
8	perfect	grn
8	resistant	bpf
7	beautiful	grf
7	economical	bpm
7	fast	grn
7	flexible	grm
7	open	grm
6	affordable	bpm
6	dependable	bpm
6	exceptional	grm
6	expressive	grf
6	full	grn
6	good	grm
5	big	bpm
5	long lasting	bpm

5	round	grf
5	soft	grf
5	strong	bpm
5	superb	grm
5	unparalleled	grn
4	balanced	grm
4	effortless	grn
4	intense	brf
4	modern	grn
4	nuanced	grm
4	optimal	grm
4	outstanding	grm
3	dark	bpm
3	deep	bpm
3	direct	grm
3	great	grm
3	impressive	grm
3	lively	grn
3	mellow	grm
3	playable	bpn
3	popular	grf
3	pure	grf
3	quality	grn
3	smooth	grf
3	sonorous	grn
3	superior	grm
3	versatile	brm
2	broad	grf
2	colorful	grf
2	consistent	bpm
2	dynamic	grm

2	elastic	bpm
2	expansive	grm
2	favorite	grn
2	gentle	grf
2	low tension	grm
2	noble	grm
2	professional	grm
2	projecting	grm
2	resonant	grm
2	special	grn
2	subtle	grm
2	supple	grf
2	unique	grn
2	value	bpm
2	well balanced	brm
1	accessible	bpm
1	accurate	bpm
1	amazing	grn
1	attuned	grn
1	best	grm
1	budget	bpm
1	budget priced	bpm
1	classic	brm
1	clean	grn
1	delicate	grf
1	dense	bpm
1	diverse	brn
1	dramatic	grf
1	elegant	grf
1	enhanced	brm
1	enormous	grm

1	exquisite	grf
1	extraordinary	grm
1	fascinating	grn
1	full bodied	bpf
1	full tone	brn
1	golden	grn
1	highest level	grm
1	ideal	grm
1	identical	bpn
1	immediate	grm
1	incredible	grm
1	innovative	grm
1	large	brn
1	legendary	grm
1	light	grf

1	long lived	bpn
1	longevity	bpn
1	new	grn
1	non resistant	bpm
1	noticeable	grm
1	noticeable edge	grm
1	original	grm
1	pliable	bpm
1	power	brm
1	present	grm
1	refined	grf
1	reliable	bpm
1	resilient	bpm
1	robust	bpf

1	sensitive	grf
1	sophisticated	grf
1	state of the art	grm
1	step up	grm
1	sweet	grf
1	tender	grf
1	traditional	bpm
1	unbeatable	grm
1	uniform	bpm
1	unprecedented	grm
1	value priced	bpm
1	vibrant	grn
1	voluminous	grf

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