

Ditch the Stradivarius? New violins sound better: study

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Despite the lofty reputation of old violins by Italian masters such as Antonio Stradivari, blindfolded listeners in concert halls in New York and Paris say they preferred the sound of newer instruments.

The latest salvo in the long-running debate over which violins best project [sound](#) appeared Monday in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, a peer-reviewed US journal.

"Because Old Italian instruments are now priced beyond the reach of the vast majority of players, it seems important to test the fundamental assumption of their tonal superiority," said the study, led by Claudia Fritz, a researcher at France's National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS).

Stradivarius violins were made in the 17th and 18th centuries. Today, the instruments often fetch millions of dollars.

Experts say these antiques possess the curious ability to sound quieter under the player's ear, yet project sound farther and better in a concert hall than newer models.

So researchers asked musically versed listeners to compare three Stradivarius violins to three newer models, based on [listener](#) preference and sound projection.

One test was conducted in a 300-seat concert hall near Paris, involving 55 listeners. The second involved 82 listeners in an 860-seat hall in New York.

The instruments were played behind a screen by blindfolded soloists—sometimes with an orchestra, sometimes without.

"Regardless of musical experience, listeners preferred new over old violins and found that new violins projected sound better than old violins," concluded the study.

Both players and listeners were "unable to consistently distinguish new

from old violins," it added.

"Contrary to conventional wisdom and practice, soloists might benefit from playing new rather than old violins during auditions and competitions, provided the violins' provenance is shielded from the judges."

Two of the study's authors made a conflict of interest disclosure. One was employed by a studio that builds violins and violas, and other works for a company which manufactures orchestral strings.

A 2014 study based on 10 professional violinists also found that musicians—when they were unaware of which were old or new—preferred newer instruments.

After playing each instrument, first in a rehearsal room and later in a [concert hall](#), six chose new violins and four chose old ones.

More information: Claudia Fritz et al., "Listener evaluations of new and Old Italian violins," *PNAS* (2017).

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