

BUILD YOUR OWN FIDDLE, Lesson 1

Been thinking about replacing your old "violin" with a new one?

Since even the cheapest store-bought fiddle is probably not going to be as inexpensive as you might like, you might wish to consider creating one of your own. It's not as complicated as it might seem, providing your standards are sufficiently relaxed to allow for a few teensy differences between your output and that of one of the Cremona masters. We're here to help you with a few basic steps towards that lofty goal!

Keep in mind that this is your fiddle we're talking about, not one allegedly made by some 17th century Italian with an over-hyped reputation. Yours will cost you maybe \$100 to make, lots less than the \$239,500 (more or less) you'd be forced to lay out for one of those elderly foreign jobs.

It's not as much about cutting corners as it is about being realistic. Spruce, maple, ash, rosewood, jongo-jongo, zgraz wood from the central mountains of Uzbekistan: all great, but all expensive. You can get ten sheets of perfectly usable Home Depot plywood for what you'd spend on a square yard of the other stuff. And you (probably) won't piss off Greenpeace either! (And any extra material can be put to some sensible use, like replacing the floor in that upstairs bathroom or building a play-maze for your pet ferret. Can you imagine doing those things with rosewood or jongo-jongo?)

Super-fine hand-mixed stains and varnishes? Secret ingredients of the masters - human blood, elk pee, clam broth? Forget them! Nobody really cool plays a fiddle that looks brown and smells funny. A can of discount house paint - in your choice of color - is all you need. Flat or glossy - it's up to you! You can even use different colors to make a fiddle fashion statement. Change your colors with the seasons! If color makes no difference, go with whatever's on sale! (And forget that old wives' tale about the coating affecting the sound - hogwash! I'm here to tell you it's the quality of the plywood that makes the difference in the sound, not anything to do with whatever mess you slap on the outside.)

Once you've selected your plywood, you can start cutting out the basic fiddle shape, or as close to it as you can get. Remember - it's your fiddle, so it can look whatever way you want it to look! Again, you can either spend a lot of money on exquisitely-manufactured luthier's tools - there are catalogs full of them - or you can go with your basic imitation Swiss Army knife configuration, plus maybe a pair of pliers (can't hurt), a hammer, and a ton of rubber bands.

Note that these aforementioned catalogs contain page upon page of adhesives of one species or another, all designed for some arcane and highly specific purpose (first among which is to separate you from your money). If you bought them all, you'd be surrounded by more junk than an alchemist. Stuff and nonsense! Elmer's Glue is a lot cheaper and doesn't require a master's degree in industrial chemistry to use. Just slap it around wherever you think your new fiddle will need it, tighten the joint with a few

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dozen rubber bands (or clothespins), wait twenty minutes, and bingo - you're in business! (Helpful hint - the bond will hold better if you put the fiddle-to-be in the refrigerator for an hour or so after you glue it up.)

Even though the glue usually works pretty well, you might want to have a staple gun nearby just to make sure those important joints are nice and tight.

Are you planning on putting the graceful curves characteristic of fine violins on your home-made instrument? Why, for heaven's sake? Sure they're pretty but do you really believe they affect the sound at all? The answer is a resounding emphatic NO!, so why waste time and effort in trying to accomplish something that may have no use? Oh sure - the purists will be quick to try and convince you that the elegant shape of a classic violin is important to the sound, but can they really prove that? After all, banjos are round and accordions are sort of rectangly, and they sound pretty good, right? So why won't your square fiddle sound just as good? Of course, the "purists" - and their academic lackeys -have no reply.

In shaping the wood, it would probably be a good idea to have the top and the back of your fiddle roughly the same size and shape. Ditto for the sides. Again, however, you shouldn't get carried away with any of this. If your top and back don't quite match, you can always futz around with the side pieces to hold everything together (although it might take an extra glop of glue to tighten up those weird angles).

If the sides aren't exactly the same, you'll have a top and back that aren't quite parallel, but how important is that in the grand scheme of things? And talk about trendy design! Chances are you'll have other luthiers knocking down your door (metaphorically) to find out how you did it!

In future editions of this esteemed publication - unless that busybody American Luthiers Society obtains the injunction they've been threatening - we will continue this discussion of discount fiddle construction, including such heart-stopping topics as "Necks and Fingerboards", "Bracing" (= creative placement of angle irons), "Purfling" (whatever the hell that is), "Finishes" (more on the house paint theory proposed above), "Bridges and Sound Posts", and a few other riveting subjects that you'll have to pretend to delve into before you can announce to the world that your home-made fiddle is ready.

If any of the foregoing has been of interest and if your creative juices are bubbling up, keep an eye on this space for additional details. We're ready to help you BUILD THAT FIDDLE!

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