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Musical Instruments: a screener's guide



*Musical instruments are often the cause of tension at the airport security checkpoint. Screeners either question the appropriateness of the carriage of an instrument inside the aircraft cabin or, if it is accepted, proceed to examine the alien article without the care and attention that the musician expects. So, **Marcia Adair** provides an overview of the problems encountered and offers some practical solutions that can diffuse checkpoint tension and speed performers on their way with their loved ones.*

Everyone loves music. It makes the world go round, but what happens when musicians turn up with their kit at the airport? The best laid plans often fall apart and the travel experience can turn into a battle of wills, with musicians refusing to allow their instruments into the hold and airport personnel threatening to deny them boarding unless the passenger complies.

In the United States, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) regulations state that:

- Passengers may carry one (1) musical instrument in addition to 1 carry-on and 1 personal item through the screening checkpoint. Airlines may or

may not allow the additional carry-on item on their aircraft.

- Security officers must X-ray or physically screen your instrument before it can be transported on an aircraft.
- Security officers will handle musical instruments very carefully and will allow you to be as involved as possible in any physical screening.
- Passengers may bring musical instruments as checked baggage as long as they fit within the size and weight limitations of the airline.
- We encourage passengers to stay with their instrument while security officers screen it to make sure it is repacked properly.
- Owners should be present when an instrument is removed from its case for screening.

At British Airports Authority (BAA) airports in the United Kingdom, the policy is roughly equivalent.

Why They Get So Cross

The current dynamic that exists between airport personnel and musicians is far more adversarial than is strictly necessary. Screeners may have noticed that when a musician comes through the security checkpoint they are often grouchy. Believe it or not, musicians are not naturally cross but they have learned through experience that checking-in an instrument is usually a complete nightmare. Airlines change rules on a whim and staff are usually not familiar with the regulations stated on airline websites so, at the very least a discussion, but more often an argument about carry-on baggage is expected.

Anna Hill, manager of classical guitarist Robin Hill explains, "The security at all airports is obviously essential, but for this particular travelling musician it does cause a huge amount of stress. To know that you will have to go through the same conversation, with many different people, just to get your instrument on board, doesn't make for a relaxing start to your journey. And when that journey can involve three or four flights, it all gets rather tedious."

Recounting airport nightmare stories is almost an Olympic sport at parties, with the recurring theme being airport personnel who were careless or ignorant of the instrument's value.

Musicians can be a bit testy at the baggage screening area because their

instruments are their livelihood. It is not an exaggeration to say that a classically trained musician has spent more time alone in a room with their instrument than they have with their friends or family. Most practice around two hours a day, give lessons and play concerts with their instrument in hand several times per week.

The attachment goes beyond the emotional; instruments are also very expensive and cannot be easily replaced. Each one is hand crafted, which means there are differences in weight, size, varnish as well as other important features that affect the sound. It's true that there are millions of violins in the world but none are exactly like the musician's current instrument.

Should their instrument become damaged, insurance will cover the cost of repairs or replacement but it will never be the same. It may seem precious to be so sensitive about a nicely carved wood box but it really is almost like another child. If it came to a choice between the instrument going in the hold or a musician missing a flight, most wouldn't bat an eye - there are many other flights, but only one instrument.

Here are a couple of common examples of airline horror stories:

"I was flying from Toronto to London with my French horn in a soft carrying case. It fits easily in the overhead locker, so I didn't have too much trouble checking it as carry-on. My problems started however when I was waiting for the security screening. The instrument went through the X-ray and was then sent through again. The officer asked what it was, so I explained, but he was still confused.

Further explanation didn't really get us anywhere, so finally he told me I had to play it or it would have to go in the hold. Faced with having my unprotected instrument crushed by suitcases in the hold, I took it out and played it in the middle of the security area. A rather perplexing request but the security officer seemed satisfied and I was sent on my way."

Another example, this time from a violinist:

"A screener grabs the violin case from the belt by the end of the case, not the handle, puts it upside down, wobbling on the edge of a table. I lunge for it and he says 'don't touch the tennis racket', upon which I explain that it's a "violin" and that it's fragile, etc. He can't figure out how to

"...a classically trained musician has spent more time alone in a room with their instrument than they have with their friends or family..."

open the case and asks other employees to come help as opposed to letting me do it. I ask him to please not touch the instrument and he responds 'I'll touch what I need to.' He then asks what I'm doing with the instrument and I say I'm a violinist. He asks if I can actually play it. I say yes. He says "Play it then." And so, in Atlanta airport, I have to play the violin to prove it's not a weapon of mass destruction."

Nearly every musician also has a variation of the following scenario:

"I was sitting in my seat, watching the baggage people unload while passengers were deplaning when I saw something go flying through the air. I instantly felt sick. The item currently in flight was my French horn. It was in a hard case but no instrument case is designed to protect fully against full-on tossing. While I was waiting for the baggage to be put on the carousel, I went through all my contacts to see if I could find someone in strange town that could fix my instrument before the concert the next day."



Robin Hill, a classical guitarist, who travels frequently to perform and finds the screening of his musical instrument an added stress.

“...extra reeds, spare parts, bottles of lubricant, repair tools and grease are all perfectly normal things to find in an instrument case...”

How To Handle Instruments

Most of the time, having a look inside the instrument case is unnecessary but, should the screener still be unsatisfied after X-ray and feel the need to open the case, the best tact is to treat it as if it is a religious artefact. If at all possible, letting the musician handle the instrument is the way forward. They will be happy to show the screener all the nooks and crannies and, because the screener is treating their instrument respectfully, the musician will be much more co-operative.

Should passenger handling of items be against procedure, screeners should proceed carefully and imagine the

instrument is made of glass. When opening the case, it is a good idea to ascertain beforehand that the case is right-side up. Opening it upside down will escalate the situation quickly and is likely to damage the instrument. The quickest way to do this is to ask the musician if it correctly positioned to open and then proceed.

Several instruments (horns and trumpets for example) will fall apart if grabbed by the wrong bit. The musician's heart will be in their throat once the instrument is out of the case. If it is not possible to ask them what an appropriate way to hold the instrument is, at least advise the screeners to use two hands. That way, if a bit falls off unexpectedly, the whole thing won't end up on the floor.

Once the inspection has been completed, the best plan is to leave the case open and let the musician close it. Most instruments are designed to fit in their cases snugly and if the pieces are put back incorrectly, they will be damaged by the lid of the case. Since damage is what makes musicians grouchy and defensive, taking pains to avoid doing so will go miles towards keeping the whole transaction cordial.

What's In The Case?

One important thing to remember about instrument cases is that for most musicians they function as a sort of holdall as well as a convenient way to carry around their instrument. As such, it is likely that they may not be sure exactly what is in the case or have forgotten to take out items a screener may find suspicious. Extra reeds, spare parts, bottles of lubricant, repair tools and grease are all perfectly normal things to find in an instrument case.

One thing nearly all musicians will have is a metronome. This is a small electronic instrument that emits a steady pulse, so musicians learn to play in time. They have been known to turn on accidentally in cases when jostled up against other items to varying degrees of comic effect. Most often however, they are firmly in the off position.

The following is a list of things that may be found in various instrument cases, their purpose and the materials with which they are made.



Transportation Security

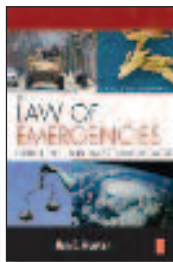
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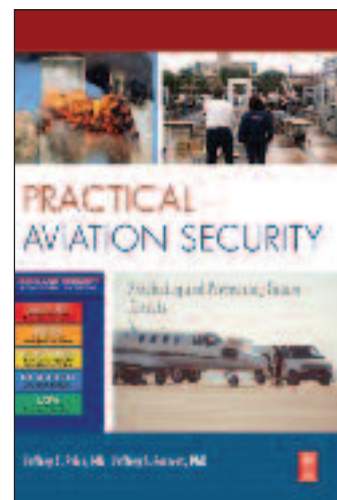
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Violins/Violas/Cellos

- Violin and/or viola – a viola is just a bigger violin. Some musicians carry double cases with two violins or a violin and viola in it.
- Up to four bows – these will be secured to the lid of the case
- Extra strings – these are lengths of wire stored either in a clear plastic tube near to the bows or in little envelopes underneath the instrument
- Rosin – this is a block of pine resin that is rubbed on the bow hair to help it stick to the strings. It looks like a piece of amber and turns into a white powder when rubbed against something.
- Mutes – these are little black pieces of rubber designed to sit on the bridge and mute the sound.
- Shoulder Rests – these are made of metal and rubber and are designed to anchor the violin between the shoulder and the jaw. Some players also use pieces of sponge or make up pads.
- Endpins – all cellos have an endpin, which is an adjustable spike between 35cm and 72cm long that comes out of the bottom of the cello and sticks

Rosin is used by string instrument musicians to help their bows stick to the strings. It leaves a white powdery residue.

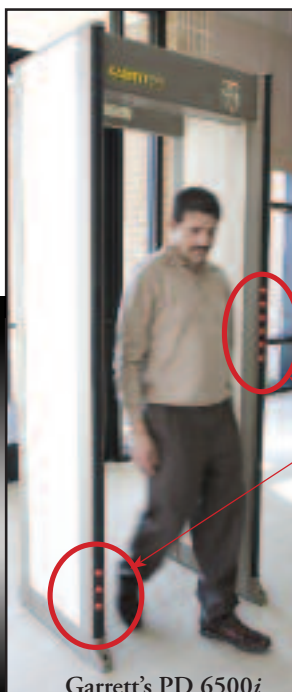


into the floor. The pin is made from carbon or stainless steel and is usually sharp enough to provide traction on a wood floor. Some endpins have a rubber covering on the bottom as well. Removing the endpin is a rather labour-intensive job and no cellist will fly if that is required of them.

Trumpets, Trombones, French Horns

- Trumpeters will usually have several different sized instruments in their bag as well as a variety of mutes. Mutes are made from metal, rubber and various other materials.
- A trombone player will almost always have a small spray bottle of water in

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their case, which is used to lubricate the slide.

- Horn players may have mutes but this is not common.
- All brass players will have various tubes of oil, slide grease and heavy oil for keeping their instruments in tip-top shape. All of these are very small containers and shouldn't come anywhere near the 100ml restriction. The oil and grease is usually synthetic but occasionally players may carry lanolin in old film canisters.
- Each instrument will also have one or more mouthpieces to go with it as well.

Clarinets & Flutes

- Aside from the clarinet itself, there is likely to be some cork grease, a few reeds and a cleaning swab. It's possible there may be a small screwdriver for quick repairs of the keys. If it's there, it will be the size of the kind used to repair eyeglasses. Professional clarinetists will have two clarinets in the same case. Once removed from the case, the pieces need to be put back exactly as they were or the lid will throw all the keys out of alignment.
- Flutes are equally low maintenance. No grease is required, just a cleaning swab attached to a dull steel rod approximately 12" long.

Oboes & Bassoons

Oboes and bassoons are extremely delicate and require a lot of peripheral equipment to operate properly. In a typical oboe or bassoon case, there will be:

- Rolling papers
- A small case with several reeds in it. These are gold to a double reed player because they've spent countless



Some musicians are asked to demonstrate their skill at security checkpoints; others elect to do so whilst waiting for their flights!

hours making them by hand. Extreme caution is required if this little case has to be opened; the reeds are extraordinarily easy to damage.

- Film canisters filled with water; these are for soaking the reeds during a performance.
- Various screwdrivers and other small tools such as pliers.
- Cork grease
- Tuners – electronic devices designed to indicate when notes are in tune.
- Cleaning swab

Guitars

Items in a guitar case will likely be much more familiar than the kit found in orchestral instrument cases. Most players will have various picks, capos and

spare strings in their cases. Classical guitarists will have a footrest as well as a manicure kit. Usually they stow their nail kit in the hold but, if they have forgotten, it would be quite normal to find small nail scissors and liquid superglue as well as various files. A classical guitarist's nails are extremely important and without them in good shape, he will not be able to play properly. There will also be a tuner and, if the guitar is electric, likely a few lead cords for the amplifier.

Tubas, Basses & Contrabassoons

These instruments will all be placed in the hold, so there is no need to worry about encountering them at the security scanning point. Depending on the case, horns and trombones often go in the hold too. Student cellists, who can't afford an extra seat, will usually invest in an extra-robust flight case and put their instrument in the hold as well.

Although it covers most of the basics, this list is nowhere near comprehensive. Each musician has their own individual way of doing things and therefore carries their own mix of gear. If anything looks unusual in the case, just ask the musician. There are lots of pieces of kit that look a bit weird or menacing but have perfectly rational uses...or at least they do to someone who has spent the good part of the last 30 years alone in a room practicing scales!

A bassoon player's reed case

