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## **SUMMER 2008 NEWSLETTER**

**FROM THE U.K.'s LARGEST SUPPLIER OF VIOLIN FAMILY PRODUCTS**

This newsletter would probably be better called Paul's rant, but I trust that you will find it interesting. Our long experience in the industry leaves us ideally placed to know what is going on, so here goes!!

Well summer has arrived, or has it, looking out of the window as I key this in I am not sure. What with the flash floods last week, it makes you wonder!

Anyway much is happening in the Violin Industry (and by that, of course, I also include viola, cello & bass), not all to our advantage. The value of the pound has decreased against most currencies, with the exception of the U.S. \$, and guess what, we don't get much from the good ole' U.S.A.. Whilst stringed instruments are very popular in America, they have little indigenous manufacturing, but with the exception of some string manufacturers they 'buy in' from overseas, mainly China. The upshot is that over the next few months we expect to see a raft of price increases. Some companies have already increased their prices. Stentor started it off last January, Thomastik and Pirastro, in March & June respectively, and there are many more to come. We will endeavour to keep the Website prices as up to date as possible, but please enquire prices when you order, just to make sure.

The Sound Control debacle culminating in their demise was of course an accident waiting to happen, too many big flash High Street stores, too many staff, many of them too young to have any experience, and little or no support network. It really was only a matter of time, but that is where traditional companies like us benefited. Whilst we can embrace the industry advances, we don't forget the past, and of course in our book, the customer and service is all important.

Another problem to add to the mix is the labour shortage in China, which is causing some grief with the Instrument and case manufacturing industries. Wages paid in the construction industry are much greater than most manufacturing industries, so guess what, workers are leaving to obtain more money, and who can blame them. I have said for years that the price we pay for Chinese Instruments in particular is realistically too low considering the quality. Now by this I mean the instruments you would purchase from a dedicated violin shop, where instruments are individually selected by experts, not a High Street supermarket, General

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Music shop, Internet based sales outfit or Ebay; where you get what you pay for, and generally these don't deserve houseroom! Many is the instrument, and I use the term advisedly, that has been brought in to us because it 'doesn't work', or sounds lousy, and sure as eggs are eggs it was sourced from one of the above outlets. Instruments are supplied bridge down, with the expectation that the purchaser can put up the bridge, a fairly skilled job, if you are going to follow good practice. The number of bridges put on the wrong way around is staggering to see. In this world you get what you pay for, just don't expect that a cheap price will get you anything more than a cheap instrument, often incapable of anything more than squeaks & squawks. Whilst you might find a Specialised Violin shop charges a bit more, and generally it really is only a bit, you know that you will get an instrument that has been properly sourced from a good manufacturer and has been setup properly, and of course you inherit a support network to help you as you progress. Anyway I will get off my soap box, and give you some other news.

Regrettably we can no longer supply the Andreas Bang Rosin, as Alex Kang the manufacturer does not respond to our emails; why is anyone's guess. Such a good product, well received as the replacement for the renowned 'Tartini' rosins, just a shame they can't contact us to enable us to supply you with them. We were warned by the previous importer that they were difficult to deal with, so I guess they were right.

The supply shortage situation with BAM cases continues. Deliveries are currently between 3 months and a year, and that to us is looking more and more unacceptable, and we are considering seriously as to whether to continue selling their cases. Such a shame really, we have been selling these cases for the last 8 or so years, and they are very good, but we don't like to not be able to supply from stock, and as such don't really have a system in place for processing back orders, and anyway when you need a case, you need it there and then; regrettably not everyone thinks like us!

Headcase Cases have now ceased trading as we have advised previously, again a great loss to the industry. We have sold these cases for around 20 years, under several guises including for a while as the 'Hamilton Caswell' or HC case (well Headcase had the same initials & Hamilton was always good at self promotion!) We have just one slight second Carbon Fibre Cello case (slight roughness in the gel coat for an area of around 1 square inch), left, and a bargain at £600. When this has gone there will be no more.

If you look at our cello case pages, you will see described several cases which we hope will assist you in obtaining what you require, many at prices lower than the equivalents they replace, all at considerably less than recommended retail. That is the **GOOD NEWS!**

We have currently a **SPECIAL OFFER** for bulk purchases of Lina Rectangular Violin cases. These cases are amazing value for money, (see website) and even have a hygrometer. Whilst I know this doesn't affect individual players, this superb budget case which we normally retail at £30 (R.R.P. £38), can while current stocks last, be purchased in quantities of 6 or more for £20 each, + £10 carriage for the whole shipment to anywhere in mainland UK. This is a real bargain, especially for maybe a school with rather tired violin cases with their stock of rental violins.

We are moving more into selling quality Bows for all instruments. We had previously thought that we wouldn't go this route, but you encouraged us, and we have taken the plunge big time. The Bow lists are clearly indicated on this Web Site in the new Bow Section. As always, we are happy to send you a selection of bows to try, within your price range (regrettably not student bows). There is **NO CHARGE** for this service, we even play the out going postage by Special Delivery, you just promise to look after them whilst in your charge, and pay the return postage, again by Special Delivery.

Our Instrument sales have reached a new high over the last year with sales of over a 1000 instruments, yes **1000**, I didn't believe it either. Whilst a few have gone to educational authorities, they are mainly to players or their teachers. Thank you for the great support and encouragement that gives us. With all the doom & gloom around this year this achievement is truly amazing.

We are very fortunate to have taken delivery of a large shipment of the fantastic Hidersine Giovanni Violin outfits in  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$  &  $\frac{4}{4}$  Sizes. By purchasing in bulk, we have been able to negotiate the price down to the 2007 prices. These instruments at **only £75**, set-up ready to tune & play are amazing value for money. They are manufactured of the correct tonewoods, with ebony fittings, a Brazilwood bow, and a lovely rectangular case,

with blanket & padded ruckstraps. Realistically they would benefit from, say, a set of Dominants, to allow them to give of their best. Therefore for around £100 you would be purchasing an instrument that realistically 10 years ago we would have been asking about £140 for. How good is that! At this price, when they are gone they are gone!

Unfortunately many Authorities are still purchasing the instruments from wholesalers, on the basis that they are a few coppers cheaper. That of course is fine if they have a Luthier to set up these instruments on receipt, however generally this is not the case, and the 'little man' who looks after all of the musical instruments normally gets lumbered to do what he can. This is a good way to wreck an instrument at worst, or provide a poor instrument for pupils to hire. One pupil came in recently moaning the instrument she rented from school wouldn't stay in tune; guess what – NO SOUNDPOST. Really sad, her first experience with starting to play was marred by stupidity. Did the person setting up this instrument think that the little bit of dowel rattling around inside the instrument was there by mistake? It is fortunate however that rather than throwing it he/she put it in the case pocket for us to find and fit. For anyone in a position of authority in an L.E.A., please encourage them to purchase responsibly, not necessarily go for the 'cheapest option', tell them to check what they are getting for their money (well ours really). Also of course remind them that there is unspent Government money available for the purchase of instruments.

Realistically I suppose that I am really trying to encourage you to purchase or rent from professionals, there are many good specialist violin shops out there, of which I like to think we are the best (well I can do self promotion as well), but please use us, give us your support, & we will be around to help you when you need it. The good old General Music shop is usually OK for Guitars & Piano's, but do not expect them to know about the violin family. The adage should be, is you see anything other than violin based products in the store, steer well clear, they are unlikely to have anyone on staff who really has any knowledge or experience!

Anyway, if you are a new visitor to our website, or maybe on your first foray into the string world, welcome. If you have read this far I guess that you will have seen that this industry like everyone else is not having as easy a life as we would like. It always amazes me when people find out what I do for a living; they think what a quiet refined business I am in. Well refined yes, quiet, definitely not!

For new starters we encourage parents to maybe purchase your first instrument rather than rent some potentially awful instrument from the school music service. All new players need as much encouragement as possible, if what they are playing couldn't produce a good sound even when played by a professional, they are on a hiding to nothing, and of course being young, they think it is their fault & give up. Whilst we do rent out properly setup instruments at a very competitive rate, our upgrade policy is designed to encourage you to purchase rather than to rent; and anyway isn't it better to encourage a new player by letting them have their own instrument rather than a 'loaner'? Looking at the economics, most rental schemes aim to cover the cost of the basic instrument within a couple of years, with an up front charge to cover possible damage.

We all know from experience and human nature, that if you don't own something you don't look after it so well. Therefore you can assume that the instrument will not be so carefully tended for as it deserves. This means that when you return the rented instrument, it is highly possible that the up front deposit charge will be forfeited. Therefore you will, likely as not, end up paying more, and have nothing to show for it. Purchasing therefore makes sense, and we guarantee to buy back any instrument purchased from us when upgrading to a better instrument. Obviously certain conditions apply, which I shall explain later. Our experience shows that players whose parents made the investment in their children and purchased instruments, are far more likely to continue playing, and whilst they will certainly not all become professionals, they will have had an enjoyable experience which will last a lifetime. As a point of note they also tend to look after their own property and treat it well!

As regards our upgrade policy, we guarantee to purchase back any instrument/outfit purchased from us at the price that you paid us (less the V.A.T. which the Government had anyway), when you upgrade to a better instrument/outfit, providing the instrument you return is in a sellable condition. (This price does not cover any upgrades like different strings, as we would automatically replace the strings on return anyway). This policy applies to all individual players, not to teachers or L.E.A.'s, unless specifically stated otherwise.

On the subject of better strings, may we respectfully suggest that when purchasing an instrument/outfit, that unless it is fitted with good strings as part of its specification, you maybe consider asking us to upgrade it with a set of good strings? This can lift even the most basic of instrument to a different level and produce a much more

mellow tone than the factory supplied strings. We don't charge for the fitment, just the cost of the strings and we even let you have the factory strings as a spare set! I can tell you that it makes the playing experience much better, and especially for the parent, the listening experience more tolerable!

Electric Instruments are becoming more popular, and are now fortunately also more accepted by teachers and schools. It has taken a long time, but I have long felt that anything you can do to encourage a player is good. Peer pressure has long left the violin family out in the cold, but the new groups around now, with electric violinist etc. are encouraging a more 'street cred' attitude. Any youngster who aspires to be in a group really wants 2 things: an instrument that he/she plays well, and an amplifier to carry to group practice in a well meaning parents' garage! The electric violin in particular covers these criteria well. It is compact, and only needs a smallish amplifier to make a big noise. You are however unlikely to get into the school orchestra, or to that matter any orchestra, currently with anything other than a traditional acoustic instrument, so an electric instrument must realistically be considered a second instrument option. The Electric instrument offers the parent another distinct advantage; headphones. Almost silent practising is possible, what a boon when the player is struggling over a particularly difficult phrase in some exam. piece! We hold in stock several different makes of electric violin over different price ranges, qualities and features. The 'funkiest' of these is of course the Vivo<sup>2</sup>, which is made of transparent Perspex, has not only fully electronic controls, but also a sound to light facility so the whole instrument flashes as you play it, how cool is that! The Bridge range of Electric Violins are also really attractive, and with a quality of playability and sound that is hard to beat. As a major Bridge supplier, we are able to discount these, generally to below the prices from Bridge direct. Whilst there are some cheap electric instruments around, unless they are playable by a player who is already fairly advanced, they are a waste of money. You will not find us stocking such instruments. As regards the Viola, Cello & Bass, the options are regrettably considerably less. This is a problem we are trying to resolve, but unless manufacturers are prepared to make them, it makes it difficult. Bridge manufacture instruments to cover the whole range, and these are superb, however whilst we stock the 4 string violin, the 5 string violin, octave violin, viola, cello and bass we only supply to order due to the low turnover of these instruments. It generally takes us around a week to obtain one, and don't forget our prices are difficult to beat! Yamaha do of course make electric instruments to cover this area, however other than the Silent Violin, we only supply to order due to the low turnover of these instruments. We do not sell the Yamaha Stick bass as we don't like it. Having no bouts, it is difficult for a traditional bass player to hold conventionally, and also whilst when it is packed up it is considerably smaller than an acoustic bass, it is very heavy. The sound reproduced is in our opinion, and that of the many players we know who have tried them, nothing like an acoustic bass, but more like a fretless bass guitar, it depends what you want!

If however you are unable to consider an electric second instrument, but still want to be able to play your violin, viola, cello or bass in a group, please consider the range of pickups, which with a suitable amplifier, also of course available from us, covers that need. They are a fine alternative, and give good response, without in most cases detracting from the basic acoustic 'look' of the instrument. Please enquire for details.

After selling out of the Bridge 5 string Violin, and being told by Bridge that they were going to discontinue them, we are pleased to announce that we have been able to convince them to change their mind. We are stocking the Siren, primarily because it has a tailpiece with adjusters, but can obtain the Woodstock as well, to order. Many is the violin player who can obtain an orchestra place playing Viola, without the complication in learning to play a larger instrument, and with the advantage of being able to 'slip' back to violin instantly. The range of pieces playable also increase, the unexpectedly strong C string gives a different aspect to the violin. Check out our prices, as other than Bridge themselves, we understand that we are the only Violin shop stocking these fine instruments, and we are cheaper than Bridge!

To assist players, please remember we produce many help leaflets, based on ours and others experiences, which we are happy to send out when you order from us. They cover a host of subjects from fitting new strings, to even cutting your own bass bridge (don't really suggest you try this at home mind!). Please enquire when ordering and let us help you with that question you have always wanted to know the answer to. Maybe we ought to be the 'Google' of the violin business!

Our Website as always is exceeding our expectations as regards 'hits', but after much consideration we have decided that a shopping basket really is not for us. We had always felt that it would be unlikely, although the facility was designed in from the outset. Our reason is quite simple, we obviously want to be able to supply your

needs accurately, therefore we would require from you the exact item you need, and whilst that might seem simple, let me give you an example: Violin Dominant E Strings are supplied in the following variants: Soft, Medium & Hard; Aluminium wound or Plain steel; Loop or Ball end. 24 different permutations! I know that this is the exception, but we do prefer to get your order right first time. Anyway personal contact is much better, you know we are real people, here to assist, rather than some faceless Internet Outfit. Please note that when you click the `About Us` section of our website, you get an address and full contact details, try that on some of the Internet only sites! We can of course accept orders by Fax or Email, but please let us have a phone number where we can contact you during the working day, so that if necessary, we can speak to you concerning any queries with your order.

For individuals, please enquire for any special offers. No goods offered will be seconds, or in anyway imperfect, but sometimes end of lines, or cases we have purchased as an extra to obtain some additional discount that may be offered with their purchase.

As always we are happy to welcome you to our shop, in particular to select an instrument or bow from our magnificent selection. Due to space limitations we do ask that you make an appointment prior to visiting. This will also ensure that we can devote our time to you and assist you in your selection. Any instrument or bow(s) selected can then be either purchased at the time or taken on approval for a short period. Bows can be returned by post, but not instruments, which must be returned by hand. While we don't open Saturday's, as a matter of course, we can often open by appointment. If a Saturday is the only day you can make, we will try to accommodate you.

Postal and transport costs are as always a problem for all companies offering a mail order service, and with postal charges in particular, seeming to be on the increase it seems every few months, this does present us all with cost increases. As always we try to keep our costs to a minimum, but primarily we do prefer to offer a next day delivery (subject to the carrier not letting us down), so unless you specifically ask for a second class service, we will always use a 1<sup>st</sup> Class post, or Next day Courier option. Fuel surcharges are already in place from the couriers that we are currently absorbing; however how long this situation will prevail depends on the price of oil I guess. Our suppliers are not being so forgiving, and are passing on all and every increase which impacts on us, and this we are, as they say, `keeping under advisement`.

We have been asked on a few occasions to take PayPal. We can see no reason why, when we offer secure Credit & Debit card facilities to consider this. Both customer and supplier have a good protection system in place from the card companies and banks. The same does not apply to PayPal, which in any case was only set up by Ebay to assist in their operation. Suppliers only taking PayPal will almost always be individuals, as recognised companies will always be offered Credit/Debit card facilities by the Banks. The other interesting point to consider is that PayPal will only give you an account with either a bank account or credit/debit card registered to them. So if you already have those facilities, use them direct rather than through an intermediary such as PayPal.

Anyway I hope that you have enjoyed this Newsletter, which contains my perspective of the Violin industry. The opinions expressed are mine alone, please don't blame anyone else! No part of this can be copied or reproduced without the authors expressed consent. Well that is the legal bit over!!!

Not quite of course we have to end with Errors & Omissions Excepted, however maybe some errors are deliberately there to stimulate you to contact us and give some feedback!

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