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Stringing Along

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"Stop fiddling around!" Maybe you've heard adults say that. However, what they should say is, "Start fiddling around!"

The fiddle is a string instrument. Its formal name is the violin, and it makes beautiful music. How does it do that?

Violins don't look like they should be called string instruments. After all, they're made of wood. However, the strings are where the music begins.

Violin strings are made of nylon, steel, or sometimes gut (the intestines of some animals). The violinist uses a bow made of the hair from horses' tails, drawing it slowly across the strings. The wood picks up the strings' sound and transmits it inside the instrument. It then amplifies the sound, producing clear, strong notes. The violinist changes notes by moving his or her fingers across the strings on the violin's neck.

All four string instruments have curvy wooden bodies and straight necks. Violins are the smallest members of the string family. They make the highest-pitched sounds because of their small body. Violas are a little larger than violins, so they produce a slightly deeper sound. Musicians hold both instruments the same way—under their chin.

The other two string instruments are the cello and the double bass. Because they are much larger than the violin and the viola, they are played differently. The bottom of the instrument rests on the ground. The cello is played from a seated position, while the double bass is played from a standing position. The average double bass is about six feet tall. In contrast, a full-sized violin is about two feet long. Because they are so big, basses make the lowest, richest sounds.

Today, string instruments are used in many types of music. Violins are popular in folk, and double basses are popular in jazz. All four instruments are also used in rock music. With such a variety of sounds and sizes, maybe it's time for you to start fiddling around!

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