

BOUGHT AND SOLD?



COURTESY, JULLIARD SCHOOL

Violinist Stephen Clapp is dean of Juilliard School as well as a long-time teacher and performer

A RECENT NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE considered the cosy relationship between doctors and medical device manufacturers:

‘As she presented research results indicating that a new medical device was “an important breakthrough”, the doctor’s enthusiasm was clear. Less evident were some of the financial links between the researchers and the device’s maker.’

The article implied that there’s something wrong with supposedly objective evaluators being paid by the company that made the device. Is this any different from a music teacher persuading a student to buy an instrument from a dealer - without revealing to the student that the teacher will get a commission on the sale?

What could be wrong with a perfectly legal practice that puts a few dollars into the wallet of an underpaid, undervalued

fiddle teacher? In my view, such transactions are problematic and at stake is the trust between student and teacher.

In most cases the arrangement between dealer and teacher is secret. This lack of transparency strikes a severe blow to a relationship that should be based on mutual confidence and respect. The first time I was approached by a dealer to enter into this type of ‘business arrangement’ was in my first years of college-level teaching, before I knew about the practice. As my entry-level salary was barely enough to live on, I thought it was a pretty good deal. I took the money and thereafter felt guilty – and do to this day - whenever I saw the student.

The financial incentive of a commission is a powerful persuader against objectivity

The fact that the amount of a commission paid to the teacher is not revealed to the buyer. A student taking out loans to pay for education would certainly benefit from a lower price. However, I know from personal experience that the dealer is unlikely to pass on the savings to the buyer if the teacher doesn’t accept the commission.

The second time I was approached by a dealer, I asked if my commission could be subtracted from the sale price if I did not accept it. He said ‘no’. So I accepted the commission and returned it in full to my student. When the dealer heard about what I’d done,



he was irate! His reaction convinced me that I had done the right thing.

In the search for the right instrument, the financial incentive of a commission is a powerful persuader against objectivity. I tell students who are looking for an instrument to visit a dozen shops, see what’s available and what seems right, and then to purchase on the basis of numerous criteria. Instruments become available at different times with different dealers, so the freedom to explore all sources is essential.

Teachers should certainly be involved in guiding students through these important investment decisions, helping them to avoid instruments that are overpriced