

Should a teacher accept commissions from dealers when a student buys an instrument? A Juilliard dean and a successful private teacher have very different views about this contentious subject



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WHEN ONE OF MY PRIVATE STUDENTS

(and, usually, their family as well) asks for help finding and purchasing an instrument, or I feel it's time for them to buy an instrument rather than hire one, there are many steps involved before they hold the instrument in their hands.

I find that parents of most students do not have the expertise that I have and they need to be guided throughout the entire searching and buying process. First, I

that they are borrowing for a week or two. The final stage of the process is to assist the student in choosing an instrument. Often I meet with them for an extra 30 minutes to perform an 'instrument test'. During this session, the student and I play the different instruments while the parents help us decide.

The entire process of helping a student buy an instrument is time-consuming and I do not charge the student for the time spent. Therefore, I gladly receive a commission from the instrument dealer. [I do not tell parents about the commissions: when I conduct seminars on the topic of how to run a private music studio, I tell studio teachers that their studio is a business and they don't need to explain finances to the parents.]

I help all of my private students with instrument purchases. I have never had a problem because I have always made sure that I work with a responsible and reputable dealer. I worked briefly with a dealer who often did not return phone calls and who did not offer trade-ins. Now I work with a dealer who is quick to respond to phone calls and instrument orders, and who offers fair trade-in prices.

If a teacher is worried about their choice of instrument for a student, they should ask the student to take the instrument to one of the teacher's colleagues. (The parent



or in poor physical condition. Yet sometimes students avoid asking teachers for help because they've heard about the commission game.

The subject of teachers receiving a commission from the purchase of an instrument by a student was considered some years ago at Juilliard and led to the creation of the following policy for its faculty: 'To avoid misunderstanding, gifts (which would include commission on the sale of musical instruments, cash or other valuable merchandise) should be returned upon receipt, with an explanation that acceptance is against Juilliard policy.'

In real-estate transactions, the commission is announced up front and is paid by the seller. In instrument transactions, commissions are concealed and are paid by the buyer.

Somehow, this doesn't seem to be appropriate. ■

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typically spend about 30 minutes on the phone with the parents, who have many questions: Where should we start looking? Can we afford an old instrument? Does the dealer offer trade-ins? What do we do with the instrument the student is playing now? How much should we spend?

Next, I contact different instrument dealers, including one dealer that I have worked with on many occasions and trust completely. After that, I may drive to the dealer to pick up the instruments or I may have them shipped to my studio. This takes a great deal of time. If the instruments are shipped, I need to unpack them and inspect them. Then I explain to the student and parent how to take care of an instrument

may have to give the colleague a lesson fee for their assistance.) Sometimes, I just ask one of my colleagues to play the instrument for a few minutes to tell me whether or not it is a good choice.

As a studio teacher, I consider it part of my job to assist my students with finding the right instrument. I know that I have the students' interest at heart, so I will send my students to other dealers to check out instruments, even though this means I may forego a commission. That way I know that I am not being biased towards the dealer who gives me a commission. I want the parents of my students to be charged a fair price and the students to be happy with the instrument. This comes first. ■