

# ELECTRIC SPICE

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Did you know that you could use technology as a tool for creativity, composition, arranging, recording, fundraising, and for the development of finely honed rhythmic skills? It can also be used as an enhancement to the rehearsal process and as a recruitment tool. Let's take a look at how.

## WHY BUY AN ELECTRIC FOR YOUR SCHOOL PROGRAM OR STUDIO?

Our students live in a technology-oriented world. No matter what the topic when working with string orchestras across the United States, the moment I whip out my NS Design electric violin and start up my effects box or looper pedal, students become excited and their level of interest and involvement intensifies.



In order to access free apps for tablet or smart phone, a \*multi-effects box, or a \*\*loop pedal, you will need an amplified instrument. While you can use a pickup mic such as the beautiful-sounding [Bruce Bartlett](#) Fiddle and Cello mics that are designed specifically for bowed strings, you won't be able to access all the tools that are available without a solid-body instrument.

*\*Effects units are electronic devices that alter how a musical instrument or other audio source sounds. Some effects subtly "color" a sound, while others transform it dramatically.*



*\*\* A looper pedal or "phrase looper" allows a player to record and replay a phrase or passage as he or she plays/records another phrase, and another. Loops can be created on the spot during a performance (live looping) or they can be pre-recorded and played back.*

## HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHICH INSTRUMENT TO PURCHASE?

Solid-body instruments alleviate feedback or distortion and provide a clean, clear sound. Pricing can range between \$350 and \$4,000. Your budget will play a big role in the options you consider, but here are a few more helpful tips:

- If the instrument requires a 9-volt batteries to operate (Yamaha Silent Violin) it might be less expensive but heavier, and you will always need to check the batteries and have extras on hand. Some instruments, like the Bridge Aquila, use a 3-volt coin cell battery.
- Make sure the instrument of choice provides ergonomic options. In other words, if the chinrest and shoulder rest are in fixed position, you won't be able to accommodate your student's varied body types.

- Read player’s reviews whenever possible before making a final decision. You can find reviews on amazon.com or even by typing “reviews: electric violin, viola or cello” into your search engine.



• After purchasing an instrument, if you don’t like its sound, you can enhance its tone through the type of amp you use, like the [Fishman Loudbox](#), designed specifically for bowed strings, or through the use of a preamp (a small box that provides detailed tonal control), like the two options available through the company, [L.R. Baggs](#). These add-ons allow you to achieve a more balanced, warmer tone by experimenting with reducing or boosting bass, mid-range and treble. This can become a wonderful ear-training lesson for your students. They can learn to distinguish the difference between settings through experimentation and discussion.

## WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO GET STARTED?



You will need at least one ¼” guitar cable to plug into an amp, or two if you’re going to use a special effects box, and you will need an amp, although you may be able to borrow one from the band director if you teach at a school. Avoid accidents by purchasing a cable that has an elbow shape on one end so that it neatly tucks in against the instrument.

## REHEARSAL TECHNIQUES

You can pass a clip-on mic and/or an electric instrument from player to player across your orchestra and your students won’t be able to hide in their section. The Bartlett mic already comes with a long cord (though it needs phantom power, an outside power source supplied by the amp or small mixer) but you will need a long guitar cable for the solid-body. An amplified instrument is extremely sensitive to pressure, and its quick response teaches us to play with a lighter touch, which helps improve intonation, vibrato, and speed. If each student is given a regular opportunity to be amplified they will learn to recognize the need for practice, and will tend to review their parts more carefully. This has been proven through experimentation within various school systems. Here’s an example of what happened in a formerly traditional music program in Lakewood, Ohio, after the string director purchased an ensemble of electric instruments:



*“Since these kids have started playing rock with Lakewood Project,” says music director Beth Hanks, “their relationship with their instrument has completely changed. I’m not kidding. The violin has gone from being their enemy to being their life partner. They are suddenly interested in musical history! They are interested in what was going on when Shostakovich was writing his symphonies and Stalin was meddling in Shostakovich’s art. These kids eat it up! It’s unbelievable! Most of these students came into this program loving music, and now they can’t imagine a day without it! And all because of Led Zeppelin.”*

You can also use amplification for a concert when missing students from a section. Worried about amplified bad intonation? Use a special effects box that has a “pitch-correction” setting. It will tune

notes as they are played. This may seem counterproductive, but it will actually help teach the student to recognize and aim for good intonation.

## **ADD-ONS**

Every program should have at least one looping station on hand. You can save money by purchasing an effects box, like Zoom, that has a built-in looper in addition to close to one hundred popular special effects commonly used by electric guitarists, like digital delay, phase shifter, and wah-wah. The looper will enable you and your students to cultivate creative compositional skills that demand rhythmic accuracy. Everyone loves learning how to generate a phrase and layering in melodic and harmonic ideas. Starting with a simple four-beat phrase, they can progress into longer and more complex ideas and layers. You will need a dedicated phrase looper for longer phrases.

One of the most successful exercises I lead during residencies in schools as well as at my summer program, [Strings Without Boundaries](#), leads students and teachers through fun, interactive practice ideas that help build skills for looping.

## **FUNDRAISING FOR YOUR PROGRAM**

Once you have an electric instrument, you will be able to choose from a number of smart phone or tablet apps to generate ring tones that you can sell. There are also a number of multiple-track studio apps or apps that include a recording studio—JamUP Pro is one—that you can use to record your students. If you open an account with the Internet company, CD Baby Now, you can upload the recording to their website. The music is then posted on iTunes, and the money you make in sales to your community will generate income for your program.

## **RECRUITMENT**

The demonstration of at least one electric instrument and effects box during a recruiting presentation will generate excitement for strings and create a buzz for orchestra that chorus and band can't compete with.

## **RESOURCES**

### [Electric Spice Video Tutorials:](#)

(<http://julielyonn.com/projects/bollywood-strings>)

1. Electric Strings: FAQ — Parts A and B
2. Electric Strings: Equipment and Setup — Parts A and B
3. Bollywood Strings: Special Techniques — Parts A, B, C, and D

Four tutorials to help prepare players to perform the electric violin part in “Bollywood Strings”

4. NS Design Setup: Shoulder rest placement and how to change the strings — Parts A and B

### [Strings Without Boundaries BLOGS \(<http://www.stringswithoutboundaries.com/downloads/blogs.html>\)](#)

Amplification, Looping, Technology for strings, and more.