

SOUND
OFF

How do you handle flying with an instrument?

As summer travel season arrives, five musicians offer tips on how to navigate air travel with large or valuable instruments.

BY BRIAN WISE

Nick Canellakis ('06)

Curtis cello faculty and Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center member

→ Cellist and filmmaker Nick Canellakis drew knowing laughs this spring when he posted a video on Instagram titled “Musicians Comparing Airline Status.” It features him portraying two musicians boasting about their award status and benefits on an airline. “I’m addicted to the lounge; what can I say?” begins the one musician while smugly tossing his credit card on the table. Mr. Canellakis says that while a seasoned musician can avoid certain hassles at the airport, getting a bulky instrument onto a plane requires extra planning.

PRE-BOARD: “For cellists, keep in mind the basic stuff. You must buy a seat for it, and if you don’t know that, you’re not in the game yet (laughs). You usually need to get the cello in a window seat. You can get an extension seat belt. I don’t personally care about that stuff, but the flight attendants usually do. Pre-boarding is key for me, just for ease of comfort. Some airlines allow a cellist to do that; some don’t. Delta certainly does. I avoid Air Canada because they put this Hannibal Lecter-like cage over the cello.

“Occasionally, even on airlines that I fly regularly, you get a flight attendant that is a bit uptight and maybe has never seen a cello before and doesn’t know the FAA rules, which allow musical instruments. They’ll give you a real problem. You just have to stay calm and explain that you’re not leaving the flight and you’re not changing. You can pull up the FAA regulation.”

TSA CHECKPOINT: “The bins at security are the worst thing for cellists. The cello does fit through the X-ray machine, but they won’t let it in. So, you must go to the oversized [checkpoint] and hand the cello to a TSA agent. That’s when I say, ‘It’s extremely expensive. You have to handle it with care, and put it on its back, not on its front.’ It feels very vulnerable when that happens. That’s way worse than being on board.”

ARABELLA OZ

Bella Hristova ('08)

Violinist

→ Though a self-described “airplane nut” on her social media accounts, Bella Hristova admits that her relationship with flying is more of the “love-hate” variety. She remembers flying as a child and once being delighted to visit the cockpit mid-flight during a trip to Salzburg. But weather delays and turbulence can add to the stress of a journey. She’s developed a series of travel hacks over the years.

ARRIVAL: “I have TSA PreCheck and Clear, both of which I recommend, though Clear, I suppose, is more of a luxury to save time. TSA Pre is great for flying with an instrument because you usually go through another belt, and you can get to your instrument on the other side faster without having to take out liquids, etc. From the time I was a student, I tried to keep airline loyalty with an airline based in Philly, which has lots of non-stop options—then US Airways, now American Airlines. That allows me to board earlier. I try to get to the gate 30 minutes before boarding, and I get in line as soon as they announce boarding.”

AT THE TSA: “Although very rare, if the TSA asks to do a manual inspection, insist that you are present and talk the agent through how to go about opening the case, what’s inside, etc. Saying ‘this is an antique instrument’ helps.”

ON THE PLANE: “I try to select the exit row. I like that for many reasons, one of them being that I can board early, but also, there’s more legroom. If one is a nervous flyer, being in the middle of the plane is great.”

OVERHEAD SPACE: “I have a Gawa Air 2.1 case. It’s a very sturdy hard case, and in the winter, I travel with a cushy case around it. Most airplanes in the U.S. now will fit a violin case. I’m always just on alert until the bins are closed. I’m very happy to work with passengers. In mid-sized planes like the 737 and the Airbus A321, a suitcase will fit in front of the case sideways. In trying to find solutions, I’m often looking at other bins, trying to see what can be moved in front of the violin. I’m always plotting ahead.”

INTERNATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS: “For international travel, make sure you have your instrument insurance papers with you, and be sure you’re not traveling with any controlled materials out of the country—i.e., tortoiseshell frogs, ivory. I don’t have a bow with a tortoiseshell frog anymore, but when I did, I never took it out of the U.S.”

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE DOUBLE BASS:



Xavier Foley ('16)

Double Bassist

→ There are different schools of thought about traveling with a double bass: Removable neck or not? Fly with your instrument or borrow one? A few years ago, Texas-based bassist Xavier Foley found air travel so onerous that he took flying lessons in the hopes of doing it himself. Ultimately, he arrived at other solutions.

THE DETACHABLE NECK: “My bass has a screw in the neck. All you do is screw it off, you take the tailpiece, and the end pin off, and that’s pretty much it. That goes next to the body of the instrument. If it’s not a removable neck, then it’s glued on. If workers drop the bass, which is what they often do, the glue will come apart. Now you have a problem.”

PILOTING: “The problem was the fees for the bass were so high on certain airlines. I enjoyed flying at first, but then I started getting headaches and getting tired. Plus, I don’t want to have to calculate weight and balance and wind speed and runway length. I figured it would be safer for a professional to fly. I’d rather sit back, relax, and watch a movie.”

BASS-FRIENDLY AIRLINES: “It’s less common for airlines in other countries to accept basses in general. I take American Airlines because they have a policy where musical instruments are not charged oversized fees. Southwest Airlines has a flat fee for oversized instruments. It’s simple, and they fly the same 737s. JetBlue is another one that always flies the big jets.”

PRO TIP: “If you have problems with a gate agent, which often happens, remain calm. Some of them have ego issues. They don’t want to be wrong. Show them the policy—and good luck.”

Marguerite Cox ('23)

Double Bassist; fellow in Ensemble Connect

→ New York-based bassist Maggie Cox is a seasoned road warrior, having once traveled with a suitcase, a bass stool, a cat, and her instrument. These days, she prefers trains and has even created an online video on “how to take a double bass on Amtrak.”

FLYING WITH A BASS IS STRESSFUL: “Do Amtrak when you can. Their policy is very consistent: No one touches the bass except you. Otherwise, see if you can borrow or rent an instrument, and if you do need to fly, make sure you have a good flight case. Make sure you give yourself lots of extra time. Carry printouts of the airline policy and TSA policy that say you can bring a musical instrument. If you’re not that experienced with flying with your bass, ask for help carrying it. Have a friend drive you to the airport if you can so you don’t have to deal with Uber.”

INSPECTION TIME: “Don’t forget to inspect it when you land. When I land and go to oversized baggage, I always take the bass completely out of the case in the airport to see if there’s any damage. You must check it while it’s at the airport for insurance to work. If you don’t, the airlines will say, ‘You can’t prove that we did that.’

“Also, know that it’s out of your control at a certain point, and if something happens, basses are fixable, and that’s why we have insurance.”



MATT DINE (FOLEY)



Craig Knox ('89)

Curtis tuba faculty; Principal Tuba, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

→ For Craig Knox, most of his long-distance travel takes place with the Pittsburgh Symphony, where his tuba is shipped in dedicated cargo. But when traveling to give a recital or workshop, he'll often ask to borrow a tuba from someone at the destination or drive, if possible. Otherwise, it pays to understand some customer service psychology at the airport.

OVERSIZE CHARGES: "The first big stress is just what it's going to cost [to check your tuba(s)]. The over-size and overweight charge sometimes can be \$150 or \$200 each if they really play by the book. So, you must learn how to sweet-talk the agent at the check-in counter and come up with a sad story about how difficult it is to be a traveling musician and hope you can get them to sympathize with you and cut you a break (laughs). But you're at the mercy of whoever's behind the counter. Sometimes they'll look the other way and put it in there like any other suitcase. Other times, they go by the book and charge you hundreds of dollars just for one leg of the journey."

TSA CHECKPOINT: "I usually ask if I can accompany the instrument to the TSA [inspection] station. They

usually are happy to let me do this. I'll go with the instrument and meet with the TSA person, where they're doing a visual inspection. They'll let you stand there and talk them through it. But if it's not possible to be there, inside the case I have this big sign with a warning that it's a fragile instrument, and to please handle and close it this way. I don't know if they're going to read it, but you hope that it helps."

TUBA AS CARRY-ON: "There is one other option, which is to buy an extra seat and fly with the instrument in the cabin of the plane. That can be a good solution to all the difficulties I just described. However, it's not as great as it sounds. You have a ticket [for the tuba], but you're still at the mercy of the flight crew, and if they don't like the looks of this whole thing, they can still give you a hard time. It's never ended up being as improved a choice as I'd hoped."

BORROWING AN INSTRUMENT: "We've had students who come to audition for us at Curtis from across the country. Especially when students must bring two tubas, they may not have the means to manage that. Sometimes, they'll ask if they can borrow an instrument when they get here. We always try to accommodate that when we can. No one wants to play on a borrowed instrument, but sometimes that's the best option."

Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.