

1704 Variation Violin Varnish Recipe

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This varnish recipe is based on an old traditional Italian recipe (the 1704 varnish) with slight changes. It was adapted by violin maker Leif Luscombe who found it to be an excellent varnish for new instruments - it dries fairly fast, is transparent and durable (not too hard or soft). He prefers the varnish to have a 'natural' feel, as most of the older Italian violins have. The materials to make it are available on our web site at www.violins.ca, and the preparation instructions below are fairly easy to follow; the process takes about 1-3 weeks and only about an hour of time (once you have the equipment and supplies).

A small amount of mastic improves adherence between coats, and the sandarac adds a bit of hardness. These ingredients are included in our varnish ingredients package, item number 2-1704I (please note that this is a double recipe):

90 grams seedlac
10 grams gum mastic
10 grams gum sandarac
10-14 ml. lavender spike oil (more oil yields a softer and more supple varnish)

400 ml. of ethyl alcohol are needed for this recipe, and is not included with the ingredients. This is available from us, or from a hardware store or chemical supply. We use denatured ethanol, which contains about 5-10% methyl alcohol (and thus is not subject to liquor taxes in Canada).

Preparation Instructions

Place all of the ingredients in a glass jar and let it dissolve, stirring at least twice a day, until the gums no longer sit and stick to the bottom of the jar (this may take from one to three weeks). When completely dissolved (there will be some naturally occurring dirt and sludge), boil in a double boiler for seven minutes, let cool, and then boil again for seven minutes. While still warm, filter through a cloth (a cheesecloth is good). If it is allowed to cool it will be difficult to filter. Repeat the filtering process until there is no more dirt in the filter (2-3 times is usually sufficient). Once this process is complete, and the varnish has cooled, it is ready to use. Since alcohol is lost in the cooking process, thinning with alcohol will probably be necessary to obtain brushing consistency. Be sure to have extra alcohol on hand for this.

The varnish colour will vary, depending on the particular shipment of Seedlac. This can range from a light yellow-gold, to an old-gold; from reddish to green. The 1704 varnish will usually be quite light without the use of colours. Leif prefers to start with a yellow base and build the darker colours on top. A varnish that does not have a good colour base of yellow tends to look incomplete regardless how much colour is put over the white wood. For more information about colouring violin varnish, please visit www.violins.ca/varnish/

Enjoy!

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