

Alice: Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English: the programme in which we talk about a story in the news and learn some vocabulary while we're doing it. I'm Alice and joining me today is Neil. Hi there, Neil.

Neil: Hi Alice.

Alice: Now, Neil I know you're very musical – but can you spot a **multi-million** dollar violin when you hear one?

Neil: A multi-million dollar violin? So, that's a musical instrument which costs several million US dollars? Who's got that kind of money to spend on an instrument?

Alice: Somebody with lots and lots of money. When we talk about dollars in English, they usually mean US dollars. Anyway, let's listen to these two violins, and then tell me which sound you like the best, and which do you think is the most valuable?

Neil: OK.

The same musical scale played on two different violins

Alice: So, did you like the sound of the first violin, or the second?

Neil: Well, my perfect musical ears are telling me the second violin was the multi-million dollar one.

Alice: And was that the one you liked best?

Neil: Oh yes. Of course!

Alice: Good taste. Well done. One of the qualities which makes the sound so wonderful is what's called **timbre** – the quality of the sound. And that leads me to another question, Neil. Which language does the word timbre come from originally? Is it:

- a) Russian
- b) Italian
- c) French

Neil: Hmm. Definitely not Russian. I would be tempted to say French but most musical expressions come from Italian. So I'm going to say Italian.

Alice: Well, as usual we won't find out the answer until the end of the programme. Let's talk some more about violins. What makes one violin sound so much better than another?

Neil: I like that very **mellow** sound – a sound that is sweet and rich.

Alice: Mellow. We talk about coffee being mellow, rich and sweet - and sound can be mellow too. What makes an instrument **top of the range**? The best that is on offer. Here's Professor Tasmin Little from the Royal Academy of Music, who is also a concert violinist – a soloist.

Professor Tasmin Little:

There are two most famous and great makers. Stradivari is the most famous, but also there is Guarneri del Gesù who is also very favoured by top soloists, perhaps the instruments are more mellow in sound. But certainly, there is nothing to beat a Stradivarius, because they are just really the top of the range instruments. And I'm very, very fortunate to have this instrument on loan from the Royal Academy of Music.

Alice: So Professor Tasmin Little says there is nothing to beat a Stradivarius – it's the top of the range.

Neil: And she's very fortunate – very lucky to have one on loan. That means she's borrowing the violin to play at concerts.

Alice: Yeah – as some Stradivarius violins cost several million dollars, I don't think many musicians would be able to afford them themselves.

Neil: And what is it about violins made by the Stradivari family in 17th and 18th centuries that makes them so special?

Alice: As we've heard that word before, they have great timbre – the sound they make **reverberates**.

Neil: Reverberates – it echoes back at you. A really rich, deep sound. How did violin makers like the Stradivari family give violins that special sound quality?

Alice: Professor Little says that's **the billion dollar question**. It means that's the question that everybody would like answered. If we could only understand what gives these violins their very special quality, people would have copied the technique ages ago:

Professor Tasmin Little:

That's the billion dollar question, isn't it – it's one that has foxed people for centuries. People have come up with all sorts of explanations. There are a few, such as: at the point when Stradivarius was choosing his wood, there had been a particularly cold spell of temperature and the trees had grown very slowly and, therefore, with more density. Apparently he used to go into forests and tap on the trees and listen to how reverberant they were and, according to the results, he would chop them down or not.

- Alice:** So it's believed that violin makers chose the wood they used to make the violins for their reverberant qualities. There had been a cold spell, and the trees had grown slowly, so the wood was more dense.
- Neil:** Professor Tasmin Little says that's one possibility why the violins are so special.
- Alice:** Now, before we go, Neil - have you had a think about the origins of the word timbre? I asked if the word came originally from French, Russian or Italian.
- Neil:** Well I said Italian, but judging by the way you've been pronouncing that word, I think I'm probably wrong!
- Alice:** You're right. It's French. Well, well done anyway. Now, time for a recap of some of the words we heard in today's programme.
- Neil:** They are: **multi-million, timbre, mellow, top of the range, reverberates, the billion dollar question**
- Alice:** Join us again soon for more 6 Minute English from bbclearningenglish.com.
- Neil:** And don't forget to find us on Facebook and Twitter.
- Alice:** Bye for now.
- Neil:** Bye.

Vocabulary and definitions

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| multi-million | several million |
| timbre | quality of the sound |
| mellow | rich and sweet |
| top of the range | best on offer |
| reverberates | echoes back |
| the billion dollar question | the question everyone wants to know the answer to |

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