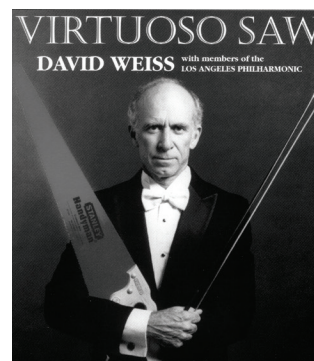


BY JON VARA

Saw players cut loose at an annual get-together in Felton, Calif. While often seen as a folk instrument, the musical saw has another dimension as well. Classical oboist David Weiss (far right) has performed on the Stanley Handyman at the Hollywood Bowl and other prestigious venues.



Song of the Saw

Full-size handsaws, once indispensable to the day-to-day business of cutting lumber to size, are seldom seen on modern jobsites. But they have another, equally traditional use that persists today: as musical instruments. A hundred years ago, saws were manufactured specifically for use in vaudeville musical acts. A few—such as the Bahco (formerly Sandvik) “Stradivarius” and the Mussehl & Westphal “Professional”—are still available.

But professional saw player David Weiss favors the familiar Stanley “Handyman,” finding that its thin-gauge steel produces excellent tone. Weiss should know what he’s talking about. A classically trained woodwind player who enjoyed a 20-year career as first oboe with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, he has played saw on *The Tonight Show*, recorded a well-received CD, and appeared on movie soundtracks, most notably the 2000 comedy *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Weiss describes the sound of the musical saw as “a combination of a soprano voice and a whistle.” Perhaps the best way to experience the sound, though, is to start playing yourself. Apart from a saw, all you need to get

started is a \$20 violin or cello bow. If that’s more than you want to spend, you can use a straight dowel rod as a bow, or simply strike the saw gently with a mallet. Thanks to YouTube, there’s no shortage of instruction and performance videos available. After that, as with carpentry itself, it’s just a matter of practice.

And should you someday find yourself on stage, you can use an old-as-the-hills warm-up gag that’s still one of David Weiss’ favorites: After flexing your saw, look around for a chair and, not seeing one, gesture toward the wings. A stagehand then brings out a stool with four legs, one of which is two inches longer than the others. After several frustrating attempts to sit on the tilted stool, pull a carpenter’s tape from your pocket. Measure the legs, then trim the long one to length with your saw (this is easier if you’ve sawed halfway through the leg ahead of time). Take your seat to applause and cheers, tuck the handle of your saw between your knees, raise your bow, and begin to play.

Jon Vara is a writer in Cabot, Vt.

Photos: courtesy David Weiss