

Musical Instrument Maker interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for Musical Instrument Maker roles typically combine a conversation about your craft with a practical assessment, because employers need to see how you work with materials and tools, not just hear about it. Expect questions that probe your technical process, how you handle repair problems, and how you deal with musicians who are anxious about their instruments.

- **Technical and craft process:** Questions about how you select and season tonewoods, shape components, set up instruments and use tools like CNC routers or moisture meters.
- **Scenario and repair judgement:** A damaged or difficult instrument is described, and you talk through your diagnosis, repair approach and the trade-offs you would make.
- **Behavioural:** Questions asking for a real example of a time you solved a problem, managed a deadline or worked with a challenging client.
- **Client-facing and communication:** How you explain repair options, costs and timelines to musicians who may not know the technical detail.
- **Safety and workshop practice:** Questions about WHS, dust extraction, tool guarding and safe handling of finishes and adhesives.

The interview usually starts with a tour of the workshop and a look at your portfolio or photos of completed instruments. Then a one-on-one conversation with the owner or senior maker, followed by a practical test such as a setup, a simple repair or a component shaping task. Some employers ask you to bring a small tool kit and complete a bench task while they observe. The final part is often a discussion about your availability, how you work in a small team, and any questions you have.

1. Walk me through how you select and season tonewood for a steel-string guitar.

Why they ask

This shows whether you understand material behaviour and can avoid costly failures like cracks or warping after assembly.

How to structure your answer

Process walk-through: start with species and grain, move to moisture checks and storage, then explain how you know the wood is ready to work.

Example answer

"When I select tonewood for a steel-string guitar, I start with the species and the intended sound. For tops, I look for straight, even grain with no runout, and I tap the board to listen for a clear ring. I check moisture content with a meter, aiming for the dry range that keeps instrument timber stable. Then I stack and sticker the boards in a dry, ventilated area and let them acclimatise for weeks or months depending on thickness. I check the moisture meter again before I joint or thickness the plates, because if it moves after assembly, the instrument can crack or go out of shape. Once the wood is stable, I mill it to thickness and brace the top to get the response I want. I also keep notes on each set so I can repeat a good result."

2. A violinist brings in an instrument with a cracked top and a bridge that is leaning forward. They need it back in five days for a concert. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

This tests your judgement under time pressure and whether you will risk an instrument to meet a deadline.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: assess the damage, prioritise what is safe, communicate clearly with the client, plan the work, and outline a contingency if the full repair will not be safe in time.

Example answer

"First I would assess the damage properly. A cracked top on a violin needs to be stabilised, and a leaning bridge could mean the soundpost is out of place or the top has distorted. I would check the crack for separation and whether it needs cleats or a patch. Then I would tell the client honestly what can be done in five days. If the crack is clean and the bridge just needs resetting, I can do a safe repair and a setup in that time, but I would not rush a soundpost adjustment or a patch that needs drying time. I would give them two options: a concert-ready temporary stabilisation that protects the instrument, or a full repair that takes longer but is permanent. I would document the condition before I start, so we both know what changed. If the repair is not safe in the time, I would say so and suggest a loan instrument or a later date rather than risk the violin."

3. Tell me about a time you had to repair an instrument under time pressure or with limited information.

Why they ask

This reveals how you solve problems when the usual parts or information are not available.

How to structure your answer

STAR: describe the situation, the task you faced, the action you took and the result, keeping the focus on your decisions.

Example answer

"At a previous workshop, a customer brought in a clarinet that had a leak and a bent key, and they needed it for a school performance in two days. I did not have the exact replacement key in stock, so I carefully straightened the existing key on a mandrel, replaced the pad, and regulated the instrument. I tested it with a feeler gauge and played a scale to check the seal. I finished it in a day and a half, and the student was able to use it. The repair held, and the customer came back for regular servicing. I learned to keep a small stock of common pads and springs so I am not caught short."

4. How do you explain a repair that is technically complex to a client who does not know instrument repair?

Why they ask

Musicians often feel anxious about their instruments, so clear communication builds trust and reduces misunderstandings.

How to structure your answer

Plain-language explanation: ask about their concern, describe the problem without jargon, offer options with trade-offs, check understanding, and put the agreement in writing.

Example answer

"I start by asking what they have noticed about the instrument, so I understand their concern. Then I explain the problem in plain terms: for example, 'the glue joint along the back has opened, which is why you hear a buzz on certain notes.' I avoid words like 'cleating' unless they ask. I show them the instrument and point to the area, if that helps. I give them the options: a minimal repair that stabilises it, or a full restoration that takes longer and costs more. I explain what each option means for sound and longevity. Then I ask if they have questions, and I put the agreed work in writing. I want them to feel informed, not pressured."

5. What safety practices do you follow when using a CNC router or other power tools in a small workshop?

Why they ask

Small workshops can be hazardous, and employers need to know you will not cut corners on safety.

How to structure your answer

Hazard identification and controls: name the specific risks, describe the controls you use routinely, and mention housekeeping and reporting.

Example answer

"Before I use a CNC router, I check the machine guards and emergency stop. I make sure the material is clamped properly and the bit is sharp and suitable for the job. I wear eye and hearing protection, and I tie back loose clothing. I check dust extraction is working, because fine dust from some woods and composites is a health risk. I never leave the machine running unattended. For hand tools, I keep the bench clear, use sharp blades, and cut away from my body. At the end of the day I clean down, check the dust extractor, and report any damage or near miss. In a small workshop, housekeeping is safety."

6. How do you set up an electric guitar for intonation and action, and what tools do you use?

Why they ask

This is a core technical task that affects how the instrument feels and plays, and it shows your attention to detail.

How to structure your answer

Step-by-step technical demonstration: explain each adjustment in order, name the tools, and describe how you verify the result.

Example answer

"I start by checking the neck relief with a straight edge and feeler gauges, then adjust the truss rod if needed. I set the action at the bridge to the player's preference, measuring at the twelfth fret. Then I tune to pitch and check each string's intonation at the twelfth fret harmonic and fretted note. If the fretted note is sharp, I move the saddle back; if flat, forward. I use an electronic tuner for accuracy. I repeat until each string is close. Then I check pickup height and play the guitar to make sure bends do not fret out. I like to use a capo and a small ruler, plus the tuner, and I write down the settings so I can return to them if the player wants a different feel."