A Guide to Flying with Musical Instruments

Produced by the AFM in collaboration with the members of the National Musical Instrument Carry-On Coalition

Contact: Alfonso M. Pollard, Legislative-Political Director, (202) 274-4756
American Federation of Musicians, Office of Government Relations
5335 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Ste. 440; Washington, DC 20015

CONTENTS

AIR TRAVEL TIPS FOR INSTRUMENTAL MUSICIANS 3
FEDERAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENT AVIATION POLICY 3
BEFORE YOU PURCHASE YOUR TICKET 4
CHOOSING AN AIRLINE AND MAKING YOUR RESERVATION 4
PACKING AND CARRYING YOUR INSTRUMENT 5
DEAL CALMLY WITH PROBLEMS 6
ABBREVIATED PROCEDURES — TRAVEL TIPS 7
ADDITIONAL WEBSITE RESOURCES 8

THE NATIONAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENT CARRY-ON COALITION

American Federation of Musicians of the US & Canada afm.org
Raymond M. Hair, Jr., *President*
Dave Pomeroy, *AFM Executive Board Member and President of AFM Local 257, Nashville, TN*
Edgardo Malaga, *President of AFM Local 161-710, Washington, DC*
Jennifer Mondie, *National Symphony Orchestra Violist and ICSOM Governing Board Member*
Alfonso M. Pollard, *AFM Legislative-Political Director*

Association of Performing Arts Presenters apap365.org
Mario Garcia Durham, *President and CEO*

Chamber Music America chamber-music.org
Margaret Lioi, *CEO*

Department for Professional Employees dpeaflcio.org
Paul Almeida, *President*
Eric Geist, *Assistant to the President*

Folk Alliance International folkalliance.org
Aengus Finnan, *Executive Director*

League of American Orchestras americanorchestras.org
Heather Noonan, *Vice President for Advocacy*

MusicFIRST Coalition musicfirstcoalition.org
Ted Kalo, *Executive Director*

The Recording Academy grammy.org/advocacy
Todd Dupler, *Senior Director of Advocacy & Public Policy*

Performing Arts Alliance www.thepaalliance.org
Cristine Davis, *General Manager*

Recording Industry Association of America riaa.com
Morna Willens, *Senior Vice President, Federal Public Policy*

The AFM partnered with the National Musical Instrument Carry-on Coalition to work with the DOT, FAA, and airline industry to resolve long overdue inconsistent travel policies. Read more at: internationalmusician.org/musical-instrument-airline-carriage-rule/

AIR TRAVEL TIPS FOR INSTRUMENTAL MUSICIANS

Ongoing changes to security measures at U.S. airports and revised airline policies impact the ability of musicians to carry their instruments in-cabin.

Certain uniform rules for travel with musical instruments by air are now in place as the result of music stakeholders' engagement with Congress, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), and national and regional airlines. The American Federation of Musicians (AFM), League of American Orchestras, The Recording Academy, Chamber Music America, Performing Arts Alliance, Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), AFL-CIO Department for Professional Employees (DPE), Association of Performing Arts Presenters, Music First Coalition, Folk Alliance International, and musician members of our respective organizations have pursued policies that will make travel with musical instruments more predictable and accommodating.

Below is important information these groups have compiled to help your instrument safely reach your destination. Knowledge and advanced planning are the keys to successful travel with your instrument.

FEDERAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENT AVIATION POLICY

On March 6, 2015, new Department of Transportation administrative rules for musical instruments went into effect as required by the FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-95). The text of the regulations can be found in the Federal Register (www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/01/05/2014-30836/carriage-of-musical-instruments) or at www.dot.gov/airconsumer. The regulation establishes a uniform national policy regarding musical instruments as carry-on and checked baggage on U.S. air carriers flying domestically and internationally.

☛ https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/01/05/2014-30836/carriage-of-musical-instruments

Airlines must accommodate musical instruments as *carry-on items* as long as there is room available in the overhead bin or under-seat area at the time of boarding and the instrument can be safely stowed. Instruments should be in a case or cover to avoid injuring passengers. While not all airlines permit passengers to purchase a seat for larger instruments, the DOT has encouraged them to do so.

Airlines must allow musicians to check musical instruments in the baggage hold upon request, as long as the sum of the length, width, and height of the exterior case dimensions does not exceed 150 inches or the applicable size restrictions for the aircraft; its weight does not exceed 165 pounds or the applicable weight restrictions for the aircraft. As a practical matter, the aircraft's cargo hold should be sufficiently large to accommodate such items. Larger instruments allowed as checked baggage may be subject to the same oversize or overweight fees that would apply to other checked baggage of that size and weight.

BEFORE YOU PURCHASE YOUR TICKET

Insure your instrument. Your instrument is one of the most valuable and important tools of your musical career. Damage and/or destruction can lead to missed performances and/or a longtime disassociation between you and your valuable work tool. Some airlines disclaim liability altogether for loss of or damage to musical instruments on domestic trips. On international trips (including domestic portion of international journeys) airlines are prohibited by treaty from disclaiming liability for baggage that they carry. Airlines that have liability or damage recovery allowances nonetheless normally do not cover the cost of replacement. If your instrument should be lost, damaged or delayed, there is a limit on the airline's liability. At this writing the limits are $3,500 per passenger for domestic trips, and 1,131 "Special Drawing Rights" for international trips (including the domestic portion of an international itinerary). A "Special Drawing Right" is an international currency surrogate that floats on a daily basis. (At this writing 1,131 SDRs is equal to about US $1,580.) You can visit www.imf.org to see its current value. Hence, it is up to the artist-musician to be prepared with his or her own insurance.

Measure and weigh your instrument (in its case). Determine the size in linear inches. Linear inches refer to the sum of the three dimensions. (For example, if your case has dimensions of 20" x 10" x 10", the linear measure would be 40".)

CHOOSING AN AIRLINE AND MAKING YOUR RESERVATION

Notify the airline that you will be flying with a musical instrument. When selecting an air carrier, call to confirm that you are traveling with a musical instrument and to inquire whether the size of the aircraft might limit your ability to fly with an instrument in cabin or in the cargo hold—and be sure to have on hand the exterior dimensions of your instrument's case. Keep in mind that the size of overhead bins can vary greatly from one aircraft to another, and reservation agents may not be able to specify the type of aircraft in advance of travel.

Airlines make their policies available online—print and carry a copy. A summary prepared by Airlines for America (www.airlines.org/blog/instrument-rated-air-travel-for-musicians/) provides an overview of some, but not all, policies established by major airlines. Be sure to click the links in the chart to view the full airline policies for further detail. If you are traveling on one of the airlines listed on this page, print a copy of the web page and take it with you.

When making your reservation, consider options for early boarding. Depending on individual airline policies, paying extra for early boarding or requesting a seat assignment at the back of the plane may provide more time to stow your instrument, and more space options. Paying for early boarding may

- When booking air tickets, musicians should inform carrier representative(s) that he or she will be transporting a musical instrument.
- Air carriers are required to adequately inform passengers and the public about the limitations and restrictions imposed.
- Ask ticket agent for priority seating when making reservations. Request (or purchase) Zone 1 boarding, which will allow you early access to overhead bins stowage.
- Special fees may not be charged for carrying an instrument, but fees that apply to all carry-on or checked items will apply to instruments.

be well worth the cost if it means space will be available for your instrument. For certain airlines, passengers seated in the rear of the aircraft are boarded immediately after first class and special needs passengers, so it's worthwhile to find out how the airline you will fly determines its boarding order. Asking for pre-boarding at the gate is risky and may be too late. It is suggested that as many of your boarding arrangements as possible be made prior to your arrival at the airport.

Notify reservation agents of oversized items. For space and safety reasons, many airlines have limits on the number of oversized items allowed in-cabin. Flight crews have to ensure that oversized items such as large musical instruments occupying a passenger seat do not block passenger views of safety signs (e.g., "Fasten Seat Belt"). Even if you paid an additional fee or booked a seat for your instrument, ask the reservation agent to record that you are traveling with an oversized musical instrument.

To see the new federal rules for travel with instruments, go to www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/air-travel-tips. Print and take a copy with you when flying. Having a copy of the rules to reference can be helpful if you encounter problems while traveling.

PACKING AND CARRYING YOUR INSTRUMENT

Limit the number of carry-on items. On most airlines, passengers are permitted one carry-on bag (stored in the overhead bin) and one personal item (stored under the seat). Your instrument will be counted as one of these items. The new law does not require exceptions to this rule. If your instrument is equivalent in size to a "personal item," then you may also bring another carry-on item. On the other hand, if your instrument is too large to be deemed as a "personal item" or too large to fit under the seat, the airline is allowed to treat the instrument as the allowed carry-on item instead of "personal item," and in that case you may have to check your carry-on item and pay any associated fees for checking that bag.

Remove all extraneous items from the case. If you plan to carry your instrument into the cabin, all tools and other items should be checked or carried separately to simplify the screening process. What are completely familiar items to you—cleaning fluids and tools, valve oil, end pins, reed knives, mutes, tuners, metronomes—may seem threatening to screening personnel. Know what items are prohibited in carry-on bags by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) regulations. If you are unsure whether an item is permitted, the safest course is to keep it in your checked baggage.

Have a backup plan. Prepare yourself for the possibility that you may not be able to travel with your instrument in-cabin—even if you have followed all possible procedures. What will you do? Are you willing to send your instrument by air courier?

- If you are carrying your instrument into the cabin, remove any sharp tools (for example, reed knives and end pins) and liquid items (cleaning fluids and valve oil) that do not comply with the TSA's 3 oz. regulation. www.tsa.gov/travel/security-screening/prohibited-items
- If there's a possibility that your instrument will not be allowed in the cabin with you, be sure to have a proper travel case to avoid damage.
- Board early: overhead stowage is on a first come, first serve basis. Airlines are not required to give you boarding priority because you are traveling with your instrument. Priority boarding may be available because of your frequent-flyer status, or your seat assignment. If those don't apply to you, you may want to pay a fee for priority boarding if such an option is offered by the airline.
- Once an instrument is stowed in-cabin, it cannot be removed or be replaced by other bags.

If you must check your instrument, insist that it is put in the temperature controlled section of the cargo hold where pets are placed. If it goes in the regular baggage hold, changes in temperature may cause serious damage. Be sure that you have a hard-sided travel case, but simply placing an instrument in a hard case is not enough. Use foam rubber blocks, bubble wrap, Styrofoam chips ("popcorn") or compressed soft paper to keep the instrument from moving.

In the event that an airline or TSA prevents you from bringing an instrument on board your flight, there are potentially two options available. Some airlines will provide passengers with a box or envelope, obtained at the airline's ticket counter, in which the item can be shipped back home. Also, at some airports, private shipping companies have set up self-service kiosks.

Examine your instrument for damage before leaving the airport at your destination. If you encounter a problem with damage, report the problem immediately to the airline baggage office near the bag-claim carousels and be sure to fill out a claim form, BEFORE you leave the airport.

DEAL CALMLY WITH PROBLEMS

It is crucial as a traveling musician that you be aware of several important facts:

- The most important responsibility of airport and transportation (TSA) officials is security.
- The most important responsibility of gate agents and flight attendants is safety.
- The most important responsibility of the captain is safety AND security.

Your instrument may be an unusual and unexpected item to aviation personnel. Gate agents and flight crews have a very short period of time to seat passengers in an aircraft. You (and your instrument) are only one of many passengers that will likely have special needs. However, you have the right to travel with your instrument in the cabin in the manner described in this brochure. Don't take it personally if a gate agent or a flight crew member seems indifferent to your concerns. Their time is limited. In many cases, the problem may be resolved easily.

Remain calm and polite, and consider these options when encountering difficulty:

1) **Calmly and quickly** state your understanding of the new federal rules (showing the copy you have printed to carry with you) and explain the precautions you have taken to prepare your instrument to safely travel by air.
2) **Be accommodating** by suggesting placing the instrument in the rear of the cabin, or securing the instrument with cords or ties provided by the airline. Do not bring your own, as they may not be permitted as an approved restraint.

3) DO NOT block the way of boarding passengers.

4) If necessary, immediately ask to deplane so that you can resolve this matter with a customer service representative or airline supervisor. Remember that you have limited time to resolve this issue before the plane backs away from the gate.

Submit formal complaints to the airline and DOT. If your experience flying runs counter to the policies posted by the airlines, you are strongly encouraged to submit a complaint to both the airline and the U.S. Department of Transportation. Start first with a complaint to the airline. DOT requires airlines to acknowledge consumer complaints within 30 days of receiving it and to send a substantive response within 60 days of receiving the complaint. Next, submit a copy of your complaint to the DOT at https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/file-consumer-complaint, so that they have a record of the difficulty musicians encounter when flying. DOT monitors complaints for patterns or egregious cases that warrant actions to hold airlines to laws and regulations.

ABBREVIATED PROCEDURES — TRAVEL TIPS

A. Insure your instrument.

B. Measure the size and weight, including the case.

C. Study airline carry-on and checked baggage musical instrument policies before selecting an airline.

D. While booking your reservation, tell the agent you will be traveling with a musical instrument. Ask to speak to customer service to address questions.

E. Request/purchase priority boarding in advance, and keep copies of receipts.

F. Carry a copy of the DOT rule as outlined in the Federal Register or the DOT website, as well as a copy of the airline's policies.

G. Limit carry-on items to one musical instrument, plus a personal item.

H. There's a possibility that your instrument will not be allowed in the cabin with you, be sure to have a proper travel case to avoid damage if the instrument must be stowed.

I. Remove all extraneous items from your instrument's case and carefully secure the instrument inside the case. Place identification inside and outside the case.

J. Have an alternative, back-up transportation plan in mind.

K. Do not argue with flight crews! Calmly ask to speak with a customer service supervisor.

L. Examine your instrument for possible damage before you leave the destination airport.

M. Report any violation of airline policy or damage to airline customer service before you leave the airport.

N. If you believe the airline has violated its written policies, first file a complaint with the airline. Also file a direct complaint with the Department of Transportation.

ADDITIONAL WEBSITE RESOURCES

Airlines for America Overview of Airline Policies: http://airlines.org/blog/instrument-rated-air-travel-for-musicians/

TSA Tips for Flying with Musical Instruments: http://apps.tsa.dhs.gov/mytsa/cib_results.aspx?src=tsawebsite

DOT Flying with Musical Instruments: www.dot.gov/airconsumer/air-travel-musical-instruments

Filing a Complaint with an Airline: www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/file-consumer-complaint

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Air Travel Tips for Instrumental Musicians Handbook was produced by the American Federation of Musicians in collaboration with the members of the National Musical Instrument Carry-On Coalition. With over 80,000 members, the AFM is the largest organization in the world dedicated to representing the interests of professional musicians. Learn more about the benefits of membership at afm.org.