

See all Culture

Is the airline industry waging war on classical musicians?

From 'unfair' extra charges to aggressive staff, professional artists say they're being penalised



13



Gift this article free



'The staff left me in tears – the behaviour amounted to nothing less than bullying' Credit: izusek

Gary Ryan

27 December 2024 7:15am GMT

As a composer and double bass player, Valentina Scheldhofen Ciardelli performs around the globe. Leading up to a concert, she can find herself anxious about what's ahead. This isn't due to any pre-show jitters, but rather the unique complications involved in flying to the destination with her irreplaceable instrument. "Every time I travel from Heathrow or Gatwick, I have to mentally prepare myself psychologically to have a fight or argue," says the 35-year-old. "I find travelling more stressful than performing on stage."

Ciardelli is far from alone in feeling penalised by the airline industry. Classical musicians frequently report problems negotiating their way through the minefield of varying baggage rules that differ between airlines, which they claim are sometimes capriciously enforced by aggressive gate staff. Just last week, star cellist [Sheku Kanneh-Mason](#) had to cancel a concert in Toronto after Air Canada refused to let him board with his \$3 million cello, despite having bought a separate seat ticket for it. Air Canada told CBS News: "In this case, the customers made a last-minute booking due to their original flight on another airline being cancelled," the spokesperson said. "We are still reviewing what happened including why the cello was not successfully rebooked."

In November, a musician spoke online of her "horrible experience with Ryanair". Having worked professionally

for over a decade, she said that she had never encountered an issue with travelling with her small, narrow bow case – which she says fits in the overhead lockers. Despite having taken three other flights that week with no problems, she was told by the budget airline that she would have to pay an additional charge of £60. Describing staff on the ground as “extremely rude and confrontational”, she alleged, “they would not allow me to finish a sentence and they were talking over me, shouting and laughing at me. They left me shaking and in tears...the behaviour they exhibited amounted to nothing less than bullying.”

Some musicians even fret that the “unfair” extra charges they incur are pricing people out of the industry. “There are already challenges to becoming an artist and travel shouldn’t add to that or discourage it,” says Ciardelli.



Valentina Scheldhofen Ciardelli: 'I find travelling more stressful than performing on stage' Credit: Riccardo Musacchio

The question of whether the airline industry is waging war on classical musicians came to the forefront in September when award-winning violinist Esther Abrami posted on Instagram that she had been met with “rudeness and public humiliation” when Ryanair staff would not let her board a flight from Berlin to Marseille (where she was due to record her third studio album for Sony Classical) with her violin because it measured 1cm over the cabin luggage limit. For instruments that exceed cabin baggage allowance, Ryanair’s policy is that musicians must purchase an extra seat – a charge that the Independent Society of Musicians (ISM) believe can be “disproportionate”. Although slightly exceeding cabin bag dimensions, a violin case “will easily fit in the overhead lockers,” they argue.

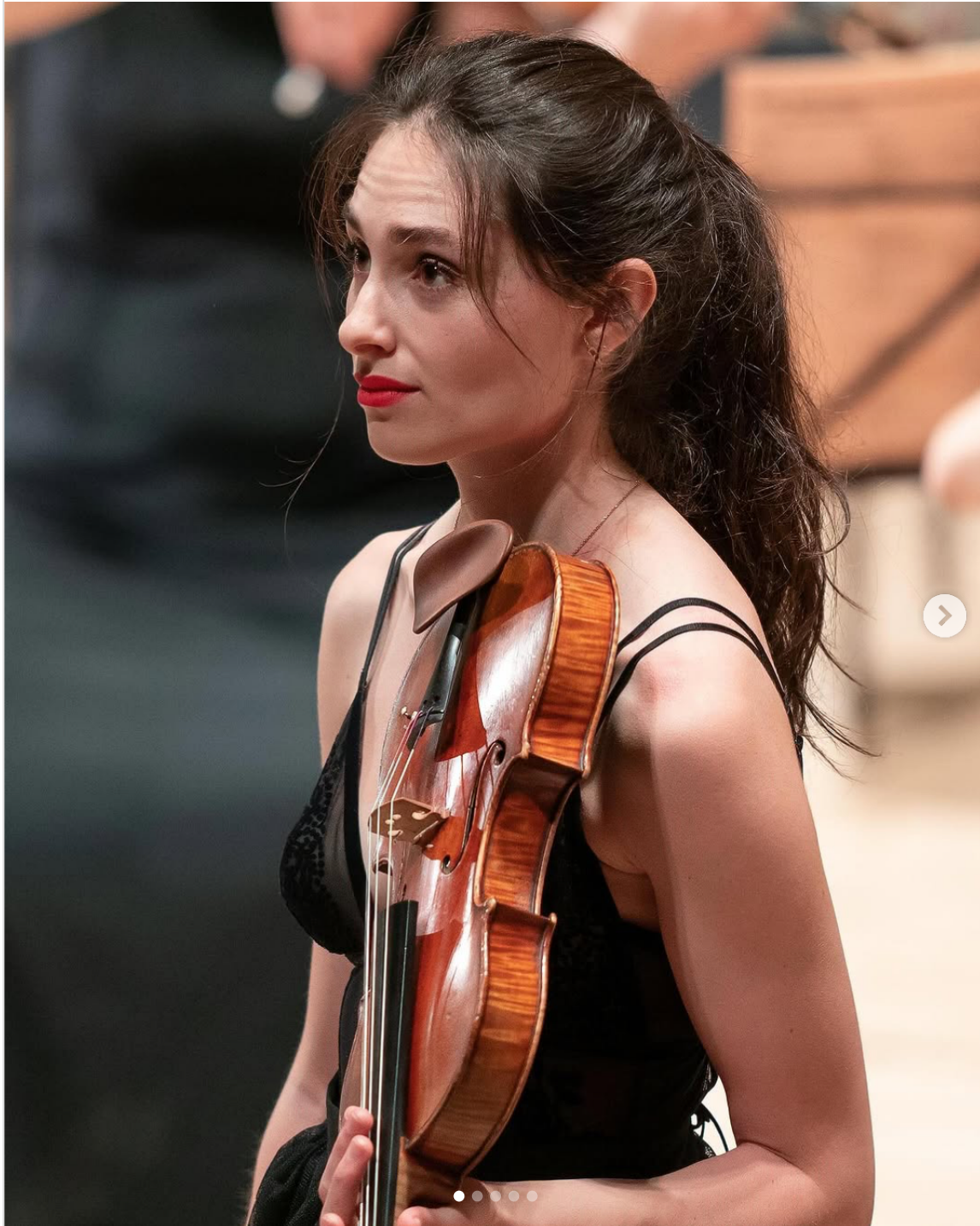
As the flight was closed, Abrami was told her only option was to check her 200-year-old Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume violin into the hold, where it could risk being crushed by suitcases. She booked a last-minute alternative flight – but points out that had she not, “a missed gig or recording session could have had a detrimental effect in a competitive industry reliant upon professionalism and reputation.”

Ryanair’s luggage allowance for oversized instruments is 20kg, with an excess fee applying for anything over this weight, but Ciardelli feels these limits are unnecessarily harsh against classical musicians. “Bikes can be a maximum of 30kg, so why are musical instruments just 20kg?” she questions. “I do feel it’s wrong and a

discrimination against musician workers. A lot of younger people are afraid to pursue a career in music, especially with big instruments due to issues such as travelling.” The Musicians’ Union points out that a double bass weighs around 30kg.

 **estherabrami** 
355K followers

[View profile](#)



[View more on Instagram](#)



30,004 likes

estherabrami

I was refused boarding on a Ryanair flight with my 200 years old violin today. On my way to Berlin, departing from Marseille to record my third album with [@sonyclassical](#), this is the first time I have experienced such rudeness and public humiliation.

Just before boarding the flight I was stopped and told I could not board on with my violin. I offered to pay whatever it would cost to take it with me, they refused. I offered to buy an extra seat, they said the flight was closed already and I could not buy an extra seat anymore (despite the flight not being full). They said the only option was to check it in with the LUGGAGES or just leave at the airport (!! 😡).

I explained the price and the fragility of the violin. I begged them, explaining I was recording this very same day for my album, telling that I had flown an incredible number of times with this company and never experienced this. It came to the point where I even offered to take my violin out of the case, keeping its fabric protection and just carry it by hand and keeping it on me during the whole flight whilst they put the case in the cargo.

They made me open my case on the floor, put the violin in the place to measure suitcases. The requirements for the cabin luggage -which I had paid for already- is a length of 55cm. My violin measures 56cm, it fitted diagonally, and otherwise was 1cm over. Even this was refused.

And yet, I still feel incredibly fortunate that I could book a last minute ticket on an other flight, with an other company, on the same day.

Not every musician can have this opportunity. Missing a flight often means losing a vital work opportunity, whether it's a gig, a recording session, or an important meeting.

In an industry where every opportunity counts, such an incident can have a ripple effect, impacting reputation and future prospects. This is simply unacceptable.

[@ryanair](#) [@aeroportmarseilleprovence](#)

[View all 1,868 comments](#)

Add a comment...



Like many freelance musicians, 69-year-old Edward* travels weekly and has learned to arrive early and pay for speedy boarding to try to mitigate for crowded flights that might mean no room in the overhead for his clarinet case. “The nightmare is inconsistency and the stress of not knowing for sure what will happen,” he says, noting that in his experience, “Ryanair makes violinists buy an extra seat, but then often tells the passenger just to put it into the overhead. EasyJet is generally OK with violins, but the reality is that it depends on who you’re dealing with. I was once travelling on a flight with a group where they wouldn’t let the cello on unless we upgraded the cellist to first class. As I had organised the tour, I paid for that, and then the flight attendant told him to put it in the coat closet.” He adds: “It’s stressful enough working in the performing arts without these sort of petty impediments.”

Dave Webster, Head of International at the 35,000-strong UK trade union Musicians’ Union, says that the number of members contacting them with issues relating to Ryanair is “of great concern”, adding they are currently in discussion with the carrier about a degree of flexibility for musicians and their instruments. “With budget airlines, it’s always more difficult. They monetise every inch of the cabin without taking into consideration just how fundamentally important it is for musicians to be able to travel with their instruments,” he says. Just as a businessman needs his laptop, a musician needs their instrument to fulfil their professional contact. “Arriving at an engagement with a highly valuable instrument that is damaged is simply not an option,” notes Webster. “It’s not like you can go out and buy a replacement. This is what airlines need to understand.”



Silenced: Sheku Kanneh-Mason had to cancel a concert in Toronto after Air Canada refused to let him board with his \$3 million cello Credit: Kate Green/Getty Images

Naomi McCarthy, Senior Policy and Campaigns Officer at the Independent Society of Musicians (ISM) says that they have set minimum standards for the carrying of musical instruments. “But not all airlines have adopted these standards, and even those that have, such as EasyJet, don’t always follow them in practice, and ISM members have told us that they have been refused boarding by EasyJet staff.” EasyJet responded:

“We allow for instruments up to 30 x 117 x 38 cm (including any case) to come on board as part of their large cabin bag allowance, which is larger than our standard maximum large cabin bag size. Items larger than this and up to the size of a cello can also travel in a booked seat.”

Understandably, musicians are fearful of checking their instruments into the hold, considering highly publicised horror stories such as that of a musician from Tennessee who checked his \$45,000 (£32,000) 75-year-old cello into the hold, which baggage handlers placed beneath a set of golf clubs, snapping its neck. Yet also concerning is what happens to their instruments even *before* they get off the ground. The Musicians’ Union tells The Telegraph they have “been made aware that security staff are mishandling instruments” at Heathrow, and are campaigning for staff to be trained to better listen to musicians’ instructions – or preferably allow them to handle the instrument themselves – during security checks.

It’s a hurdle that Ciardelli has encountered. “I feel that airports don’t understand that I am fine for the instrument to be checked but they’re opening the case without me being present, meaning it may not be closed properly. If it’s not packaged correctly, it can damage the instrument as they don’t have the knowledge to pack it up. If you touch my bass, it’s like you’re touching me, it’s very private.”

She alleges that two hours were “wasted” trying to get through Heathrow Terminal 5 last month. “The manager I spoke to was rude and made me feel anxious. I think musicians should be respected more, as it’s not just a hobby. In other airports like in Munich, there is much more understanding.” Heathrow did not respond to requests for comment.

As Ciardelli concludes, “our instruments aren’t just wood, they are art, forms of expression, our livelihoods, and they are expensive. I am hoping by fighting for this cause, the next generation will experience the benefits.”