

Revised Airline Travel Advice for Musicians with Instruments

by Alfonso M. Pollard, AFM Legislative-Political Director

For years, musicians have faced numerous uncertainties when traveling on commercial aircraft. Many have been refused boarding, while those trying to make connecting flights have had to settle for inconveniences in order to complete their journey. In some cases, musicians have had to make the choice between stowing rare, expensive, and often irreplaceable musical instruments in the cargo hold, or having their travel plans interrupted, delayed, or even canceled.

The Coalition in Support of Musical Instruments as Carry-on Baggage, led by the AFM, is currently in talks with Department of Transportation (DOT), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) officials, and airline representatives. They are working on interim solutions to the inconsistent application of airline policies, while helping to establish the foundation necessary to aide in the development of a new rules as required in section 403 of the FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012.

Until the new administrative rules are in place, the best advice for traveling musicians is to cooperate with ticket agents, gate attendants, and flight crews to resolve any difficulties encountered with the transportation of musical instruments. You should carry a copy of the TSA letter available at the AFM website under MyAFM/Library so you can make it available to airport security personnel. Note: this letter only applies to TSA security, and each airline has its own policies, protocols, and regulations. Here are some other tips to help you better navigate the reservation, boarding, and carry-on process.

Making Your Reservation

As a result of the AFM talks with the DOT and the airlines, musicians can now access concise musical instrument carry-on and checked baggage rules simply by going to the Airlines for America (A4A) website at <http://www.airlines.org/blog/instrument-rated-air-travel-for-musicians/>. This one-stop location contains instrument baggage policies for A4A member airlines, as well as links to each airline's musical instrument policy page.

Each airline has unique restrictions regarding carry-on and checked items. When selecting an air carrier, call to confirm whether the dimensions of your instrument meet the airline's requirements for carry-on items for each leg of your journey. Note the name of the agent you spoke with. The airline policies are also available online. Carry a copy of the policy with you.

When making your reservation, request preferred boarding. Some airlines have a different designation. The object is to move up to zone 1 boarding, which will allow you early access to your seat and possibly to overhead bin stowage. As one of the first on board, you will have more time to stow your instrument and more space options.

Many airlines have a limit on the number of oversized items allowed in-cabin. Even if you have paid an additional fee or booked an extra seat for your instrument, request that the reservation agent note (for all of the connecting and return flights on the trip) that you're traveling with an oversized item that is a musical instrument.

Packing and Carrying Your Instrument and Gear

Remove extraneous items from the case. All sharp tools (for example, reed knives and end pins) and liquid items (cleaning fluids and valve oil) that do not comply with TSA's three-ounce maximum security regulation should be carried in your checked baggage. Also, bear in mind that, what are completely familiar items to you (mutes, tuners, metronomes, etc.), may be questionable to screening personnel.

Arrive early. This allows for time to work with security and flight crews. It is imperative that you arrive at the gate at least one hour before boarding time.

Limit the number of carry-on items. In addition to your instrument, carry only one small item. Gig bags are not travel cases. 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.

Helpful Documentation

As the coalition led by AFM President Ray Hair continues talks with the DOT and airline representatives, musicians traveling domestically should familiarize themselves with, and carry copies of, the documents listed at: <http://www.dot.gov/airconsumer/air-travel-musical-instruments>.

Though problems navigating Homeland Security/TSA have been marginal at best, the information from the Department of Homeland Security Site Regarding Musical

Instruments (<https://www.tsa.gov/traveler-information/musical-instruments>) may prove an invaluable resource to have on-hand.

Remember that Section 403 of the 2012 FAA Modernization and Reform Act is not an effective tool to use with gate agents and flight attendants. It simply outlines the will of Congress and is not law until a new administrative rule is promulgated.

Deal Calmly with Problems

Your instrument represents an unusual item. Gate and flight crews have a very short time to seat passengers in an aircraft, and must try their best to deal with the unexpected quickly. It is crucial that, as a traveling musician, you recognize three important facts:

- The most important responsibility of airport and transportation officials is security.
- The most important responsibility of gate attendants and flight attendants is safety.
- The most important responsibility of the captain is safety and security.

Don't take it personally when a gate agent or flight crew member seems indifferent to your concerns. You (and your instrument) are only one of many passengers that will likely have special needs. However, you have the backing of the airline to travel with your instrument onboard. In many cases, the problem may be resolved with the following strategies:

- If you are stopped by a flight attendant, calmly and quickly explain the precautions you have taken to prepare your instrument to safely travel in-cabin.
- Do not block the way of boarding passengers.
- Be accommodating by suggesting placing the instrument in the section of the aircraft designated by gate and flight attendants.
- If necessary, immediately ask to de-plane so that you can resolve this matter with airline supervisors. Remember, you have approximately 15 minutes to resolve this issue before the plane backs away from the gate.

Finally, prepare yourself for the possibility that you may not be able to travel with your instrument in the cabin, even if you have followed all possible procedures. It is important to have some sort of backup plan. If it is packed well enough you could check it. Another option is to send it by air courier, or plan to travel by train or car.

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