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When Your \$3 Million Cello Gets Bumped From Your Flight



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The cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason had to cancel a concert in Toronto last week after an airline refused to let him board with his instrument, even though he had bought a ticket for it.

The miseries of flying for work are well documented. Delays. Cancellations. The eternal gamble: to check or not to check bags, risking damaged or lost luggage.

For professional cellists, whose tools of the trade are extremely delicate instruments that can be worth thousands if not millions of dollars, and which certainly do not fit into the overhead bins, flying can be exponentially worse.

Sheku Kanneh-Mason, a rising star in classical music, was forced to cancel a concert in Toronto last week because Air Canada refused to allow him to board a plane with his cello, even though he had purchased a separate ticket for it.

This is an all too frequent occurrence for traveling cellists and other musicians with instruments that need to go in the cabin,” Kanneh-Mason, who rose to fame after performing at the [wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in 2018](#), said in a statement on Tuesday.

The episode, which struck a chord with cellists around the world, occurred last week when Kanneh-Mason and his sister, Isata, a pianist, were on tour and trying to fly from Cincinnati to Toronto, with a connection in Washington. Their original flight, on American Airlines, was delayed and then canceled, a spokeswoman said. So they bought tickets on a new flight to Toronto on Air Canada — including one for his cello.

Kanneh-Mason said that “we were given conflicting information by Air Canada throughout the long process, culminating with staff denying our boarding with the cello at the gate.”

Air Canada said on Monday that the company regretted that the musicians had not been able to travel as expected and that it would be in contact with them.

“Air Canada has a comprehensive policy of accepting cellos in the cabin when a separate seat is booked for it,” it said in a statement. “In this case, the customers made a last-minute booking due to their original flight on another airline being canceled.”



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*Credit: Greg Kahn
for The New York Times*

The airline’s policy for carry-on instruments, [outlined on its website](#), specifies that travelers must purchase a seat for their instruments at least 48 hours before departure.

The Kanneh-Mason siblings wrote about their difficulties [last week](#) on social media. “We can only dream of a time when all airlines have a standardized, global and carefully considered approach to the carriage of precious instruments that are booked to travel in the cabin,” they wrote.

Their concert at Koerner Hall in Toronto was called off, to the chagrin of fans and ticket holders, and rescheduled for June.

Kanneh-Mason’s cello is worth about 3 million euros, or about \$3.1 million, [according to a short video from Deutsche Welle](#), the German public broadcaster. It was made by Matteo Goffriller more than 300 years ago and was given to Kanneh-Mason in 2021 on a lifetime loan after it was purchased by six sponsors.

Kanneh-Mason faced a similar travel hiccup last year when he was unexpectedly denied boarding for a British Airways flight, prompting him to [speak out on social media](#).

Travel woes among musicians carrying large and expensive instruments are not uncommon. Lynn Harrell, the acclaimed cellist who [died in 2020](#), [complained in 2012](#) about a dispute he got into with Delta Air Lines over trying to earn miles for the seats he had purchased for his cello.

It is an occupational hazard, said Eliot Bailen, a professional cellist and an associate in the department of music at Columbia University.

“A lot of cellists run around with their cellos, you know, on a plane,” Bailen said in an interview on Monday. “It shouldn’t be that difficult.”

Bailen said he once ran into trouble in the early 2000s when he had booked a seat for his cello but was unable to produce a passport for it. “I was being cheeky and I called it Mr. Cello,” he said, the name under which he had booked the instrument’s ticket. “I thought it was funny until they just refused to let me on the flight.”

When [Amit Peled](#), a cello soloist and professor of strings at Johns Hopkins University’s Peabody Institute, was asked what he thought about Kanneh-Mason’s issue with Air Canada, he simply said, “Welcome to the club.”

“Every cellist can write a novel about what is happening to them in the airport,” Peled said in an interview. He knows the plight Kanneh-Mason faced all too well and recalled one incident in which his own case was broken by airline workers who were tying it down to the seat.

Peled said he flies with his cello, worth more than \$1 million, three times a month. “We guard it like one of our kids,” he said. “And we spend time with the cello more than with our wives and kids.”

He added, “For a cellist, I think it’s very common to only feel relaxed when the plane is actually in the air.”