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Wednesday January 20th 2010

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Violin-making

Older and richer

Violin-making is flourishing, but the 450-year-old ones are still the best

Dec 17th 2009 | CREMONA
From *The Economist* print edition

THE concert at London's Wigmore Hall was a sell-out, and the performance of trios for violin, cello and piano by Schumann and Mozart got a rapturous reception. The cello, played by Tanja Tetzlaff, was a wonderfully mellow 1776 Guadagnini. The violin, played by her brother, Christian Tetzlaff, complemented it beautifully, but its provenance was more unexpected. It was made by a contemporary German luthier, Peter Greiner.

Mr Tetzlaff plays not just one but two Greiner violins: a louder, brighter one he has owned for ten years and which is particularly good for solo parts, and the darker one, more suitable for ensembles, which he used that evening. Most string virtuosi perform on instruments made by Italian masters a few hundred years ago, and preferably by Antonio Stradivari, the greatest of them all.



Reuters

Mr Tetzlaff has previously played two Strads and a Guadagnini. Now, when he gives a concert on one of his Greiners, people often ask whether it is a Strad. He thinks that the best modern violin-makers offer outstanding quality at a small fraction of the price of an old one by a famous maker.

Mr Greiner has been making fiddles (as the fraternity likes to call them) since he was 14. Now in his early 40s, he has produced 250 so far. He works closely with a physicist, Heinrich Dünwald, and aims to make violins whose tone comes close to the human voice. He charges €32,000-38,000 (\$48,000-57,000) apiece, well above the average for a good modern maker, but his waiting list is so long that he will never get to the end.

The past two decades have seen a renaissance of string-instrument-making (violins, violas and cellos) by luthiers across the world. They can learn their trade at renowned violin-making schools in a number of countries. But those with the most distinguished connections are in Italy: in Milan, Parma and especially in Cremona, home of the most fabled of the 16th-18th-century violin-makers: the Amati, Guarneri and Stradivari families.

Advantage Cremona

On a sunny autumn morning students are milling around the Scuola Internazionale di Liuteria A. Stradivari, housed in a palazzo in the centre of Cremona, a handsome city in the Po valley south-east of Milan. Most are foreign, but they all chat in Italian: fluency in the language is one of the school's entry requirements. All are keen to learn how to make violins in the Cremonese tradition.

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The school was founded in 1937 to mark the 200th anniversary of Stradivari's death. Since then it has produced nearly 800 graduates. Some 300 were Italian, but most have been foreign, including 58 Japanese, 48 South Koreans and even eight students from China, a country better known for cheap and basic factory-made instruments than for fine violins. Some take the tradition home: two of America's best-known violin-makers, Joseph Curtin and Gregg Alf, trained in Cremona. But many subsequently set up shop in Cremona itself. The city has around 150 luthiers, all hoping to benefit from the city's association with the grandest names in violin-making and from the cluster effect. The local chamber of commerce provides some financial support for showing instruments at fairs and exhibitions. Some 65 luthiers have formed a consortium that certifies products and helps with marketing.

Francesco Toto, the consortium's vice-president, thinks that the luthiers benefit from the craft's long tradition in Cremona. But that has been far from continuous. Violin-making in the city reached its zenith late in the 17th century, then declined from the mid-18th century as luthiers moved elsewhere. By the late 19th century a local factory churned out violins. Only after the school opened, did craftsmen return and quality pick up again.

To help create the right atmosphere, Cremona has been adding to its collection of superb old-master violins on view in the town hall, including famous Strads and Amatis. Every morning a curator takes each one out of its glass case and plays it for a few minutes to keep it in peak condition. Another group of magnificent fiddles is on view in the Stradivari museum. A violin-making festival in the city offers a feast of music each autumn and a competition for making stringed instruments is held every three years.

Gaspar Borchardt, whose workshop is opposite Cremona's cathedral, is inspired by the beautiful Romanesque building. He says that the city's violin-making school taught him very precise craftsmanship, but most of what he knows comes from 27 years of practice. He makes about eight instruments a year, each of which takes 200-250 hours of painstaking work—and lots of creative energy. Mr Toto of the makers' consortium explains that "you are constantly thinking about the violin you are making, so you couldn't keep several going at the same time." Makers usually finish putting together one, then begin varnishing it and start work on the next as the layers of varnish dry.

Good violin-makers can earn a reasonable living. A new instrument from Cremona can command up to €18,000, plus tax, depending on the maker. The recession has not helped. Mr Borchardt says he used to have a waiting list of two years, but the downturn has halved it. Still, most makers are not in it for the money but because they are passionate about violins.

Preserving a precious asset

Carrying out high-class repairs can be financially more rewarding than making new instruments. Violins are quite fragile and most will need repairing sooner or later, so there is always a demand. If the instrument is worth a lot, the quality of the repair can make a big difference to its value, so a skilled restorer can set his price.

Expertise in making and repairing is essential to a business such as J&A Beare, a venerable London firm of string-instrument dealers, valuers and restorers

that has been going for over 100 years. Frances Gillham, a director, previously worked in the musical-instrument department at Christie's, but says that professional musicians rarely buy at auction: they prefer a relationship with a trusted dealer. Beare's has a huge database of old violins which it uses to authenticate instruments, and offers a restoration service. Ms Gillham says that scientific advances have improved restoration techniques and restorers have grown more respectful of the original.

Peter Beare, another of the firm's directors, has made an instrument for Nigel Kennedy, among others. Many famous performers play modern violins alongside their old masters, not least because they are often more resistant to the rigours of air travel and central heating, but



Something old, something new

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Many famous performers play modern violins alongside their old masters. Sometimes they actually prefer them

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also because they may be more suitable for certain kinds of music. Sometimes the musicians actually prefer them. The cellist Jacqueline du Pré played two Strads and an instrument by Matteo Goffriller, who worked in Venice 300 years ago, but towards the end of her career switched to a modern cello made in Philadelphia by an Italian-born luthier, Sergio Peresson.

The highest price yet paid for a contemporary violin, at an auction in 2003, was \$130,000 for an instrument made by an American, Samuel Zygmuntowicz, which had previously been owned by a virtuoso, Isaac Stern. Mr Zygmuntowicz, who has also made instruments for Joshua Bell and the Emerson String Quartet, is rated as one of the best violin-makers alive. Even so, that record price probably had much to do with the previous owner. "This is not like the art world," explains a collector. There are no Andy Warhols or Damien Hirsts among the luthiers. Even outstanding modern instruments rarely fetch more than \$30,000-40,000.

That sort of money will go nowhere if you want to buy a fine old violin. Stradivari himself made around 1,100 instruments, a huge number by any standard, because he lived to be 93 and worked obsessively to his dying breath. Around 650 of those instruments survive, mostly violins. But even though there are quite a few Strads around and not all of them have star quality, even a cheaper one now costs around \$1.6m. The highest price for a Strad at auction was \$3.5m, paid in 2006. But the few that come on the market generally change hands privately, and for far more: an outstanding example is likely to cost \$10m-12m. Fine violins by less exalted old Italians still fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars, and prices keep rising. By one dealer's reckoning, fine-violin prices have gone up by an average of nearly 12% a year since 1950.

That makes life particularly hard for ambitious young string players. There are many more of them now, achieving ever higher standards ever earlier, and competition is getting fiercer as the profession becomes more global. Unless they come from wealthy families, they have to win lots of competitions, quickly make a name and hope that someone will lend them a great instrument. Nicola Benedetti, a young Scottish celebrity fiddler, plays a 1712 Stradivari estimated to be worth £2m (\$3.3m), lent to her by a generous sponsor. Jennifer Pike, a young English violinist, is trying to scrape together £250,000 to buy her 1708 Goffriller. The best young players may get an interest-free loan from a sponsor or trust, but they will be paying it off for most of their lives.

Alternatively they could go to someone like Mr Zygmuntowicz, Mr Greiner or another well-established modern violin-maker and get a beautifully hand-crafted instrument specially made for them at a price they can afford. It will sound splendid, and few of their audience will know the difference. But most of the truly career-minded will try for an old master, by hook or by crook. Are they being silly?

Which is the Strad?

Every expert has a story about a "blind" test in which several instruments are played out of sight and the listeners have to guess which is the Strad and which the modern pretender. They often get it wrong. There are good and bad Strads, and some fine modern violins. A lot can be done to tweak an instrument to make it sound better, and a brilliant player can make even a run-of-the-mill violin sound great for five minutes. But he will not want to have to try that hard all the time. And many musicians genuinely believe that a great old instrument will do more for them than a new one.

An element of self-reinforcing snobbery is at work. If everyone thinks that old instruments are best, then a self-respecting virtuoso will want to play one because it is expected of him. And old instruments often have a history that adds to their lustre. Stradivari became wealthy by making violins for the rich and powerful. His instruments were highly esteemed, played by the virtuosos of their day, perhaps heard by famous composers. Only a curmudgeon could deny the romance of it all.

But the difference may not all be in the mind. Even enthusiasts for modern instruments often concede that the finest of the old are better than the best of the new. That may have something to do with age itself. Most musical instruments wear out or are consigned to niche markets by design changes. Only violins, violas and cellos last hundreds of years if well looked after. They are working antiques: desirable, collectable and mostly still played every day. Several hundred years off the tree has made the wood dry and light, and constant use may have changed its qualities.

Florian Leonhard, a London dealer, says that time has "vibrated the wood". Ms Gillham at Beare's thinks that some Italian violins from the 1900s are now beginning to improve

noticeably as they age. So perhaps in another century the finest instruments made today will also have become even better. But the best of the old Italian masters will probably still outdazzle them.

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