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Violin maker, restorer and consultant

NEWSLETTER



Spring 2000

Incorporating



Vn bow by A. Lamy

Welcome to Newsletter 2000!

We would especially like to welcome new readers to this Spring issue of Newsletter, our sixth since it began at Edward Withers Ltd. in 1996. As many of you will know, Withers was one of the most important and longest standing violin shops in the UK, its tradition dating back to 1765, and it was my privilege to own and run it for 10 years before it ceased trading in London's West End three years ago.

I have now incorporated Edward Withers Ltd. into my business, specialising in instrument and bow sales, restoration and high-class service to all string musicians. After nearly 30 years as a restorer, maker and dealer, the more good instruments I see, the more I appreciate the unique contribution their makers have made - perhaps without realising so at the time. My hope is that this tradition will not only ride the current millennium but travel far into the next. Here's to all future generations of violin makers, restorers and players!



Violin by Nicolo Gagliano, Naples, 1780

Violin by Vincenzo Postiglione, Naples, 1886

Increasing Collection of Fine Instruments & Bows

I have an expanding stock of beautiful instruments in all price ranges, from a modest J.B.Collin-Mezin to a fine Nicolo Gagliano, Matteo Goffriller or Antonio Stradivari. Bows range from Hill to Dominique Peccatte with many in between. A small selection of items currently available is illustrated here, but please ask for details of whatever it is you are seeking, however modest or fine, and we will make every effort to help you find the instrument or bow you are searching for.



As a violinist myself, I am aware not only of the problems in finding a good instrument, but also of the requirements a professional will look for, and a great deal of attention is taken to present every instrument in the finest possible condition and set-up. Sound adjustment is just one of the areas we take very seriously, and this is often something involving many different aspects of the instrument, not only the bridge and post. Read on if you would like to find out more about this in

Notes from the Workshop - Sound Ideas

The art of violin restoration and repair is a curious one: not many people can say that they "reset necks", "remove bellies", "splice ribs", and "graft heads" on a daily basis, and with (relative) impunity. But these gory, structural aspects of violin restoration aside, there is one area that is rather more difficult to pin down - namely, sound.

The attributes of a violin can probably be grouped into three categories: the quality of the construction; the quality of the sound; the pedigree and value. Inevitably, these are intertwined and an instrument that excels in one category may be less impressive in another - although this is not always a bad thing. Perhaps not surprisingly, the problems of sound are often the hardest to address since they involve so many different aspects, not least the player's own perception.

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Stringed instruments, like any other tool in daily use, require occasional maintenance. Even a Rolls Royce will sooner or later need a good service - everything must be finely balanced for it to function at its best. Although the violin may seem a very simple object, there are principles at work that would probably test even the most accomplished physicist.

Fortunately for violin restorers, an intuitive understanding arrived at through a good teacher, one's own experience and a fair bit of trial and error is probably more valuable, and for most of us an oscilloscope is not a regular piece of equipment in the violin-maker's workshop - yet.

When an instrument comes in for sound improvement, a considerable time is usually spent fumbling around for words that adequately describe the resonance in question (or problem with it): "It used to be much free-er." (Didn't we all?); "The upper register is thin on top." (No need for the barber, then); "The bottom seems tight." (No comment). The restorer must translate these unfocused anxieties into something that he or she can do to bring back confidence between the unhappy couple.



Standard post-adjuster's Kit

Good average position - 2.5mm in & 2.5mm back

The first port of call for the repairer, and also the most common culprit, will generally be the sound-post: is it in the optimum position and at the correct tension? Then the bridge - is it too high/low, thick/thin, bent? Then could anything be unglued? Are the best strings in use? And a number of lesser possibilities. There are two other more serious contributing factors (or three, if you include an inferior instrument), and these are the neck angle and the bass bar. But only when there are really obvious reasons to alter these will they be changed.

Of all these components, the sound-post probably holds the most intrigue. In French, it is called *l'âme*, or the 'soul' and for no small reason. Without this little stick of wood the instrument would function at a fraction of its potential and would in fact sound "soul-less". Plucked instruments do not function in the same way and therefore do not require this tiny but important innovation, but a bowed instrument with a constant sound/vibration under bowed pressure depends on the constant connection between the front and the back of the sound box.

The relationship between the post, the neck angle (affecting string tension), the bridge and the bass bar are the main variables that can be "played" with to achieve the best from an instrument.

Chasing the ideal sound can be like a meander through a maze. There are many permutations, only one leading to the exit, and you can easily end up where you started out. Every old violin, viola or cello will naturally have its limitations as to sound production, but the job of the violin expert together with the player is to bring out the ultimate that each instrument has to offer. And if that still isn't enough then perhaps you may consider whether you have outgrown your current instrument and need a new acquisition!

A GOOD READ

For those who missed the first excerpt of "Mud from a Scraper" it might need a little explanation. It is a book written in 1951 by violist Jeremy White, with cartoons by my father, violinist Herbert Whone (both members of the Covent Garden Orchestra at the time). It should have been published but sadly, due to the untimely death of the owner of the publishing company, never was. It is a witty, perceptive and rather tongue in cheek look at the profession they were in. Due to popular demand and with thanks for the author's permission to do so, we continue the series...

Mud from a Scraper

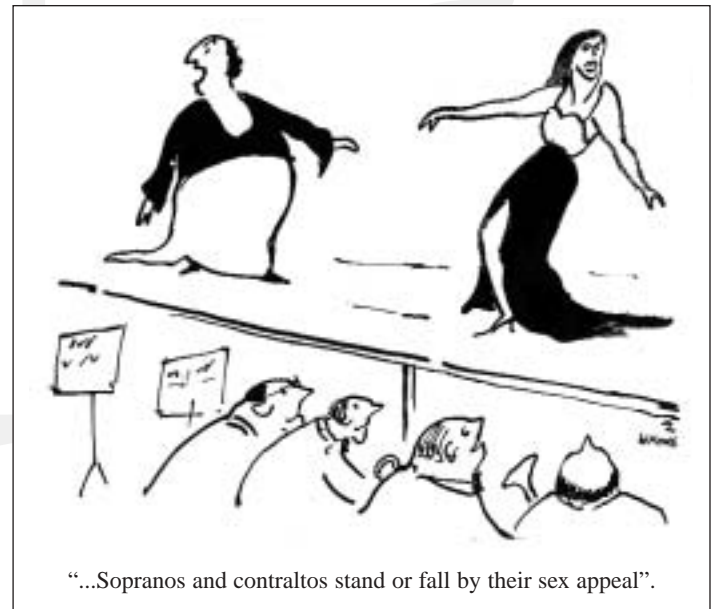
(or Give me Excess of it)

Chapter 17 - Soloists

"The sweetest soul that ever struck an octave in disaster".

Eric Mackay

An instrumental soloist is a musician who, by virtue of an over-developed technique and an excess of individuality, is unsuited to playing in orchestras. His task is a thankless one, for he is always conscious that there are fifty or more performers behind him watching for flaws in his performance.



A solo violinist feels that he is being accompanied by twenty men who have studied the work he is playing in detail, and who know that they could play it better. A cello soloist is more fortunate, in that he rarely performs before more than eight of his critical brothers.

Pianists are in a much happier position, as they seem to be divided into two classes:- a) sensitive ones, who benefit from comparison with the insensitive ones who ignore the orchestra, and b) those others who are oblivious of any hostility they may arouse. Lady soloists, on any instrument, have the extra advantage of their sex, for orchestras, being practically exclusively male, forgive them much if they are pretty enough to gaze at during tacet passages.

Singers are judged by different standards. It is an old saw that people are either gifted with musicianship or with a good voice; thus a singer exhibiting the slightest trace of

(Continued on page 4)

Life After Menuhin

Interview with Natsuko Yoshimoto

Natsuko Yoshimoto is no stranger to travel - or the violin. In pursuit of her career, she has lived on three continents and attended three prestigious schools of music, graduating with, amongst other awards and prizes, BMus (Hons), RNCM and PPRNCM (Professional Performance Diploma) with distinction. She has studied with three remarkable teachers, was winner of the 1994 Shell LSO Music Scholarship and many other top awards, has achieved a broad experience in chamber and solo work, playing with a wide variety of professional orchestras, and is still only the tender age of 23.

Born in Japan, Natsuko began playing the violin when she was 3 1/2. At the age of 8, her father's job took the family to Dubai, where, because of a lack of teachers, she travelled to Yugoslavia during holidays to attend masterclasses with Igor Ozim. Two years later she was advised to apply for a place at the internationally renowned Menuhin School, and before she knew it, found herself in darkest Surrey, where she was to remain for six years, together with 49 other aspiring young string musicians.

"When I went, the youngest was only six, although normally it was around 8 to 18. Some got on fine - others found it harder. But when I was there, I felt it was like being in a second family - the matron was like my second mother! There was a healthy element of competition, but never too much - never nasty." After Menuhin, the greatest influence on her there came from the violin teacher Wen Zhou Li, for whom Natsuko has the highest regard. "Meeting him changed my life," she commented. "He also taught me at the Royal Northern College of Music, where I later went.

"As for Menuhin, he gave out such a positive aura, it is hard to describe. Taking orchestra, he would sometimes sing a phrase and it was just the most beautiful thing I ever heard. His humanity as a person meant so much to everybody. What I learnt most at the school was general musicianship - chamber music, orchestra, and so on. We played a lot. I think it's rare to receive such intensive training in chamber music."

I asked Natsuko about the instruments she has played. What was her first violin and how did it sound? "Ghastly. Well, it seemed so at the time - it may have been me! It was an 1/8th size. My first good violin was a 3/4 size Maggini, loaned to me just before I began at the Menuhin School by a London dealer. It was really beautiful with a big

warm sound, quite powerful for a small instrument. Following that, I had the loan of a school violin which I really loved, although nobody knew what it was. Again, it had a warm sound but not so powerful. Unfortunately it had to go back to its owner who had loaned it to the school.

"It was then that I found my present violin from Adam - a beautiful Nicolo Gagliano. It's very responsive and forms into whatever you want it to - very easy to play. The sound is very lovely yet powerful and I don't feel limited by it. If I ever did, I might think of something else but for

now its potential is still growing and I find new depths and colour in the sound the more I play it."

During her last year at school Natsuko (whose modesty, incidentally, belies her exceptional talent) entered the Shell LSO Music Scholarship (held every four years). "Although I dislike competitions, this was different. During the later stages, there were masterclasses and also chamber music. The players were judged from many angles, which I found unusual and interesting. I was fortunate enough to win playing the Sibelius Violin Concerto on the Gagliano. In the finals I

played against two cellists and another violinist who just happened to have chosen the Sibelius too!"

Natsuko didn't expect to win. "By the finals, in a way it didn't seem to matter any more. The opportunity to play in the Barbican with the LSO was great enough - quite a few of the participants even joined the orchestra."

After the Menuhin School, Natsuko went to the States for a year, to study at the Curtis Institute. "But what was particularly rewarding was going to the Royal Northern College of Music for 3 years with Wen Zhou Li again as my teacher, especially after Menuhin and the Curtis Institute." At that time, she was questioning a lot about her career, but during her stay there was able to focus on what she really wanted to do.

Recently, Natsuko has been playing concertos and giving solo recitals, whilst also working with the London Sinfonietta and the Scottish Ensemble, most recently visiting Australia for trial as assistant leader of the Australian Chamber Orchestra. She is also just about to return to Australia for concerts with her recently formed piano trio. "I would really like to play more chamber music - it's what I love doing most. In the end, what I value more than anything is playing for the pure joy of playing - perhaps with an audience, perhaps not. I will always feel this way..." Let us hope that it is more often *with* - and on that one condition, I am sure we will be seeing much more of Natsuko in the future.





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Nicolo Gagliano, Naples, 1780

Antonio Gragnani, Liburni, 1786

Camillus Camilli, Mantua, 1732

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Lorenzo Ventapane, Naples, 1802

Vincenzo Postiglione, Naples, 1886

Giovanni Svarzi, Venice, 1898

H. Lockey Hill (Va), c.1800 (40.2cm)

John Furber (Ce), London, c.1810

John Lott II (Ce), London, c.1850-60

£10,000-20,000

P.Jombar, Paris, 1897

Emile Germain, Paris, 1906

Mathias Thir (Va), Vienna, c.1780 (40.5cm) by H. Lockey Hill, c.1800



Under £10,000

Violins by **J.B. Collin-Mezin**, **J.Grandjon**, **P.Wamsley**, **J.Carter**, **Bela Szeppesy**, etc. (incl. a selection of classical instruments). Also - many fine bows from Hill to Peccatte.

(Contd. from page 2 - Mud from a Scraper)

artistic sensibility is welcomed by an orchestra however inadequate the voice may be. The majority are praised or condemned for their intonation and the quality of voice, and in rare cases will be unfavourably compared with famous singers of the past. Tenors and basses stand or fall by their resemblance to Caruso and Chaliapin, as well as by the deference with which they treat the orchestra; sopranos and contraltos stand or fall, first by their sex appeal and then by their similarity to Adeline Patti and Dame Clara Butt. This is because players know little or nothing about vocal technique, but refuse to relinquish their prerogative to criticise anything in earshot.

The artistic merits of any soloist can be gauged by the amount of applause afforded to him or her by the orchestra. Most players tap their stands at the end of a concerto or aria as an act of thanksgiving that the piece is over - but it also signifies gratitude for the audience the soloist has attracted. If they continue to tap whilst the soloist is taking his second bow, it means that they approve of the performance. If they are still tapping when he is recalled for his third bow, they think he is really good: and what finer praise could any soloist receive? However, no player applauds after this lest the soloist be encouraged to play an encore.

There is another type of player also referred to as a soloist in the profession. He is one of the few irreconciled players who imagines himself to be better than his leader. He can be recognised by his impressive fingerings, the extreme individuality of his bowing, and the look of disgust on his face when an audience acclaims a performance of which he himself disapproves.

Many orchestral musicians entered their career under the illusion that they would one day be soloists. Despite this, there is no trace of jealousy in their indictment of concerto players, for they come to realise after fifteen years in the profession that though there is no kudos to be gained in their work, theirs indeed is the higher calling.

(To be continued)

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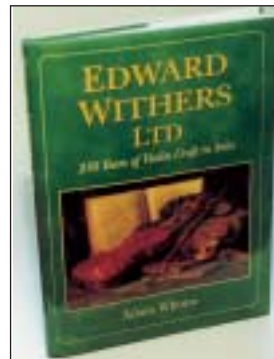
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