

Stradivari

Roger Hargrave examines the Stradivari 'Milanollo' violin of 1728, one of the few of the master's instruments to keep its original sharpness

Although Antonio Stradivari's workshop produced a relatively large number of fine violins, most have been considerably resculptured by the passage of time. Even where little or no damage has occurred, most of their edgework and heads have become worn through constant use. Accordingly, the image we have of Stradivari's work is largely prejudiced by a softness of form that the master never intended. This is a major reason for the controversy surrounding some rare examples of his work which have retained something of their original sharpness.

The 1728 'Milanollo' violin is a rare example of a well preserved Stradivari. Its authenticity is unquestioned and it matches several instruments of the period, including the beautifully preserved 1727 'Kreutzer' violin.' The condition of the edgework and head chamfers of the 'Milanollo' is even finer than that of the 'Kreutzer', which suggests that over the centuries it has been conserved rather than played.

Although the 'Kreutzer' has a one piece back, the materials which Stradivari selected for both instruments are similar beyond the point of accident. The science of dendrochronology (tree ring analysis) can now match and date spruce and several other timbers, but unfortunately it is not yet possible to analyse maples this way. Nevertheless, it is a fairly safe bet that the back, head and rib wood of both violins came from the same tree, probably a variety of maple known as oppio. This peculiar brown speckled maple, whose narrow flames run across the back almost at right angles to the centre joint, is found on several Stradivari instruments of the period.' Even the spruce of the belly wood appears to match remarkably well. Certainly Stradivari preferred this kind of belly wood in his later period, when the finer grown timbers of the kind he used in the 1690s are largely noticeable by their absence.

Stradivari was 84 in 1728, but although the 'Milanollo' lacks the perfection of the golden period and the quality of the craftsmanship is somehow less



sure, evidence of a steady hand is still apparent. Signs of advancing age, which the instruments of the mid-1730s display, are not immediately obvious, and the quality of the 'Milanollo' and other instruments of the period is still way in advance of that which most of Stradivari's younger contemporaries were producing. Nevertheless, the master's advancing years must have been taking their toll and, if the number of surviving instruments is any indication, the production level seems to have decreased slightly from earlier times. It must be assumed that Antonio's two sons Francesco and Omobono, then aged 57 and 49 respectively, were heavily involved in the production of the Stradivari workshop at this time and they

may have provided the steadying hand. However, as with Vuillaume's workshop a century later, the control of the shop style was such that in this period it is extremely difficult to identify the hand of any particular individual. On several labels Antonio's handwritten note records his age, implying that until the end of his life he was still the controlling influence. In 1727 he writes 'fatto de Anni 83' [made at the age of 83] and in 1736 'd'anni 92'.

The head of this violin is pristine in both workmanship and preservation. The wood perfectly matches that of the back. It has a dark almost nutty hue and the fine speckles are brown rather than silvery. Rather unusually for Stradivari it is cut slightly off the quarter, causing the flames to appear somewhat softer than on the back. Although strong in form and cut, the head appears to revert back to a delicacy of finish that belongs to the previous century, but this may be an illusion created by the state of preservation. Nevertheless, the boldness of the golden period does seem to have given way to a more genteel approach; there is, for example, no flattening to the outline of the scroll where it faces the pegbox, as found on the 1704 'Betts' head, although the same template was undoubtedly used for both instruments.' Viewed from the side, the turns of the scroll are well rounded but retain the oval form common to most Stradivari heads. The cut of the volutes has also been carried out in typically Stradivarian style: very shallow into the second turn with only the final run into the eye becoming slightly deeper. It is perhaps chiefly the quality of this cut which gives Stradivari heads their strength of appearance.

The flutings around the back of the peg box are noticeably wider on the bass side, whereas on the front of the head they are wider on the treble side. This is a feature which led Sacconi' to speculate that Stradivari worked with a strong source of light from one side only. Along the back of the box the flutings are slightly rounded in section, recalling the style of the Amatis. This contrasts with the front of the head, where the flutings have the usual Stradivari flat bottomed profile.

The spine between the flutings is unusually sharp. Only two pin marks are visible on the spine. One is located at the centre of the chin (11.5mm from the end) and the other at the point where the pegbox narrows sharply behind the throat (62mm from the first). With the usual exception of fine chisel marks on the vertical surface of the bosses, and traces of a scraper in the flutings, there are almost no tool marks on the head. The peg box interior is roomy and cleanly finished with a sharp square end under the



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throat.

The head chamfers are tight and evenly applied. The chamfer of the peg box top runs neatly to the end of the delicate throat, emphasising its profile. A uncommon amount of black lining remains on the chamfers, testifying to the instrument's state of preservation. This appears to have been applied before the final coloured varnish.

The quality and sharpness of finish of the head is reflected in the edgework of the back and belly. The corners are reminiscent of the 1727 'Reyier',⁵ in particular the purfling. The purfling whites are typically Cremonese with tiny splits marking the surface. Particularly on the back, they are somewhat lighter than the surrounding wood, and in places they have an almost boxwood sheen. The blacks are well stained but, like most Stradivaris, they do not quite match the intensity of the Amati family blacks; in places they are



Above: the purfling comes together at the top and bottom with diagonally cut scarf joints. Right: the head is in pristine condition

almost grey On either side of the central whites, one black strip is always slightly thicker than the other, indicating that the purfling was all cut from a wider sandwich. That the strips were glued together beforehand is demonstrated by the fact that in the lower bass corner of the belly all three strips have lifted out of the channel together. In some places the groove for the purfling is unevenly cut and a little filler is evident in the back channel, especially in the corners. In two places on the lower bouts of the back the purfling cutter has slipped out of the channel, a rare occurrence for Stradivari even at this late stage. In spite of these details there is every sign (especially with the long purfling mitres) that Stradivari was seeking to maintain a high standard in appearance if not in execution. On the back the purfling comes together at the top and bottom with diagonally cut scarf joints. These correspond with the centre joint of the back. Also at this point the purfling cuts through the two locating pins

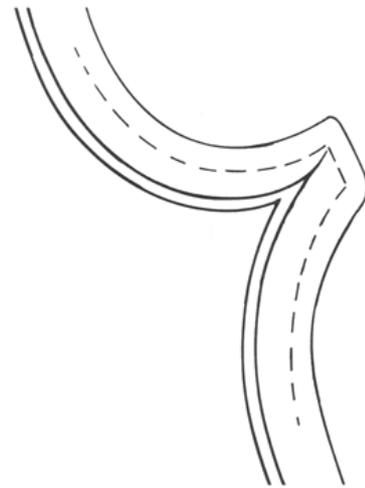
which emerge on the inside of the purfling. The edgework is slightly more delicate than some of Stradivari's preceding work, especially such bold creations as the 1715 'Cremonese' or the 1720 'Von Beckerath'. On the high point of the edge almost invisible traces of a fine scribe line can be detected on the back corners and in the centre bouts. Such markings are only found on instruments in exceptional condition. These scribe lines also mark the extent of the fluting in the corners and the end of the purfling mitre. In fact the purfling mitres raise up the end of the fluting and swing across the corners until the tips just reach the highest point of the corner at the corner of the flute (see diagram bottom right).

On the underside of the edge there is a chamfer clearly cut with a knife. This chamfer is especially obvious on the ends of the corners where tiny pools of orange red varnish have collected. The overhangs are small and even, but at the corners they increase in width slightly to compensate for the extra width of the corner. Stradivari was evidently more concerned about the corner shapes than he was about an even overhang, since the overhangs sometimes increase in width on the outside of the rib mitres, sometimes on the inside and occasionally on both sides. As a result the corners' shapes are stunningly beautiful in both



concept and cut regardless of the rib corner shapes. There is a distinct extra thickness to the edge of the corners and also a little extra in the centre bouts. However, the edge thickness decreases sharply for a few millimetres at the point where the corners blend into the bouts. This is a feature often observed on Cremonese violins, especially the later works of Guarneri 'del Gesu'. In the centre bouts the edgework is less rounded and on the extreme outer edge a half dozen fine scratches are evidence of the rasping process which originally shaped the outline. Such markings are more common on edgework by 'del Gesu'.

The rib corners are finished longer and with more turn to the centre bout curves than those by 'del Gesu', but slightly less turn than those of the Amatis. The rib wood is similar to that of the back, but lighter in colour; nevertheless it appears to be from the same source. The figure of the ribs runs vertically all around the instrument, and the direction of the growth rings indicates that the top and bottom ribs were each originally made from single pieces. The rib structure clearly tapers, but only from the neck block up to, but not including, the top corner blocks. This



The purfling mitres raise up the end of the fluting and swing across the corners until the tips just reach the highest point (shown by the dotted line)



taper is only on the belly side of the ribs. The archings of both the back and belly are hardly distorted despite the apparent thinness of the plates.

The flutings, though not deep, are well defined both outside and inside the line of the purfling. Although the centre bout flutings are not finished as deeply as outer bouts and the corners, the fluting generally runs around the instrument in a figure of eight shape more akin to the Brothers Amati than to earlier Stradivari violins.

About 10 to 15mm in from the outer edge of the back there is a slight roughness to the surface of the arching. This is almost certainly the remains of the process of blending the fluting into the arching after the purfling had been inserted. Although this process is described in Sacconi's *Secrets of Stradivari* it is rare to see such evidence on Stradivari violins until after 1730. From this point the back arching raises quickly and is fairly full. The arching of the 'Milanollo' is closely related to the 'del Gesu' 1740s archings, which are generally referred to as being of Brescian influ-

ence. There are a number of scraper marks on the back arching which were probably not visible before wear to the varnish accentuated them.

The belly arching has hardly any flattening along the top, although it rises far more steeply than the back at each end. The flutings are similar in concept to those of the back, but there are no tool marks except in the extreme ends of the f-hole wings, where a tiny gouge has formed the hollowing. The flutings of the lower wings run alongside the bodies of the f holes, where they blend into the arching a little earlier than on previous works.

Nevertheless the subtle 'eyebrow' effect around the upper, outer edge of the f-hole bodies is still apparent.

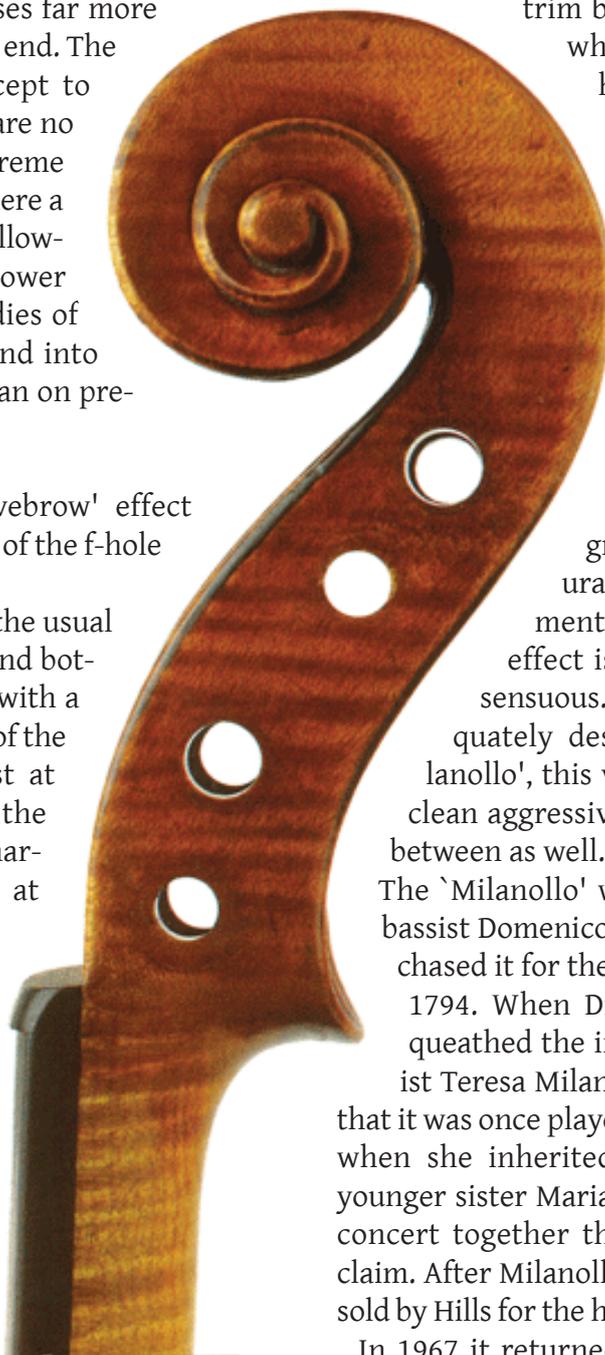
The f holes have been cut in the usual Stradivari manner. The top and bottom circles have been made with a circular cutter, and the body of the f hole has been cut almost at right angles to the body of the plate. The lower wings are narrower and trumpet slightly at the ends, a feature of Stradivari's 1720s period. On the inside of the f holes there are pin marks set at about 1.75mm from the tips of the wings. These pin holes are from the dividers which were used to fix the position of the f hole nicks. Alongside the nicks there are scratches from the opposing point of the dividers, two on the outer edge of the bass f hole and one on the inner edge. On the treble f hole there is one on the outer edge and none on the inner. Such markings on the interior of the belly indicate that it has retained its original thickness.

The interior work is coarser than earlier Stradivari instruments but is still much cleaner than most other Cremonese work. Rasped and roughly cut linings are set into more cleanly cut mortices in the corner

blocks. The corner blocks have been rasped, rather than chiselled, to a flat surface. The ribs themselves are virtually free of tool marks, although there are traces of a knife or a rasp which was used to trim back the linings. The top block, which is original, has three nail holes.

The varnish, present in large amounts, is a red brown colour and of admirable transparency, which contrasts with the more opaque varnishes of Stradivari's contemporary Joseph Guarneri. It appears to have sunk into the belly wood around the f holes. There is little disparity between the ground and the varnish. The natural darkness of the wood complements the varnish, and the overall effect is warm, dark, rich and slightly sensuous. While this description also adequately describes the sound of the 'Milanollo', this violin is capable of producing a clean aggressive light sound and all shades in between as well.

The 'Milanollo' was once owned by the double bassist Domenico Dragonetti, who probably purchased it for the virtuoso Jean Baptiste Viotti in 1794. When Dragonetti died in 1846 he bequeathed the instrument to the Italian violinist Teresa Milanollo; he stated in his testament that it was once played by Paganini. Milanollo was 19 when she inherited the violin and she and her younger sister Maria, a fellow violinist, appeared in concert together throughout Europe to great acclaim. After Milanollo's death in 1904 the violin was sold by Hills for the heirs of a Mr Ratnagar of Bombay. In 1967 it returned to Europe where it was purchased by the French violinist Christian Ferras, and with the death of Ferras in 1990 it became the property of Pierre Amoyal. The violin recently spent a brief time in its native Italy before moving to its present owner in Switzerland.



The turns of the scroll are well rounded but retain the oval form common to most Stradivari head

NOTES

1. Sold at Christie's in April for £947,500 (see p.582).
2. Including the 'Reynier' of 1727 and the 'Hamma', 'Artot-Godowsky', 'Artot-Alard' and 'Barrere', all of 1728.
3. See STRAD May 1989 p.375.
4. Fernando Sacconi, *The Secrets of Stradivari*, Cremona 1972.