

# Object of purity

**With its small and stocky form and violin style head,  
Guadagnini's 1785 Turin period viola  
is typical of the master's work.  
Roger Hargrave examines this rare and finely  
preserved example of classical making**



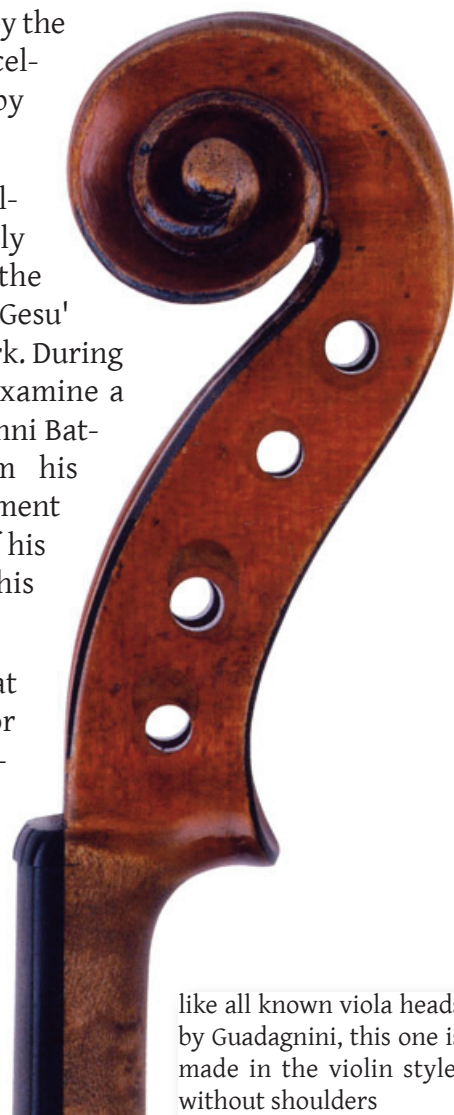
In Tainan City at the heart of Taiwan's industrial centre, the Chi Mei Culture Foundation has created a museum which in its way is as curious as the Shrine to Music Museum in rural South Dakota. Both are the brainchild of individuals of extraordinary drive and vision and both have created homes for fine collections of fine instruments in somewhat unusual surroundings. Since 1990, the Chi Mei Foundation has compiled a remarkable group of rare and important instruments of the violin family. To date, this includes a violin by Nicolo Amati, a viola by the Brothers Amati, three violins and two cellos by Stradivari and two violins by Guarneri `del Gesu'.

My visit to the Chi Mei collection was principally arranged to examine the magnificent `Ole Bull' `del Gesu' for the book about his work. During this visit I was able to examine a fine 1785 viola by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini from his Turin period, an instrument which was to be one of his final works before his

death in September 1786.

Violas by Guadagnini vary considerably in shape and size, and at 402mm, in common with most of Guadagnini's violas which are more or less around 400mm, this instrument is somewhat shorter than the standard Stradivari pattern of over 410mm. But for those looking for a smaller instrument, Guadagnini's models are certainly not short on quality and power.

Most of Guadagnini's surviving violas come from his later period and for much of this time he was influenced by Count Cozio di Salabue. However, in spite of the young count's infatuation with Stradivari, Guadagnini never appears to have constructed a viola on the surviving Stradivari patterns which were in the count's possession.



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Generally the different periods of Guadagnini's work are associated with the different towns in which he resided. However, like most violin making families, the Guadagnini family's individual styles also overlap each other. With some families, like the Stradivaris, stylistic differences are almost impossible to define. In Antonio Stradivari's lifetime his two sons contributed around a hundred years of working time and only towards the end of Antonio's life do

differences really become apparent. The work of 'del Gesu' was supported by contributions from his father Giuseppe 'filius Andrea' and possibly from his wife Katherine. Giovanni Battista Guadagnini's work is evident in the final instruments of his father Lorenzo, and the natural assumption is that Giovanni Battista's son Gaetano gave a helping hand in the completion of this viola.

Remarkably, after more than two centuries, this viola is still in a fine state of preservation, and its condition is reflected in the state of its varnish. Fresh varnishes are often a shock to anyone used to heavily polished classical varnishes. The vast majority of instruments have worn varnishes which often develop a specific patina, by which a maker's work can be recognised. Without these familiar patinas and wear patterns, instruments can appear strange or unusual to the inexperienced eye. The varnish on this viola has so little depreciation that in places its surface is unbroken even on prominent edges and chamfers. Consequently, denied the usual patina and over polishing, first appearances seem somewhat lacklustre. By comparison with classical Cremonese varnishes, and even the master's earlier efforts, it must also be acknowledged that this varnish, though highly transparent, is rather glassy and thin, probably the result of his way of finishing the surface of the instrument before any varnish was applied. Nevertheless, it still has that quality which distinguishes the great Italian varnishes from almost everything which followed.

In places on the belly, the soft lighter area of the reed lines are slightly dirty; as if the transparent, toffee coloured varnish has penetrated into the more porous cells of the summer growth. This stained appearance is reminiscent of some Neapolitan varnishes which have a negative (in the photographic sense) reflection, whereby the summer growth can appear darker than the winter growth when viewed at a certain angle; on classical Cremonese instruments the narrower, darker winter growth is always predominant. The surface on this viola is flat and largely featureless, as if the wood was dampened and scraped or abraded several times. This would have prevented the softer summer growth of the reed lines from expanding to create the fine rilled effect found on pure and unpolished Cremonese bellies.

On the head the blackened chamfers also testify to the instrument's purity. Few classical heads retain so much black lining, and it was clearly applied before the normal varnish coat, which in places still protects





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it. Like all the known viola heads by Guadagnini, this one is made in the violin style, without shoulders. In this Guadagnini may have been influenced by the lighter Brescian viola heads. Whatever his reason, even under the influence of Count Cozio's obsession with Stradivari, he rejected the cello style head preferred by Cremonese makers. Not that Guadagnini's viola heads appear weak or too light; on the contrary, they are chunky and harmonise well with his small but stocky viola form.

In common with most of Guadagnini's heads, this one is quarter sawn maple of fine growth. It is almost without flame, a feature which must have made the carving process easier. Unfortunately, the replacement neck is of bird's eye maple, which not only fails to match Guadagnini's choice of head wood but also clashes with the ribs and the back. The head retains all the usual features of Guadagnini's work. The cut of the scroll is full, to the extent that the turns are flowerpot shaped, being wider at the base. Viewed from the end of the head, with the belly held uppermost, the turns or bosses fly upwards, particularly the final turn of the eye; from the front the turns also appear to fly upwards, though slightly less so. These features, together with Guadagnini's habit of finishing

the volutes a quarter turn short at the eye, give the turns an exaggerated oval form when seen from the side.

The volutes are cut relatively deep and are slightly concave, almost up to the D peg. Although the vertical walls of the turns were clearly finished with large flat gouge strokes, these have mostly been removed by some form of abrasive; Guadagnini's earlier heads normally show far more tool markings in such areas. The eye itself has fewer of the pin-pricks which are usually a feature of his work. Such pin pricks are remnants of the marking out process, and in this case they may have been removed by the heavy blackened chamfer which embellishes the scroll.

On the top of the pegbox the chamfer runs full to the end of the throat, a feature which suggests Stradivari's influence. The throats of most Guadagnini scrolls are not as cleanly finished as this one and they usually have a V-shaped format. The pegbox interior appears to have been fully varnished, something not apparent on Cremonese instruments. In spite of the violin form the box is big and roomy, and on the inside of the walls there are no chamfers. From the side, the pegbox is longer and straighter than a Cremonese pegbox, and as it runs into the head the turns narrow quickly.

These features make Guadagnini's scrolls seem as





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if they are beginning to unfurl.

Another typical feature of Guadagnini's heads is the treatment of the flutings. There are faint remains of a scribe line between the flutings at the chin of the scroll and under the front of the head at the throat. The flutings, which are cleanly worked, run out flat under the front of the head. There are no scraper marks on the back of the pegbox, even where the flutings are deeply worked at the chin. This again suggests the use of some form of abrasive. In the manner of 'del Gesu', Guadagnini cut the head chamfers after shaping the fluting to the extreme outer edge. Applying the chamfer at this late stage meant that the outer edges were lowered and the central spine remained prominent. A further result of this was that the curve of the chin also developed a point where it converged with the central spine. In Guadagnini's case, and especially in the case of this viola, his use of wide chamfers accentuated these details.

Matching the boldness of the chamfers and the overall chunky strength of the head is Guadagnini's treatment of the body. The outline and corners are

bold and except at the corners, where they are noticeably short, the overhangs are substantial. (Guadagnini's apparent variations in viola patterns may have as much to do with his different sizes of overhangs as with differing concepts.)

The ribs, from which the outline was derived, are very similar to the back wood, suggesting that they came from the same tree. They are marked with a clear but shallow sloping figure. Both top and bottom bouts were probably one piece ribs. Viewed from the side or along the instrument, the rib corner joints tilt and pitch considerably; taken together with the short corner overhangs this has resulted in eight different corner shapes. The edges are very thick and there is a pronounced swell in the C bouts. Because of this thickness the edges remain somewhat square in their rounding off.

A large amount of varnish remains on these unworn edges, especially in the C bouts. On the treble side of the back plate a thick rim of varnish has gathered on the edgework, apparently where the back and rib varnishing has overlapped. This suggests that the varnish was viscous when applied and probably required few coats. Thick clots of varnish have also collected on both lower rib corners. None of the corner ends were blackened.

The edgework fluting on both the back and the belly is shallow and runs out to a low ridge which is close to the outer edge. This wide, shallow fluting has resulted in Guadagnini's normally thinner corners, and thicker edgework in the button areas, becoming less pronounced. The corners are wide but not stubby or informed. On the back, especially, they are well proportioned, and in spite of the sometimes unruly purfling which adorns them, they have a majestic strength. The purfling is variable in quality and the purfling channel is the only place on this viola where tool marks are apparent, with the purfling knife having run out of the channel on occasion. This is particularly obvious in two places on the upper bouts of the back.

The execution of the purfling is the most obvious detail suggesting the work of an older man. Although the purfling width varies considerably, this variation is mainly found in the black strips; the whites are fairly consistent. Varnish and dirt, or some kind of filler, is evident where the channel was cut too wide and, in spite of the shallow fluting, in several places the purfling was not set deeply enough and has been worked through. This is best observed on the bass side of the belly.

The materials used for the purfling appear the same for both the black and the white strips. The characteristic long splits in the white wood, easily seen with the naked eye, are clearly apparent in the black (stained) strips when viewed with a magnifying glass. Previous analysis has ascertained that Guadagnini used the white outer layer of the walnut tree, which complies with the observed longitudinal splits.

With the exception of the purfling, the wood used for this viola is in the best Cremonese tradition. The back wood, like that of the head and ribs, is mountain grown maple and the flame matches the ribs perfectly. The back is of two pieces, but there are small additional wings on the lower bouts which include the tips of both lower corners.

The belly wood is also of the best quality, although in the top bass bout there is an original repair to what must have been a small resin pocket. Such repairs are not uncommon, even on the works of Stradivari. The year rings are neither exceptionally wide nor extremely narrow; the wood is perhaps slightly unusual only in the even quality of the growth across the width of the belly. Along the joint the year rings converge slightly towards the top of the instrument.

Both the back and the belly archings are similar. They are flat and full and begin at the shallow fluting which extends either side of the purfling. The long arches swell slowly from the ends, the belly possibly more so, and there is no flatness along the centre and no steep climb under the fingerboard or tailpiece. With the exception of some fine scratching across the lower bass corner of the back, there are no visible tool marks on the archings. The whole has clearly been scraped or abraded several times.

Although the soundhole nicks are somewhat unconventionally placed, the design and setting of the f holes are influenced by Stradivari's work. Gone are the oval lower circles which were the trademark of Guadagnini. The soundhole bodies are cut more vertically to the horizontal plane of the plate than would be the case on most Cremonese instruments. However, they are not as undercut as some of Guadagnini's own previous works had been. The lower wings are boldly fluted, again in the manner of Stradivari but, unlike Stradivari's work, the edges have been softened by some kind of abrasive. The strength of these soundholes suitably matches the bold outline, edgework and archings, creating a harmonious and well balanced instrument.

As can be seen through the soundholes, the blocks and linings are also reminiscent of Stradivari. They are made of a similar white wood, presumably willow or poplar, and are finished in a consistent, if slightly cruder, style. The C bout linings are set deeply into the corner blocks and the whole of the interior work indicates the use of an inside mould. The label, which is presumably original, has a more sophisticated print form than Guadagnini's many and varied earlier labels and contains the legend 'alumnus ANTONIO STRADIVARI'.

There are no obvious signs of any cracks or serious damage to this viola, making it one of the great rarities of classical violin making. It has certificates from Etienne Vatelot of Paris (1986), J. & A. Beare of London (1988) and Peter Biddulph of London (1991). It is also pictured in the Chi Mei Collection of Fine Violins, published by the Chi Mei Foundation.

Thanks to the Chi Mei Foundation, its president Wen Lang Shi, Andrew Finnigan and Peter Biddulph.



