Thrills without frills

Roger Hargrave examines a robust violin by Carlo Giuseppe Testore, built around 1703 for a life on the road

More so than at any time in the past, buying a violin requires the help of a trustworthy expert. Most musicians know enough to request some form of certification at the point of purchase, but they must still judge for themselves either the quality of the instrument or the quality of the certification. All the more remarkable, then, that Pauline Nobes, the owner of this violin, walked into a London auction house determined to bid and buy, with no more help than two grainy photographs and a three-sentence catalogue description.

Perhaps more by luck than by design, this purchase was a triumph. The family of makers to whom this violin is attributed is one of the most counterfeited of the classical Italian era. Furthermore, for a Testore this violin is in an exceptional state of preservation. Admittedly there are several better-preserved violins from the same period, but there are few by this family, whose members were largely professional musicians rather than rich dilettantes. In addition, instruments by the Testore family have seldom been accorded the respite of several quiet years in a collection. Unlike many Cremonese works, they did not become serious collectors' items until the late-20th century and have spent the intervening centuries in continual use. Imagine wearing though several pounds of rosin, hundreds of horses' tails, several miles of gut and metal strings, numerous sweaty musicians - present owner excepted and, potentially the most damaging of all, dozens of restorers. The very fact that this and so many other instruments by the Testore family have survived is testimony to the quality of their craftsmanship, their design and construction and the materials employed.

Time and a fine Italian varnish have given this violin undoubted grace and charm. But essentially what we have here is a budget violin built for the rough and tumble life of an early-18thcentury professional musician. To make an analogy, while the Amatis and Stradivari were producing saloon cars, the Testores were building tough, sleek utility vehicles. There are no frills: simply good solid engineering and a stable frame. Just how good the Testores were at their job is amply demonstrated by the large number of instruments that have survived three centuries of continual use.

While absorbing the details of this violin it is well worth noting where savings were made and where the essential elements that go into making a fine musical instrument were preserved. Indeed the exercise might be a salutary lesson for those modern makers who harbour a tendency towards over-fussy work.

The practical elements of the craftsmanship become obvious as soon as the head is examined. The heads of Carlo Giuseppe's instruments vary considerably in implementation, but are generally quite distinctive. Viewed from the side, the pegbox walls of this one are deep and remain so from the chin to the throat. They are also fairly long. This is especially practical for spacing the pegs and also provides extra width around the A-peg area, which is normally prone to cracking. Inside, although it narrows considerably towards the scroll end, the box is deep and long, giving ample room for the strings. It is extremely undercut at the throat to assist the threading of the A string, and the walls thicken considerably towards the bottom, to add strength.

Once this working section of the head is past, the sides of the pegbox begin to constrict rapidly as they run into the volutes and make their first turn into the scroll. The turns then continue smoothly - if not uniformly - towards tiny, rounded eyes. The volutes are flat and smooth on both sides, if somewhat uneven. Though in quality incomparable, in depth the volutes are similar to those of Stradivari, becoming only gradually deeper from the throat to the final turn in the eye. However, where the volutes terminate at the eye, the sting is almost half a turn short and crudely finished, more in the manner of Guadagnini. Remarkably, although obviously rapidly worked, the volute surfaces have hardly any tool marks.

The bosses also show very few tool marks, except in the inner areas, where several half-oval gouge marks are filled with patina. The remaining outer

areas are clean and appear to have been abraded to a smooth finish. The bosses are distinctively shaped, like inverted plant pots, and considerably fuller at the base this is a common feature of many Milanese heads. The eyes of Testore scrolls often tilt up slightly, away from the throat and either forwards, towards the pegbox as this one does, or backwards and away from it.

As seen from the back, the long taper of the pegbox is very gradual, in the Amati style. The disadvantage of this aesthetically pleasing form is that it narrows the pegbox interior, especially noticeable by the A peg. As with many Testore heads, the fluting is only applied to the scroll itself. The back of the pegbox and the chin have been left flat, with the fluting beginning level with the pegbox end. It is commonly believed that fluting was not applied to save time. This may be true, but the lack of fluting in this area allows pegbox to be cut even deeper, creating more room for both pegs and strings. The flutes stop well short of the throat, over the front of the scroll, in the manner of a late 'del Gesu' head. Below this area several saw marks are evident another 'del Gesu' trait and indicating something of Carlo Giuseppe's urgency. The finishing chamfers are as delicate as they are uneven. Because they are so small it is difficult to judge whether they were applied before or after the flutes. The fact that the back of the head remains unfluted and chamfered, however, indicates that the chamfers were probably applied before the fluting was cut. Any other system would have made it awkward to blend the flutes, the flat area and the chamfers.

THIS IS TONEWOOD OF THE FINEST QUALITY ALTHOUGH PRETTY, IT IS NOT SPECTACULAR AND WAS PROBABLY INEXPENSIVE

When considered as a whole, the head has a soft, almost delicate appearance, like those of most of the family. General wear and regular polishing have undoubtedly contributed to this, but it seems likely that an abrasive material, probably dogfish skin, was used to remove the majority of the tool marks. However, this was not always the case and some Testore heads are covered with tool marks. To the untrained eye and unsophisticated, but to connoisseurs they are clearly made by skilled craftsmen.

The material used for this head has more in common with the Testore family's great Cremonese neighbours than its style has. A fine-grown maple with minute, dark-brown flecks or medullary rays, it is more or less quarter-sawn.

Most significantly, in common with many Cremonese heads, it has a very shallow figure. There are practical reasons for this - a highly figured head is far more difficult to carve than a plain one. The wood is of high quality and is a good match for the back and ribs, which appear to have come from the same tree.

The two-piece back is speckled with tiny brown medullary rays. It is quarter-sawn and of a fine, even grain -the annual rings are seldom wider than two millimetres. Without question this is tonewood of the finest quality, thus fulfilling the practical requirements of the working musician. Although it is pretty, it is not spectacular and was probably inexpensive. The narrow figure, which slopes very slightly upwards from the centre joint, is more pronounced than the head but less so than the ribs, and has been shown to its best advantage by Testore's storming varnish and ground.

The centre joint is exceptionally sound and serves as testimony to the maker's ability to use tools. The dark line that appears to run along the joint towards the button is an old scribe or pencil line, not an open joint.

Testore spared nothing in creating the back arching. From about 16 to 17 millimetres in overall height, it drops to a narrow and very shallow fluting at the edges. It manages to appear full without being too high, and flat without being either boxy or scoopy. As might be expected, there is some distortion from the soundpost, but generally this arching is strong and stylishly finished. From the bottom of the shallow fluting the channel rises very gently to a delicate, low edge. Probably the most striking feature of the back is the imitation purfling. Although clearly a costcutting exercise, it is finished with style and adequately complements the genuine purfling of the belly. Some of the schools that used imitation purfling painted the lines with the help of two tiny wheels, but in Milan they were always scratched on and filled with a varnish-based paste. The preferred tool seems to have been a standard purfling marker or cutter, and the accurate, parallel appearance of the lines suggests that it was double-bladed, although it is difficult to be certain.

The mitre ends have been finished freehand with a knife. In at least two cases the inner cutter has over-

ridden the mitre, creating a diamond shape, often a feature of Milanese work. Although the lines have to be incised deeply enough for the filler to be effective, cutting too deeply without inserting genuine purfling would weaken the edge. Consequently, where the already flat edge has been subjected to wear and tear these shallow lines have virtually disappeared.

THE IMITATION PURFLING IS THE MOST STRIKING FEATURE OF THE BACK. IN MILAN THIS WAS ALWAYS SCRATCHED ON AND FILLED WITH A VARNISH-BASED PASTE

As on some 'del Gesu' violins, the corners are small and somewhat stubby - almost an afterthought. On the belly, this peculiarity is accentuated by excessive wear. Each one is a little different from the next and, although generally well cut, they have undoubtedly been improved by some convenient wear and rigorous polishing.

The back edges are quite thin. Nonetheless, they appear to follow the Cremonese characteristic of swelling slightly at the corners and in the bouts, while becoming markedly thinner as they approach the corners. In several places the underside of the back edge has the remains of a knife-cut chamfer.

The back button is original and somewhat worn, but in remarkably good condition. Its survival may have been helped by the fact that no purfling channel cuts across it. There are no locating pins in the back or belly. Whenever they are present on an instrument by C.G. Testore they are almost certainly a later addition.

The ribs of the top and bottom bouts were both formed from two pieces. This would have been extraordinary in Cremona, but it was a common event in Milan. The makers there also often employed two-piece neck blocks, rather than the one-piece ribs used in Cremona, to counter the problems caused by the neck block being spilt by nails when the neck was attached to the ribs (The Strad, January 1989). But it is inside the rib structure, at the four corners, where the major differences in construction methods can be seen. With the exception of G.B. Guadagnini's short stay in the Milan, its makers did not make their rib structures on a mould.

Unfortunately, because of the instruments' utilitarian histories, many Milanese rib structures have been partly or totally rebuilt and it would require a mammoth investigation to reconstruct the original methods. In common with many Milanese instruments, this violin has maple linings and spruce blocks. Somewhat unusually, the bout linings run halfway across each corner block, meeting inaccurately in the middle.

One-piece bellies are a regular feature of Milanese violins. They were also quite common in the first hundred or so years of the Cremonese school. They save the time normally required to make a centre joint and, like one-piece backs, they appear to have no detrimental effect upon tone. This belly has the wider growth, up to three millimetres in places, on the bass side and the grain is straight with the exception of a large wave to the left of the fingerboard. On the treble side becomes very fine in the bouts - down to 0.5mm- and there is just a suggestion of hazel figure in the grain. The belly arching is clearly related to the back, but a little fuller. There is also slightly less scooping in the purfling channel and the edge itself has a flatter finish. Like the back, the edge of the front is thin, but the obvious variations in the back thickness have not been replicated. The pristine condition of the instrument is emphasised by the fact that only one tiny area of the belly edge has required repair.

Perhaps more than any other aspect of the violin, the belly purfling on this violin best illustrates the utilitarian philosophy of the Testore family. When any piece of converted timber develops a crack or split it usually begins at an exposed end. Contrary to popular belief, purfling is not simply a decorative feature: it acts as a barrier to prevent such edge cracks from extending into the body of the instrument. Even the tradition of using three separate pieces is significant. Three narrow strips form a stronger, more flexible barrier than one wide piece of the same overall thickness. However, some timbers are more prone to cracking than others and, in violins, the belly spruce is far more vulnerable than the back maple. With this in mind, many violin making schools only purfled the bellies. The fact that after 300 years no major cracks have developed in this back justifies Testore's decision. That he still had some feeling for aesthetics is confirmed by the care with which he applied his imitation purfling to the back.

By Cremonese standards the purfling strips are crude. Although the central white is markedly wider than the relatively narrow blacks, each of the sepa-

rate pieces varies greatly in thickness. No serious analysis has been made of Testore purfling. The white wood is traditionally believed to be beech and certainly has that appearance, but it could also be maple or some similar material. Overall, the purfling is efficient without being artistic it does the job.

The f-holes were cut with some haste. In common with most of Testore's work, the bottom circles are small and appear rather weak. It is difficult to judge whether the top and bottom circles were drilled, as was usual in Cremona, but they were probably not. However, as in Cremona, the bodies of the f-holes were cut more or less at right angles to the arching. The lower wings have sunk on both sides, making the bodies of the holes appear wider than they would have done originally. The wings themselves are relatively wide and square, and the slight fluting is a product of the arching process rather than a separate excavation in the manner of Stradivari.

The top halves of the f-holes lean away from each other - a common feature of this maker's work, although it is not unusual to find them leaning in the opposite direction. The treble hole is set considerably lower than the bass, but they complement each other well, in spite of their rudimentary appearance. They were cut with panache, something that comes only from complete familiarity with the work. And, with a final flourish, each of the rucks was finished with two deft knife strokes. As with the variety of head archings and outlines, the obvious disparity of C.G. Testore's f-holes belies the fact that they all belong to a recognisable stylistic pattern.

Like the head and back, no obvious tool marks adorn the surfaces of the belly. The surface is not smooth, however, as the wider, whiter, summer growth of the annual rings has swelled excessively, leaving the dark winter growths sitting at the bottom of a minute trough. Many of these troughs are filled with dirt and rosin, creating a pattern of dark, almost black lines. These black lines contrast strongly with the region's yellow-orange varnish to create one of the most noticeable features of Milanese work.

As with most ancient Italian instruments, the varnish and magical ground applied to this 'budget' violin lift it into a category apart.

Italian grounds and varnishes vary considerably in appearance, but they are undoubtedly related to each other. A classic Italian ground lends an iridescence and lustre to any varnish, but its greatest effect appears to have been on tone. Even Italian instruments that, unlike this one, have little or no surface varnish are nevertheless tonally superior, and numerous works by 'del Gesu' and, of course, the Testore family confirm this assertion.

With Milanese works, the varnish appears highly transparent and thinly applied. Here Testore may well have applied only one coat, though in the areas where the varnish has chipped off, especially on the back and ribs, it can be seen to have been a substantial coat. Evidently the ground too was generously applied and the surface varnish has separated cleanly from it. This characteristic may help explain the exceptional tone qualities and carrying power possessed by this violin and so many other instruments by the family.

In spite of its rudimentary nature this is a charismatic, attractive violin. And unlike the 'budget' works of 'del Gesu violins by Carlo Giuseppe Testore are still (just) within the limits of a successful working musician's purse.