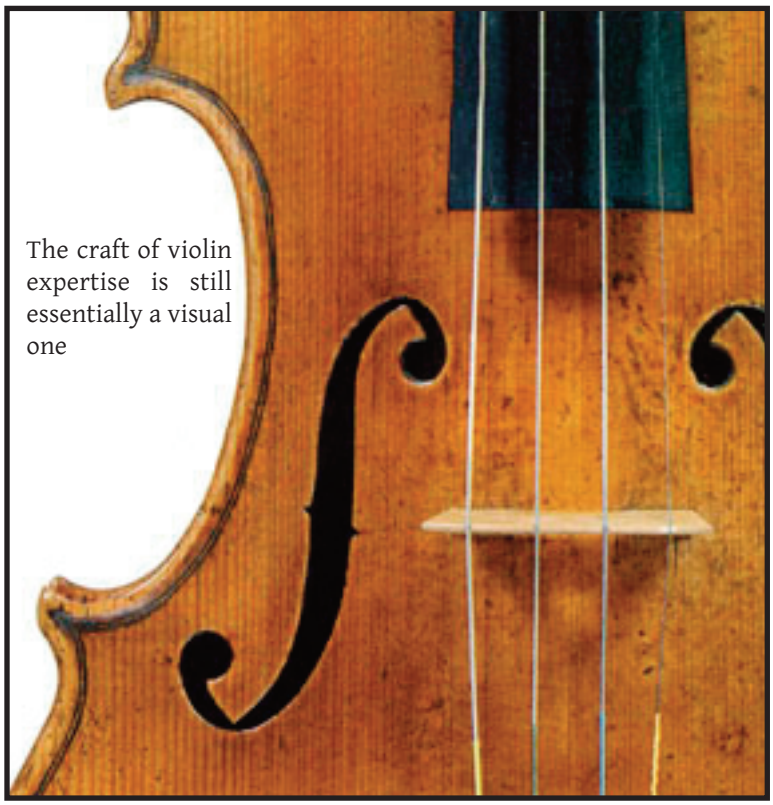
THE CRAFT OF THE CONNOISSEUR

What makes a violin connoisseur? And how difficult is it to get in on the trade? In the first half of our two-part guide, ROGER HARGRAVE investigates the history of the art

FOR MOST PROSPECTIVE CONNOISSEURS, THE struggle they experience learning the craft of expertise probably has more to do with knowing how and what they must learn than it does with any innate lack of ability. Violin identification is a skill that can be learnt, and with a little application, violins of any school can be described, compared and identified with some degree of success.

As with all objects of art and antiquity, the craft of violin expertise is essentially a visual one. Even the latest scientific weapons of analysis, such as dendrochronology, gas chromatography, high-definition photography and electron microscopy, are merely an extension of this ocular process.

So how does anyone become a connoisseur? At the moment, virtually the only way to become a connoisseur of violins is to become seriously involved in dealing. The single viable alternative to this path lies in restoring violins for a prolific dealer.



The craft of violin expertise is still essentially a visual one

Way back in the 1970s I was told that when the New York dealer Wurlitzer and his chief restorer Sacconi examined a Stradivari, Wurlitzer would simply look at it and make his decision, whereas Sacconi would meticulously examine the details inside and out before coming to much the same conclusion. This is often the way of things: dealers usually see a great variety of instruments, whereas restorers generally

see fewer, but have a better understanding of their construction. Wurlitzer was undoubtedly the better all-round expert, but I doubt he could have written *The Secrets of Stradivari.*

Now, although it does not follow that all dealers are experts, it is mainly dealers who are tasked with assessing the constant flow of merchandisable instruments. In this way, if they are astute, they can gradually learn the craft of instrument identification. In contrast, even the wealthiest and most active of collectors cannot afford to amass the number and diversity of instruments required to become a recognised connoisseur. And in this respect, even the world's most important museum collections are woefully inadequate.

In the days of ocean liners and steam trains, a small network of dealers throughout Europe and the Americas controlled the buying and selling of fine violins. Whatever the moral or negative aspects of this arrangement were, there was one very definite advantage. Choice instruments tended to be concentrated in a few very select shops. Indeed some establishments could legitimately claim to have handled virtually every important classical Italian instrument. As a result of such concentrations, a number of these dealers became adept at recognising the works of individual makers and the schools to which they belonged. And this is exactly how violin connoisseurs were and to some extent still are created.

The problem is that in recent decades these concentrations of instruments have begun to disappear, as have many of the larger dealerships. Today, fine violins are thinly dispersed across the world, and unfortunately they are often dispersed among an increasing number of inexperienced dealers with self-proclaimed expertise. This new set of circumstances makes it essential that we find different ways of gaining expertise. And perhaps in this remarkable electronic age, there are some genuine alternatives.

AT ITS FINEST, INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION not only involves the naming of a particular master, but also the period of that master's career in which a work was completed. As I have suggested, in order to achieve this, the connoisseur must have had access to many instruments over many years and to have studied these works in meticulous detail. Eventually, the very process of compiling, analysing and correlating information heightens the connoisseur's perception. In another context, such a state might well be termed 'enlightenment'. However, enlightenment of this nature is not an innate gift. Like a good bow arm, it requires hard, repetitive practice. Natural talent (whatever that might be) may help, but it is total dedication to any discipline that creates outstanding ability, and such dedication is invariably the product of passion. There never has been, and there never will be, a truly great connoisseur who was not obsessed with fiddles. Note that I have written 'obsessed with fiddles', not 'obsessed with money'.

Nevertheless, regardless of effort or obsession, the extent of any connoisseur's enlightenment is more restricted than is generally imagined. History has seen hundreds of thousands of violin makers. Some of these makers were celebrated and prolific, but many, perhaps most, were obscure and produced very few instruments. Although theoretically it is the job of the connoisseur to identify all surviving instruments, this is an impossible task.

The simple truth is that no connoisseur, however good, can claim to have examined even a single example of every school, let alone of every maker's work. Accordingly, each connoisseur is required to make judgements based upon a relatively small sample of the available whole.

It may surprise most people to learn that when a connoisseur knows the life and works of only 20 historical makers in detail, this is an extraordinary achievement. With considerable effort, a dependable familiarity with a further hundred or so may be realised. Beyond this, most connoisseurs are at best reduced to calculated guesswork. Although this is no exaggeration, it does not mean that connoisseurs are incompetent. Considering the incalculable number of men and women who have made one or more instruments, a well-educated guess is more than might fairly be expected.

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SO WHAT EXACTLY DO I MEAN by 'knowing' the life and works of a maker in detail? Consider a Jeep, something that most people will often have seen in films, on television, in magazines and in the street. But someone who knows jeeps well knows, for example, that the first jeeps were developed by the US Army Quartermaster Corps in the Second World War; that they weighed 1.25 tons; were powered by a four-cylinder petrol engine; and that they could drive up

a 60-degree slope. They would also know how many have been made since, and by which companies. They would know which different models, engines and accessories were available at different periods, and be able to identify the carburettors, sprockets, cotter pins, gaskets and go into the kind of minute detail that would send most people to sleep. But not satisfied with this, these connoisseurs would also know which parts on a vintage Jeep are original and which parts have been repaired, replaced or repainted. And undoubtedly some of these Jeep connoisseurs will have contributed to the many hundreds of books that have been written on the subject.

'Knowing' the work of a violin maker well is exactly the same. Benjamin Schröder knows Jacob Stainer well and Duane Rosengard knows G.B. Guadagnini well because they have studied those makers' lives and works in infinite detail, just as the Hill brothers did before them with Stradivari. Knowing 20 makers well is an immense achievement, one which only a rare few have managed over two centuries. In fact, knowing one important maker well is a seriously worthy accomplishment. But, it is an accomplishment that any one of us can realistically achieve.

Because of the enormous number of violin makers, there has always been a tendency for connoisseurs to specialise. Some specialise in geographical regions, others in price ranges. Unfortunately, although minor national schools or inexpensive instruments may be just as worthy of academic scrutiny as classical Italian works, in cold commercial terms they are not.

On the other hand, the intrinsic beauty of many classical Italian instruments, their undeniable sonority and their stylistic authority has caused their monetary value, and hence their prestige, to increase dramatically over the centuries.

As a result, when the violin world speaks of 'leading connoisseurs', it is usually referring to those conversant with prestigious classical Italian instruments. Moreover, because of their perceived status, the broader ability of experts on classical violins is often overestimated - even within the trade. In reality, among the world's famous connoisseurs, both past and present, knowledge of the minor schools is often limited. This is because such connoisseurs largely ignore the minor, less valuable schools, either by design or default, and connoisseurs cannot hope to know that which they do not see on a regular basis. In fact, the truth is that although one or two have come close, universal experts are as rare as griffin eggs.

Moreover, the old practice of simply seeing and studying instruments in meticulous detail is, in today's climate, not enough. The available information about a maker's life and times may often be extremely limited (and sometimes, as with Giovanni Battista Rogeri of Brescia, violin labels give us almost as much information as is known about the maker), but it has become an essential element of the connoisseur's craft and it must be examined assiduously. Today no serious connoisseur can afford to ignore the historical context within which an instrument was made.

Put simply, the examination of a single instrument can only assist the expert in identifying similar examples of the same maker's work, and only from the same period. However, if it is known when and where a maker worked, for whom they worked and who in turn worked for them, the examination of a single instrument can frequently reveal something about the work of several makers.

AMONG CONNOISSEURS THERE ARE MANY who believe that the study of classical Cremonese instruments dating from the period 1550 to 1750 is the only valid introduction to expertise. While this is by no means true, there can be little doubt that it can provide an excellent foundation upon which the student can further develop the craft of expertise. However, whereas in the past this was the exclusive domain of dominant dealers, today, no matter how remote we may feel in this often extremely insular business, we can all explore the route through classical Cremonese instruments.

Those makers whose works can be regarded as possessing the basic characteristics necessary for such a study are the families Amati, Guarneri and Stradivari. Although there are arguments for and against including Jacob Stainer as a member of the classical Cremonese school, it is inconceivable that he be left out of this basic group.

Although Venetian cellos are undoubtedly important, like the Rogeris and Rugeris (who may turn out to be the same family), the Bergonzis and others of the Cremonese school, their models were never as pervasive, and in any case, most if not all of these makers were already riding the Cremonese wave.

The only worthy exception to this trend was the early Brescian school, the violas of which have inspired makers up to the present day. It must also be

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said that Brescian instruments did have a strong influence on several early schools of violin making, particularly in northern Europe. However, in most instances this influence was relatively short-lived. More will be said of this in next month's issue.

Arguments in favour of studying Cremonese instruments as the route to expertise are actually extremely powerful and persuasive. It is certain that the designs created and brought to perfection by this group of makers were the stuff from which virtually all subsequent violin makers derived their inspiration, the only significant exception being, as I have indicated, the Brescian school. This inspiration may be many times removed from the original source, but even in the most primitive of instruments, Cremona's influence cannot be denied. And it is this link, however tenuous, that can help us identify works far removed, both geographically and in time, from Cremona's classical makers.

As banal as the idea might seem, anyone who can identify the basic models of these influential makers is already well on the way towards a better understanding of all violins. Moreover, simply having some idea about who used such models and when can direct us towards the particular. This is the basis of the argument supporting a comprehensive study of classical Cremonese works.

This argument is further supported by the fact that the lives and works of these great makers are well documented, with new information becoming available at regular intervals. Although often quite thinly spread, over a large number of publications and websites, a sizeable iconographic record of these instruments already exists and it is growing on a daily basis. Quite apart from this online information, classical instruments can be found in almost every major orchestra, museum and auction house in the world. With a little courteous effort the budding expert can gain access to many fine examples.

There are, of course, limitations to this approach: we rarely get the chance to really scrutinise such instruments, and we certainly cannot open them to check for hidden scribe lines or secret pins, or to investigate the way in which the linings are set into the blocks. But fortunately, at least for the Cremonese school, much of this information has already been publicised.

I AM AWARE THAT NUMEROUS groups and societies have computer databases that contain many photographs of instruments and descriptions and historical information about the makers. Some societies have also published a number of excellent, limited-edition books, for distribution to members only. I am bound to say that I am strongly against this, except where it applies to private individuals or companies. What needs to be monitored is the content placed on databases, not who has access to them.

Whatever else you do, never forget the founding principles of the world wide web: develop a healthy hatred for restrictive practices, and for any society

that seeks to control or exploit knowledge.

There are, of course, alternatives to the classical Cremonese approach, but the required information is not yet as readily available online. For example, British, Dutch or American instruments may be more prevalent in their countries of origin, but unfortunately supportive documentary and iconographical material for such schools is often either scarce, inaccurate, or both. Fine examples with good certification are usually more difficult to find, and certainly it will not be helpful to learn the craft of expertise using suspect instruments and questionable information.

Next Roger Hargrave traces how the Cremonese influence spread across the world

Roger Hargrave has given a presentation on connoisseurship at the Wieniawski Violin Making Competition in Pozna´n on 13 May 2011.