



Left-right Antoine Nédélec applies patina to a varnished violin

‘Antiquing is about creating something individualistic,’ he says. ‘It’s about flair and imagination. My goal with an antique finish is to capture the spirit of the original instrument, and I think the true art of antiquing is being able to leave some things to chance, and not to try to control everything. I think that’s how to achieve the most convincing result.’ In Preuss’s opinion, the more subtle the antiquing the better. And for some makers, it can come down to finding just the right amount of intervention to make a pristine finish sing. ‘I’ve made quite a few instruments with very little antiquing,’ says Curtin, ‘but I find there is still a fair bit of artifice involved. Simply applying even layers of ground and coloured varnish is rarely enough to produce an expressive finish, at least to my eye. Some minimal amount of texture and colour variation is needed to make the finish come alive.’

Once an antiqued instrument is completed, it has one practical advantage over a straight instrument when it comes back into the workshop, argues Nédélec. ‘You can give your instrument on trial to a musician and it doesn’t matter so much if they return it with a scratch on it,’ he says. ‘It’s also easier to work on an antiqued instrument; with a straight one you really don’t want to put any dings in it.’

For some makers, antiquing can be less of a choice and more of a market imperative – a way to stay in business. Much depends on customer preferences and market tastes, and where and how makers sell their instruments. Preuss observes: ‘There are huge differences, for example, when you compare Japan with the US. In Japan, clean instruments still sell the most and the fastest, whereas there’s a much bigger market for antiqued instruments in America.’ Oslo-based maker Jacob von der Lippe says that interacting with and selling directly to musicians was one reason why he moved away from antiquing to making almost exclusively straight-varnished instruments. ‘But for makers who sell through dealers,’ he says, ‘the dealers may say they want antiqued instruments because they’re the easiest ones to sell to their market.’

The demand for antiqued instruments has led to plentiful examples of what experienced exponents consider a kind of pastiche antiquing, where poor technique, simplistic execution or a half-hearted commitment to accurate representation make for particularly unconvincing results. Nédélec says: ‘Often when you only go halfway, it doesn’t ▶

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Jacob von der Lippe now makes straight instruments almost exclusively