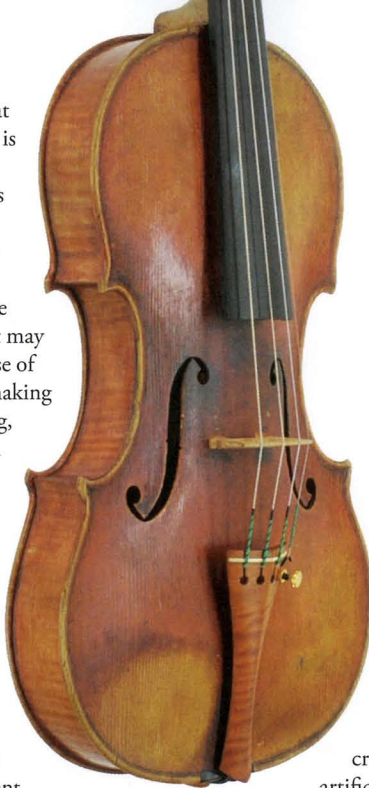


look like any instrument has ever looked at any stage of its life. This kind of approach is what I like to call “New Age antiquing”, and it looks completely fake.’ In Nédélec’s experience, high-quality antiquing needs time as well as skill. ‘It takes me as long to antique an instrument as it does to make it,’ he says. ‘I can spend three weeks on the antiquing.’ But such intense commitment may not strike other makers as a worthwhile use of their workshop hours. Simmers says: ‘If making an antiqued instrument takes twice as long, and you can sell it for twice as much, then that might make sense. But if it takes twice the time and you can only sell it for a little more than you can a straight instrument, then it’s not an economical way of working.’

Why focus time and effort on antiquing, suggest some makers, when creating a good-looking straight-varnish violin can be just as challenging and fulfilling? ‘In a way it’s a bigger challenge to make a straight-varnish instrument look attractive and like something that players want to touch and play,’ argues Von der Lippe. ‘I look for varnish that’s lively and enhances the wood, and I like some of the texture in the surface to show. And you can do that without antiquing.’ Simmers states that ‘it’s much easier to make a quickly antiqued instrument look decent than to make a very fresh instrument look good. With a straight instrument you have to be very subtle.’ For some makers, including Nédélec and Preuss, switching between making antiqued and straight violins means they don’t have to limit the challenge in either direction. Nédélec often alternates between making antiqued and straight violins, while Preuss says: ‘I do both straight and antiqued instruments and find them equally challenging as a maker.’

Success with either approach can rest as much on the quality of the wood as the character of the varnish. Simmers says: ‘You need to have good wood. You can have the best ground and varnish in the world, but without a reflective piece of wood, you can’t do anything with it.’ Curtin agrees. ‘So much depends on the reflectivity of the wood,’ he says. ‘Dull wood gives the impression of varnishing on plain paper. With highly reflective wood you feel like you are varnishing a mirror. The effect is magical, and I think it explains some of the charm of the best Old Italians. It’s not so much the varnish as what’s immediately underneath it.’

With a varnish that wears well, proponents of straight instruments say that player-wear appears more natural than the wear patterns given to antiqued violins. ‘I find natural wear patterns much more attractive than anything I could fake,’ says British maker Kai-Thomas Roth. ‘And when makers try to give their violins 18th-century wear patterns it looks even more fake, because nearly everybody plays with chinrests now, so the wear patterns today are different.’ Von der Lippe argues that the mix of artificial wear and player-wear creates a mismatched look: ‘If you see an antiqued violin that has been played for ten years, you have a kind of fake



Andreas Preuss's copy of Paganini's Guarneri 'del Gesù' violin known as 'Il Cannone'

wear and tear from the start, and then you have natural wear on top of that. Musicians might not think much about it, but as a maker I just think it looks very strange.’ Simmers, however, isn’t convinced that the potential for varying patterns undermines the case for antiqued instruments: ‘If you create the look of 50 or 100 years of wear artificially and give that instrument to a player, they’re going to wear it differently. But that wouldn’t

be any different to giving the original old instrument to another player and them adding their wear to it. So I don’t think the idea that wear patterns would be different is a great argument against antiquing.’

For Preuss, the key to ensuring that player wear on his antiqued instruments looks natural, and does not expose any awkward colour contrasts, is pre-treating his wood. He explains: ‘A big motivation for me to continue with antique finish was that I discovered a way to stain the wood naturally – simply steaming it to make it go darker. This way, when my instruments get additional wear, it just looks natural. If I hadn’t discovered this method, I wouldn’t have continued doing antique finishes, because it would have bothered me to see, after a few years’ use, any white wood come through underneath the scratches.’

Careful scrutiny of an instrument’s finish may come instinctively to makers, but do players share this obsessive attention to detail? No, says Roth. ‘I want my instruments to work, and to look attractive to the customer. The only people who really see whether something looks clever or convincing are my peers. But I want to sell to musicians, not my colleagues, and musicians don’t see a fraction of what we see as makers.’ While acknowledging that musicians might feel uncomfortable walking out on stage with a garishly new-looking instrument, something that looks too squeaky clean and polished, Von der Lippe says that, in his experience, this does not mean that players only feel happy with an instrument that looks old. ‘Musicians care mostly about the sound,’ he says. ‘As long as the workmanship is top-notch, and there’s a good varnish that enhances the wood and has an organic, lively feel to it, I find players don’t have anything against a fresh varnished instrument.’ And along with the sound, how an instrument feels and handles is more important than the way it looks, says Roth: ‘Whether an instrument is faked or not doesn’t make a difference to how it works. What is important is how the instrument feels >