

A happy medium

To antique or not to antique? Rather than one or the other, **John Simmers** decided to take a third option – using techniques developed for antiquing to make his new instruments 'look warm and fuzzy'



A 2018 violin by John Simmers displaying the toolmarks and edge shading

My journey as a violin maker is probably fairly typical. I studied violin making at the Newark School in the UK in the mid-1990s. We learnt to make new-looking 'straight' instruments. Antiquing was generally frowned upon, and certainly not taught. We all strove for perfectly finished surfaces with sharp woodwork and completely even varnish. It's a look I am sure many readers will be familiar with. At the same time, I was exposed to what I considered to be amazing examples of new violins that were skilfully antiqued. I came from a playing background and I knew that, if I wanted to have a chance of making a living out of violin making, I was going to have to learn how to do that.

So in my third year at Newark I made a violin and antiqued it. I made it very quickly and it was my first experiment in leaving obvious toolmarks. The results were less than ideal, but it gave me some insight into the process. Incidentally, after I graduated I refinished and revarnished that violin, with a much better result. I saw it recently after 20 years and was surprised by how pleased I was with it.

From then on I antiqued almost all the instruments I made. Interestingly, the ones I didn't antique were all commissions, and the customers didn't like the idea of having that done to their nice new violins! In an effort to improve my work I collaborated with other makers, went to varnish masterclasses

overseas, and attended the Oberlin Violin Makers Workshop in the US. I discovered a great deal about varnish and technique, and I believe my antiquing progressed to a reasonably high level. But I just wasn't convinced.

So I tried to make instruments that were just a little bit antiqued. But then I couldn't get them to look beautiful. I didn't know what to do next, which was a problem, as I was keen to incorporate more making into my business. It occurred to me that in the process of learning to antique, I had learnt a lot of techniques that could also be incorporated into my 'new' work. My goal was to make instruments that could not be accused of being antiqued, but were much more pleasing to the eye than the first instruments I made.

Every single one of the techniques mentioned here is part of the antiquer's bag of tricks, and could be considered antiquing. However, I refrain from pulling, dinging and scratching the varnish. The effect I am after is very subtle, so that it is not very obvious. Sometimes I come across old instruments that have not been played much. They are very fresh, but just from hanging around for all that time, the varnish has developed some texture and patina here and there, giving them a beautiful, warm look. This is essentially the effect I'm going for.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WOOD TEXTURE

I recommend that you get rid of the sandpaper and think twice before picking up a scraper. Violins are made with cutting tools, and I don't go to a lot of effort to hide that. I am happy to leave obvious toolmarks in my woodwork, as they provide opportunities when



Varnish texture before refining and polishing

varnishing. Obviously you need to be artistic in your approach, but remember that what looks textured in the white will be much less so once varnished. You need to overstate things a little. I go to a lot of effort to make my work flow and the details very sharp. I get pleasure from that, but I soften all those nice, sharp edges afterwards, to make it look less harsh. If those details aren't neat before you soften them, you don't achieve the same flow and beauty.

Ribs are a problem, as they tend to be quite smooth off the plane. I try to leave some toothed plane and scraper marks on the outside of the ribs to help add some texture. The scroll is a pretty obvious place to leave gouge marks. I don't get too carried away when refining the sides of the pegbox as I like to leave some opportunities there, too.

WELL GROUNDED

A very wise friend once told me: 'If you aren't sweating your ground, you haven't gone far enough.' I think of that every time I work on my ground. At Newark we made very little effort to achieve a dark and attractive ground (I remember Yorkshire Tea being used at one stage). If you don't want your instrument to look like it's radioactive you must find a way to get a nice dark ground, without killing the reflectivity of the wood. Once

you have achieved that, I've found that it almost doesn't matter what you put over it, as long as it's transparent and well applied. I use a lot of UV in the process and apply a very lean varnish with quite a lot of colour cooked into it as my first ground varnish.

VARNISH APPLICATION AND TEXTURE

I use a fairly thick, pigmented oil varnish and although I apply it with a brush, I get the best results by moving it around with my hand before it dries. This can leave a nice texture that will build up with each coat. After applying an even coat, including all the edges, I like to wipe it off the high points of the edges and scroll. I don't want to remove all of it, or it looks silly. I use my fingers and hand to wipe some varnish off the

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toolmarks on the scroll and pegbox. If you use a rag, you tend to get fibres in the varnish, but I have found that nylon stockings work very well in some areas. Sometimes I create craquelure in the varnish.

I'm lucky that I use a varnish that doesn't seem to attract dust. If I do get any dust spots, I try to cut or scrape them off between coats, as I want to retain any texture that is in the varnish surface itself. Rubbing back with abrasives is best avoided.

Because I've hopefully achieved a lot of colour in my ground, I don't need a very intensely coloured varnish on top to get the look I'm after. It also helps when softening the varnish edges, as the contrast between the ground and the varnish where it is worn is not so great. It creates a softness in the look that is quite appealing but subtle.

SHMUTZ, DIRT OR PATINA

When antiquing, dirt is pushed into any indentations, be they scratches, chips or toolmarks, to recreate the effect you see on old instruments. All those toolmarks we left before varnishing now become opportunities to add some patina to the surface, add contrast and depth to the colour, and to soften the overall look. I try to be very restrained when doing this, as it looks wrong if you go too far. I usually use an oil medium when applying my shmutz. When wiping it off, if any areas look too obvious, I tap my fingers on them to remove some material. I usually apply a very thin layer of uncoloured varnish over the dirt layer to increase its transparency.

None of these ideas are new, but I like to think that by experimenting with techniques I have found a way to make instruments that look beautiful, satisfy my artistic ideals and look warm and fuzzy enough for a player to want to buy, play and cherish them. I have collected a repertoire of techniques, many learnt from other makers over the years. I thank all my violin making friends who have shared their ideas with me. It's a great time to be a violin maker. ●