

Fresh Fiddles Among the Strads

By BARBARA JEPSON

MUSICIANS TELL OF THE concertgoer who drops backstage after a recital to compliment a noted virtuoso: "Oh, maestro, your violin sounds so glorious." The performer picks up his fiddle, holds it to his ear and replies, "Funny, I don't hear a thing."

In other words, the musician, not the instrument, chiefly determines the quality of the sound. Four years ago, that axiom took on new meaning for the violinist Theodore Arm, of the chamber ensemble Tashi, when his valuable Amati required long-term restoration. Since then, he has played a new fiddle, hand-crafted by the talented 34-year-old Brooklyn violin maker Samuel Zygmuntowicz, with great success. "People are surprised to learn that it's a modern instrument," Mr. Arm said.

For decades, modern violins, violas and cellos have been considered inferior, the last resort of impoverished students. Today, that attitude is changing.

This is not to say that major soloists are abandoning their beloved 18th-century Cremonese violins in favor of brand-new instruments. "Nothing can compare to a great Stradivari or Guarneri," said Isaac Stern, who owns two fiddles by the revered maker Giuseppe Guarneri (del Gesù). "But there are a number of gifted violin makers in the United States and Europe today, and

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their instruments offer far more to orchestral players and young musicians in terms of quality, projection and condition than those of third- and fourth-rank Italian or French makers available at immorally inflated prices."

Well-known soloists are also using modern violins more than before, albeit as backup fiddles, and a few intrepid chamber musicians are playing them full time.

Each August, the violinist Jaime Laredo tunes down the pegs on his Stradivari to reduce tension on the strings and give the instrument a rest from the rigors of concert use. Since 1989, the instrument he has used while his Strad slumbers is one purchased from a Utah maker named Terry Borman. "When I played the Borman in concert with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra," Mr. Laredo recalled, "the musicians were so impressed that two or three of them wound up ordering Terry's instruments. They have a rich, mellow tone right from the beginning."

Elmar Oliveira, who owns two violins by Stradivari, nevertheless recorded the Joachim Violin Concerto for Pickwick on a 1990 copy of a Strad made by the Michigan makers Joseph Curtin and Gregg T. Alf; it had, he felt, the requisite power and quick response time for this taxing showpiece.

And in 1987, the cellist Peter Wiley, of the Beaux Arts Trio, became so enamored of a new \$25,000 instrument by the highly regarded husband-and-wife team of Peter and Wendy Mocs, New Yorkers who recently moved to Massachusetts, that he ultimately jilted his 300-year-old, \$170,000 Testore. "The Mocs is easier to play," he declared. "It projects better, and it allows me to achieve more of my capabilities."

Several factors have fostered the growing appreciation for new instruments. First, demand for fine old Italian and French instruments has escalated, thanks in part to the explosion of interest in Western classical music in the Far East and the economic prowess of Japan. Second, prices for the most coveted Cremonese instruments have soared out of reach for all but a dozen or so super-

Lately, many ensemble players and even soloists have taken to using new violins.

stars, arts institutions and investor syndicates.

In 1979, the famous "Kreisler" Stradivari made news when it fetched a record-setting \$300,000 at Sotheby's of London. These days, the best Strads and Guarneris cost up to \$2 million, and even a respected second-rank maker like Guadagnini, whose mid-18th-century instruments have long been a mainstay of orchestral musicians, commands up to \$350,000.

At the same time, the quality of contemporary violin making has improved, and string-instrument makers are finding it more feasible to earn a living. "Twenty years ago," said Luiz Bellini, a noted maker from Queens whose clients include Yehudi Menuhin and Ruggiero Ricci, "it was difficult to sell a modern instrument, because musicians could

buy a Gagliano for \$20,000." Today, Gaglianos sell in the \$100,000 to \$120,000 range, and Mr. Bellini, who creates six to eight instruments annually, has a 12-year waiting list.

That's not surprising, since most leading contemporary makers sell their violins for between \$12,000 and \$18,000. And even Jacques Français, a leading international dealer of antique instruments who disdains the notion that a modern fiddle could surpass a third-rate Stradivari, admitted that "a fine contemporary violin can be as good as many instruments by late 19th- and early 20th-century makers such as Gand, Bernadel and Silvestre." (Prices for those instruments now run from around \$20,000 to \$25,000.)

Musicians are more outspoken. "I've been shocked," Mr. Laredo said, "when students have asked my opinion of old Italian or French fiddles that cost \$50,000 to \$60,000. Often, they're just pieces of junk." Mr. Stern remarked that "if musicians can't spend at least \$250,000 on a stringed instrument, they'd do better with a fine new one, provided they take the time to test it under battle conditions in a good concert hall."

Why, then, is there such a price disparity between old and new instruments? "People are snobs," suggested Pinchas Zukerman, who owns three modern instruments but is "married" to his Guarneri del Gesù. "Second, some of them wrongly believe that an old violin is automatically better. Third, antiques are always expensive."

Indeed, playing a great Stradivari or Guarneri has become a status symbol, the musical equivalent of driving a Bentley or a Ferrari. While performers remain convinced that the best Cremonese

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instruments deserve every ounce of their illustrious reputation, some experts question even that premise.

Stuart Pollens, the associate conservator of musical instruments at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said: "I don't think Stradivaris and Guarneris sound significantly better than the best new instruments; the difference between old and new has more to do with character than quality, and of course you're paying for the undeniable historical value of the older instruments."

Norman Pickering, an acoustical engineer who researches vibration patterns in string instruments at his sound laboratory in Southampton, N.Y., similarly characterized Stradivari's creations as "great works of art." But as musical instruments, he added, "fewer than 100 — possibly fewer than 50 — of the approximately 700 Strads in existence are really first-class, concert-grade instruments."

Mr. François put the number at "200 or more." In part, these assessments reflect familiarity with the alterations made to antique Cremonese instruments over the centuries. The vast majority were modified around 1800 to enable them to project more in larger halls over expanded symphonic forces. Generally, the necks have been lengthened and the bridges raised.

More significantly, the vagaries of time and repeated repairs have taken a toll. "Most Strads and Guarneris," Mr. Pollens asserted, "are a sandwich of old and new parts. Many have been patched inside with new wood

because of continuing pressure by the bridge, some of the corners may have been replaced, and the ribs, or sides, may have been reduced to compensate for different rates of shrinkage between the top and back — it's like taking in a pair of pants.

Normal wear and tear," he continued, "have eroded much of the original varnish, and French polish has been repeatedly applied to protect and shine the instrument, but it's not

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an entirely benign process: you're intermixing new polish with the old varnish and thus changing its composition."

Finally, people tend to forget that the legendary Cremonese instruments were new once, too. In fact, though Stradivari was esteemed during his lifetime, it was not until some 40 years after his death in 1737 that his instruments began to achieve wider acclaim. Until then, according to the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, earlier makers such as Nicolo Amati and the Austrian Jacob Stainer brought the highest prices at auction. "I like to think," Mr. Wiley mused, "that there will someday be a mystique about my Moes & Moes cello."

The current renaissance of string-instrument making in the United States had its roots in the post-World War II period, when skillful restorers came here to serve the growing number of professional musicians who had emigrated from Europe. Chief among them was Fernando Sacconi, a restorer, maker and Stradivari scholar who worked with Rembert Wurlitzer, the late violin dealer, in New York. His apprentices included René Morel, the vice president and head of restoration and repairs for Jacques Français Rare Violins, who in turn taught Mr. Zygmuntowicz and Mr. Bellini.

But the profession blossomed during the late 1960's and the 70's, when the "back to the earth" philosophy of the counterculture brought a new breed of maker into this nearly moribund trade. Another important catalyst was the founding of the Violin Making School of America in Salt Lake City in 1972 by Peter Prier. One of three such schools in the United States, it has helped raise standards of craftsmanship. The most prominent European schools are in Mittenwald, Germany; Mirecourt, France, and Cremona, Italy.

Today, the Violin Society of America estimates there are 200 to 300 people involved in string-instrument making as professionals. The foremost among them belong to the 11-year-old American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers, a 90-member organization that requires candidates to meet certain educational and professional criteria. The federation includes respected makers like Carl Becker Jr. in Chicago and David Burgess in Michigan as well as Mr. Bellini, Mr. Zygmuntowicz and the Moes duo. The independent Marten Cornelissen in Massachusetts also has many admirers, as did the recently deceased Sergio Perasson in New Jersey.

Although the margin for self-expression is relatively small in the crafting of traditionally sized string instruments, contemporary makers may be roughly divided into two basic camps: those like Mr. Bellini, capable of reproducing a particular Strad or del Gesù down to the last tiny nick and scratch, and those like Moes & Moes, who eschew copies altogether.

"We don't shade new instruments to make them look old," said Wendy Moes, "or bang them up to make them look antique. Stradivari already made the best Strads. We can't see setting ourselves up to be second rate."

Mr. Zygmuntowicz, who has just begun reproducing Mr. Stern's "Ysaÿe" Guarneri, takes a different view. "If I make a copy of a Stradivari," he explained, "I consider the original very much the way a violinist considers the score of a concerto. He may decide to take one passage a little slower, or bring out the staccato upbows, and he'll put all his spirit into it." Although Mr. Zygmuntowicz also

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ri," he explained, "I consider the original very much the way a violinist considers the score of a concerto. He may decide to take one passage a little slower, or bring out the staccato upbows, and he'll put all his spirit into it." Although Mr. Zygmuntowicz also creates originals and adaptations, he considers himself a student of Stradivari. "You're setting yourself up for heartbreak," he argued, "if you think you're going to displace the Cremonese masters."

Indeed, Mr. Arm's Zygmuntowicz may wind up being relegated to second fiddle later this year, now that the restoration of his Amati is nearly complete. Obviously, there is still some distance to be traveled before even the best new instruments are put to wider use. As Peter Moes said: "If a musician plays a Strad, people say, 'Of course she sounds good; she's playing a gorgeous instrument.' Whereas when a performer plays our violins, people say, 'You see, he can make even a cigar box sound good.'" □
