

The 1733 Guarneri del Gesu „Kreissler“

which was used by
Fritz Kreisler as his primary concert instrument.

**Roger Hargrave examines the
construction and workmanship of this magnificent violin.**

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Giuseppe Giovanni Battista Guarneri (1698-1744) was better known as Guarneri "del Gesu" after his habit of printing I. H. S. surmounted by a cross on his labels. There are probably between 160 and 170 surviving violins by "del Gesu" and with the exception of two extremely interesting, smaller, probably dancing master fiddles, there are no instruments of any other type known to have been made by him. In spite of his limited output in comparison with that of Antonio Stradivari, del Gesu's violins have a reputation for tone at least equal to Stradivari's. Indeed since the time of Paganini, there has been a long line of players who have actually preferred the sound of a del Gesu to that of a Stradivari

Del Gesu was almost certainly taught by his father, Josef filius Andrea Guarneri, but his early works also appear to show the influence of Stradivari.

Examples of del Gesu's work before 1730 are extremely rare; nevertheless, within two or three years of this date he had already begun to produce works of singular individuality. The influence of Josef filius Guarneri and of Stradivari was no longer so clearly apparent and by the middle of the decade the quality of del Gesu's craftsmanship was also reaching its zenith.

In *The Violin Makers of the Guarneri Family*, published in 1931, the Hills selected six violins, which in their opinion were the most outstanding examples of

del Gesu's work. The earliest of these instruments, dated 1733, was noted as being in the possession of Fritz Kreisler:

We feel, and feel very strongly, that no specimen can exemplify del Gesu in his mature youth more strikingly than that dated 1733 (Kreisler), which conceivably was made some years previous to that year. It stands on the threshold of the master's emancipation from the past, the f holes still reveal his indebtedness to Stradivari, but model and form are his own. Timid of conception, perhaps when contrasted with the audacity of later years, yet admirably typifying those closely knit examples which from a tonal point of view stand up to the greatest.

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For those readers wishing to compare the "Kreisler" with the 1733 "ex Soil" del Gesu (see STRAD poster of April 1984) it is worth remembering the Hill brothers' statement that the "Kreisler" could possibly be from a slightly earlier period. The basic concept of both instruments is very similar, but del Gesu's attention to fine detail and finish is less evident on the "Kreisler". This somewhat looser quality of finish may have been due to variations in the demand for the master's works. Despite del Gesu's apparently small output, some form of pressure, probably financial, appears to have been an everincreasing problem throughout his life. Although clearly capable of fine craftsmanship he was certainly not working for the type of

clientele who had previously filled Stradivari's order books. In the 1730's however even the Stradivari family seem to have been "feeling the pinch".

The intense productivity throughout Europe, but perhaps especially in Milan, was beginning to break the once exclusive Cremonese market. This is a major factor, often overlooked, which explains more satisfactorily than stories of prison and alcoholism the gradual deterioration of del Gesu's craftsmanship, if not his artistry. Despite the competition, however, del Gesu

was certainly not scraping the bottom of the barrel when it came to his choice of materials. That privilege and apparently even the barrel wood itself seems to have fallen to those same Milanese makers who were making life so difficult for the Cremonese school.

For the "Kreisler" violin, del Gesu chose a two piece belly of medium growth, becoming slightly wider towards the edges. The wood is quarter sawn and has fine yet strongly pronounced reed lines. Although both sides of the belly are a very close match they are not exactly alike. Somewhat like the "Gibson" viola and the "Servais" cello (see STRAD posters of September 1986 and December 1987) the pieces are probably from the same log but not adjacent wedges. Such belly wood is generally of the type which we would associate with Stradivari's violins of the same period. These "late" Strads are also noted more for their superb tone than for their exceptional craftsmanship. This del Gesu's two piece back is also cut on the quarter. It has a well pronounced medium to narrow curl which descends slightly from the centre joint. This back wood is not of the extremely fine, growth which we often see on classical Cremonese work and in places the reed lines are up to 4 mm apart. The rib wood is very similar to that of the back with a deep flame running almost vertically around the instrument. Unlike Stradivari's ribs, the flames change direction in the C bouts, although in the normal classical manner, the top and bottom ribs are each of one piece. Around the ribs del Gesu's hasty finishing has created a corrugated effect, in which the end grain of the flames has a furry appearance, having been torn slightly by the scraper. In these sunken furry ripples the varnish has penetrated deeply into the pores of the wood and in places even seems to have passed right through to the inside.

The rib corners are short, stubby and picked out in black like the chamfers of the scroll. Although Stradivari apparently never blackened the ends of the ribs

at the corners, (see "Gibson" article STRAD September 1986) this practice was a continuing feature of del Gesu's work. At the corners the ribs appear to be slightly higher than in the bouts. This may simply be the result of later repair work or it might be that the corner block areas were more difficult to plane away during the rapid making process. It is worth pointing out, however that I have observed this tendency on several fine Strads. It is possible that the great masters gave some extra depth to the rib corners, in the same way that they gave extra depth to the corners of the plates. In common with very many classical works the head is made from unfigured and extremely finely grown wood.

When viewed from the front, back and end, the left and right sides of the scroll (see p.407) seem to balance each other very well. This is quite remarkable considering the apparent difference between the outlines when viewed separately from each side. Stylistically both side views have that typical, "squarish" appearance to the turns, which is so often a feature of the Guarneri family generally. The uneven chamfers picked out in black can only have exaggerated this square appearance when the fiddle was completely fresh.

The eyes of the scroll are not particularly prominent, giving the head a slightly "chunky" look especially when viewed from the front. This was by no means a fixed feature of del Gesu and some scrolls, especially those wilder, more urgent creations of his later period, exaggerate the prominence of the eyes. From the sides the left eye finishes in the usual open comma shape, ending with a tiny knife cut, whereas the right eye looks as if it has been poked out with a stick.

Despite the urgency of the work, the overall concept of the "Kreisler" head (above all the flow of the pegbox into the scroll itself) saves the day. From the sides of the pegbox the volutes deepen rapidly as they enter their first turns: At the second turns they become somewhat shallower, before again increasing in depth at the eyes. Although the wider surfaces of the first turns have been cleaned up to some extent, scraper marks and some extremely tiny gouge marks running in almost every conceivable direction, scar the surfaces of the final turns into the eyes. The vertical walls of the volutes also feature the same very tiny gouge strokes, however this time they appear in that more regimented pattern, which is found on every Cremonese scroll.

The pegbox is relatively generous in width, al-

though not quite as big as a Stradivari box. The fluting along the back of the pegbox is very shallow in typical del Gesu fashion and there are traces of the scraper running lengthways. Over the end of the scroll the flutings become narrower and were originally much deeper. Here the flutings appear to have been finished with a rough round rasp. On the front of the scroll the flutings once again become shallow, this time showing traces of both the knife and the gouge. The flutings do not stop short under the front of the scroll, as often happened on del Gesu's later works, but they are rather unevenly finished and the central spine has a slight "wobble". The letters W.T. are stamped several times on the pegbox. These are the initials of previous owner, William Thompson (see history).

There is relatively little about this violin which suggests the influence of Stradivari. The outline and the centre bouts in particular are more reminiscent of Josef filius. The head too is more in the style of Josef filius than of Stradivari. Only the soundholes and the corresponding archings have a "late" Stradivarian feel about them.

The outline of the back is a combination J of full and open curves flowing into and out of the corners and the bouts. There is only a brief flattening across the area of the button. The edgework is of a relatively even thickness all around the back plate, although this evenness may be misleading since the corners are certainly more worn than the rest of the edgework.

On the underside of the edge, i.e. the overhang, the flame has been torn out, probably by the plane as the plate was being flattened after jointing. The resulting hollows have been filled with varnish which is slightly thicker and redder than that on the back itself. A knife cut chamfer along this underside begins the rounding off of the edge of the plate. Traces of such knife cut chamfers are common on classical instruments, but in this case they are very prominent. Chipping out of the flame, as on the overhang, is also occasionally to be seen in the purfling channel, especially in the centre bouts. The channel itself, although distinct, is not very deeply incised. From the edge the arching rises quickly without scooping and remains full throughout the plate. In the centre bouts the arching rises so quickly that closing cramps have, over the years, dug into the first stages of the arching making the edgework appear more roughly finished than it is in reality.

The lines of the purfling flow evenly in spite of the

rough appearance of the channel. The purfling itself is fine and of a relatively uniform thickness throughout, although it does appear to be slightly wider on the belly. The blacks are dark, but not as intense as those by Antonio Stradivari or the Amati family and there is a rapid tendency towards graying in the sweat areas. At the corners the purflings do not finish with a sting but simply as neat short mitres pointing towards the middle.

The belly arching, like the back arching, also rises quickly especially under the fingerboard and tail-piece, but it does have a flatness, which is not quite a scoop, as it leaves the sides of the upper and lower bouts. The belly is otherwise full across the top. The soundholes' wings are fluted only very slightly and do not interrupt the general form of the arch as do those of Stradivari.

The soundholes are beautifully bold, upright and open. They are distinctly del Gesu, but they retain a curious mixture of Josef filius (especially the tiny top circles) and Stradivari. It is interesting to compare the

two soundholes illustrated on pages 76 and 77 in the Hill book on the Guarneri family. This shows a soundhole of A. Stradivari dated 1710 alongside the "Kreisler" soundhole.

Geometrically the "Kreisler" holes are not identical. This imbalance is amply demonstrated by the way in which the bottom right wing trumpets far more than the left. It is the shape and form of the wide bottom wings, the placement of the soundholes against the centre bouts and the corresponding rather shallow fluting, which bears the strongest resemblance of all to the later works of the Stradivari family.

The soundhole nicks are rather small and set on a slightly long stop (see measurements). The overall cut and finish of the soundholes is clean. The circles have, as usual, been drilled, an operation which greatly simplifies the cutting of extravagantly trumpeting wings. At least some attempt seems to have been made to cut the holes at right angles to the arching. Like the scroll chamfer and the ends of the ribs, the inside edges of the soundholes also appear to have been blackened.

Looking through the soundholes, the inside work is typically Cremonese and very similar to that of the "Soil" del Gesu. The blocks and linings are strong and appear to be made of spruce. Traces of what might have been a toothed plane blade are visible on the in-

side of the ribs. The label is probably not original. I was unable to take measurements of the thicknessing of the plates and I would refer the reader to the "ex Soil" thicknesses. Like all other del Gesù's despite the occasional "knock about" quality of some of the more detailed work and the general finishing, the "Kreisler" is well constructed and on sound principles. It is a stylish violin, which even without varnish would stand up to the harshest criticism. The varnish however gives this instrument a seal of approval, instantly explaining why the Hill brothers selected it as one of their top six del Gesù. It is of an orange red colour, of excellent transparency, which in places seems almost fluorescent. In the main the varnish has been extremely thinly applied and yet retains an incredible intensity. It is a typical del Gesù varnish, in thickness, in colour, in its application and in the pattern of its wear.

There remains a large amount of varnish on the whole instrument; however, where varnish is missing, the fiddle's golden ground is unusually impregnated with dirt. It may simply be that this dirt has been trapped under a layer of polish or over varnish at some time, but it is nonetheless slightly unusual.

On the back the locating pins lie on the centre line 4 mm from the inside of the purfling at the bottom and 1.5 mm from the inside of the purfling at the top. I have left the positioning of these pins until last because it brings me to a point which I have not yet seen in print. In the backs of del Gesù's violins is a third wooden pin. This pin is usually only visible from the inside of the plate where it lies on the centre line and is about 1.5 mm in diameter. This wooden pin fills a conical hole in the back plate, which passes right through to the outside, where it usually emerges as an almost invisible pin prick. On the "Kreisler" del Gesù, it lies approximately 177 mm from the inside of the purfling at the bottom of the instrument and exactly on the centre joint.

The "Kreisler" del Gesù has a long and well documented history, which is best summed up by a letter from Alfred Hill to Fritz Kreisler and dated 23 November 1926:

Dear Mr Kreisler,

The history of the Guarneri violin, ex Marshal Junot, is one of exceptional interest. The instrument found its way to our shores in the following manner: it was being transported with Marshal Junot's baggage from Bordeaux to Lisbon, at the beginning of the XIX century, (the latter city being occupied by

French troops under his command), when the vessel was captured by an English privateer & brought into Whitehaven, Cumberland. The violin passed into the hands of a sailor who sold it to the Parson of Whitehaven for £2.. He subsequently sold it to Mr William Thomson (whose initials are branded on the scroll), an excellent amateur and brother of Geo. Thomson of Edinburgh, who published several volumes of Scottish Melodies, the words by Burns set to music by Beethoven, Haydn & other contemporary composers. Mr Thomson retained possession of the violin for many years, dying, upwards of ninety years of age, about 1840-50, when the fiddle was sold by his son to another amateur, Mr Thomson Sinclair, from whom it passed, by way of inheritance, to two ladies of the name of Day, whose existence I can just recall. They guarded the instrument so jealously that they would not even show it to a dealer, nor was my Father, who had previously become acquainted with it, allowed to have the instrument on sale, or to introduce a buyer! Thus it happened that when Mr John Mountford, one of his intimate

clients, expressed the wish to purchase a "Guarneri" my Father advised him to go and see these ladies but on no account to reveal the source of his information. Mr Mountford went, saw the violin and, being captivated by it, purchased it on the spot, despite the price asked, 500 guineas which, in those days, i.e. about 1875, was considered a high figure. Mr Mountford, a well known character and faithful client of our firm, retained the fiddle practically to the end of his days, reluctantly parting with it at the age of some four score years, when it passed into our hands. We then sold it to Mr R. E. Brandt only to repurchase it within recent years!

My Father declared the violin to be the finest "Guarneri" he had ever seen. I recognize it to be one of the few of the first rank. You will read our views concerning it in our forthcoming book on the Guarneri Family. It is an example of the early type of the maker's work and reveals, in certain features, the influence of Stradivari, which is not surprising when one considers that these great makers were work only a few hundred yards apart!

I congratulate you on the acquisition of this violin, commend the instrument to your loving care, and hope that it may afford you as much pleasure as that experienced by its less illustrious owners of a bygone day!

The violin was donated to the United States of America by Fritz Kreisler and is now deposited in the

Library of Congress without whose kind help the production of this poster would not have been possible. The Library also contains several other fine Cremonese instruments, including three Stradivari violins, two violas, and one cello. A violin by Nicolo Amati completes the set. In the near future THE STRAD will be publishing posters of two of the Library's Stradivaris, the 1704 "Betts" violin and the 1690 "Tuscan" viola.

"KREISLER" DEL GESU 1733		
MEASUREMENTS (in millimetres)		
	Back	Belly
Length (over arch)	358	357
Upper bouts	171	169,5
Middle bouts	115,5	114
Lower bouts	210,5	210
Edge thickness		
Corners	4,25	4
Centre	4,3	3,8
Bouts	4,2	3,8
Overhang		
in Cs	3,5	3
in bouts	3	2,4
Height Width		Thickness
Button 19.5	19	4,25
Rib Heights	Left	Right
Neck root	29	29,75
Upper corner	30,5	31
Lower corner	31	31,25
End pin	30	30,75
Purfling (back only)		
Distance from edge		4 - 4.5
Total width		1.3 - 1.5
Width of White		0,75

THE STRAD wishes to thank Jon Newsom of the Library of Congress for his help and assistance in examining the violin. As with the preceding STRAD posters, Geigenbau Machold kindly provided the financial assistance for the research.

