PRY BEFORE YOU BUY

BUYING AN INSTRUMENT

Many highly intelligent and worldly-wise tycoons somehow lost their streetwise instinct, bamboozled by the mythology that surrounds classical violins.

Great classical varnishes are often quite matt, as in this 1664 tenor viola by Andrea Guarneri

Some musicians shell out serious money on instruments without any hard evidence of their true worth.

ROGER HARGRAVE argues that buyers should wise up and insist that dealers provide full condition reports

MOST MUSICIANS ARE WELL-EDUCATED people. Unfortunately, a good education does not necessarily protect us from the wicked and unscrupulous ways of our world. I know someone who has a double doctorate, but his qualifications have not made him streetwise. He recently purchased a sensationally beautiful house overlooking the Baltic Sea on the north German coast. The asking price was €250,000, very reasonable for such a stunning property in such a stunning location. The owners were moving abroad and needed to sell the place quickly. Temporarily blinded by the house's beauty, the bargain price and the need to act quickly, he transferred the required funds without engaging a professional surveyor. The subsequent discovery of dry rot in the house's foundations cost him an additional €250,000.

I hope no one reading this article would be foolish enough to purchase a house without a suitable survey. But I would bet all of my rapidly decreasing pension pot that more than a handful of readers will have purchased an instrument without a suitable survey. This is not to imply that readers of The Strad and musicians are foolish, but perhaps that normal practice in the violin business is in urgent need of serious modification - modification to the point of revolution.

The recent allegations against Dietmar Machold in June 2011-the latest of several high-profile dealers to face legal action - have painted a picture of the rotten underbelly of the violin trade as never before, and there has been much legitimate wailing and gnashing of teeth from both players and collectors. However, if just a few simple precautions had been taken, this anger and anguish need never have arisen.

BEFORE LAYING DOWN THEIR CASH, smart customers will usually assess an instrument over a period of days. During this time they may even canvas the opinion of several makers or dealers. They will do this in the belief that they are securing an unbiased second opinion. However, although this may be a valuable exercise, the person or persons being consulted may also have some form of vested interest in the instrument concerned. They may simply wish to destroy the business of a competitor, or they may have some financial stake in the instrument being offered. This may sound somewhat cynical, but violin dealing is an extremely small business and the larger the price tag that an instrument carries, the smaller the circle of dealers becomes. And when the price tag is sufficiently high, it is common practice for a number of independent dealers to be financially linked to the same piece of business.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with such an arrangement. Objects costing hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars may necessitate the joint ownership of several dealers. Unfortunately, in addition to sharing out the financial burden, such arrangements also decrease the chances of obtaining an unbiased opinion. Those unable to afford a Stradivari would be wrong to suppose that such arrangements are limited to the market's top end, either. It is also common for smaller businesses work in this way too. There are many honest dealers and many groups of dealers who openly work together. I'm worried about the secretive groups who don't explain their associations. The point here is about transparency.

If we must even occasionally assume that a second opinion - even one that is paid for - may not be as reliable as we might rightfully expect it to be, then some other form of security is clearly required. Unfortunately, for the moment the onus lies with the purchaser, not the seller.

The most remarkable thing that I have experienced recently has been the naivety of people who purchase musical instruments. And this applies not only to musicians, but also to international banks and successful business people who would normally check every detail of a business contract, specifically looking for irregularities or any possible deception or fraud. In various violin-related transactions, many of these highly intelligent and worldly-wise tycoons somehow lost their streetwise instinct, bamboozled by the mythology that surrounds classical violins. As a result, they accepted at face value papers that were deliberately ambiguous and quite clearly designed to

The scroll of the 1664 Andrea Guarneri tenor viola has, like the rest of the instrument, survived in original condition

deceive. Like the house buyer I mentioned earlier, they were temporarily blinded - seduced by fantastic stories of Stradivari and Cremona and by talk of healthy profits and bargain prices.

With a little insistence, and persistence, such experiences could all have been prevented. The first thing that must be introduced into the world of violin dealing is an accurate description of every instrument being offered for sale, even new ones bought directly from the maker. These descriptions should take the form of a survey, and like a house surveyor's report, they must be comprehensive. Such a report should include any relevant details about the maker or makers involved in the instrument's production. This may seem pedantic, but changes to a violin's originality occur very gradually, and sometimes these changes occur even before the instrument has left the maker's shop.

Normally we may not think that a replacement soundpost bridge, pegs or tailpiece would be relevant to an instrument's value, but as the recently auctioned 'Lady Blunt' Stradivari confirmed, old instruments with original fittings are undoubtedly more desirable. Indeed, largely because of its original fixtures and fittings, the 1690 'Medici' tenor viola by Stradivari, which is housed in the Instituto Cherubim in Florence, is now virtually priceless. Even at a lower level, the value of originality is significant. Instruments with an original neck (even if altered) arc considered more desirable, and consequently such features are mentioned in sales catalogues. It is therefore fair to assume that each time an original part is lost or replaced, for whatever reason, some of the instrument's value is lost with it.

THIS IDEA OF ORIGINALITY may be a difficult concept to understand, but if we make it a simple matter of weight, it becomes easier. Let us say that an original Baroque violin might have weighed 425g as it left the maker's shop. Remove all the original fittings, the tailpiece, the original board, the neck and the bass-bar, and you are left with original parts weighing about 250g. But that is not the end of the story. When a neck is replaced, the top block is usually also replaced and some of the top rib is removed (on classical Cremonese instruments the top rib was usually of one piece and passed right across the top block). In addition, the pegholes are often bushed, causing a further reduction of about 25g. Although the violin has by now lost almost half its original weight, this is the absolute minimum that would normally be missing from most old violins. Nevertheless, most violins with only these alterations would be described as being in an excellent state of preservation.

Now things begin to get critical. Add sonic

If the only clue is a statement that the instrument has been fully restored', the instrument may be a confusion of cracks, or as thin as a mayfly's wing

half edging work, a couple of newcomers and perhaps two or three new linings, and you are easily under the halfway mark. And all of this without any major repair work. But it can get much worse, because on most instruments many other parts will have been replaced in addition to those I have already listed. Some instruments might even have a replacement head, or areas of patching that cover much of the belly and even parts of the back. I know of several classical instruments where the blocks and linings and occasionally even one or two ribs have been completely replaced. Small pieces of purfling, edgework and corners are often renewed many times.

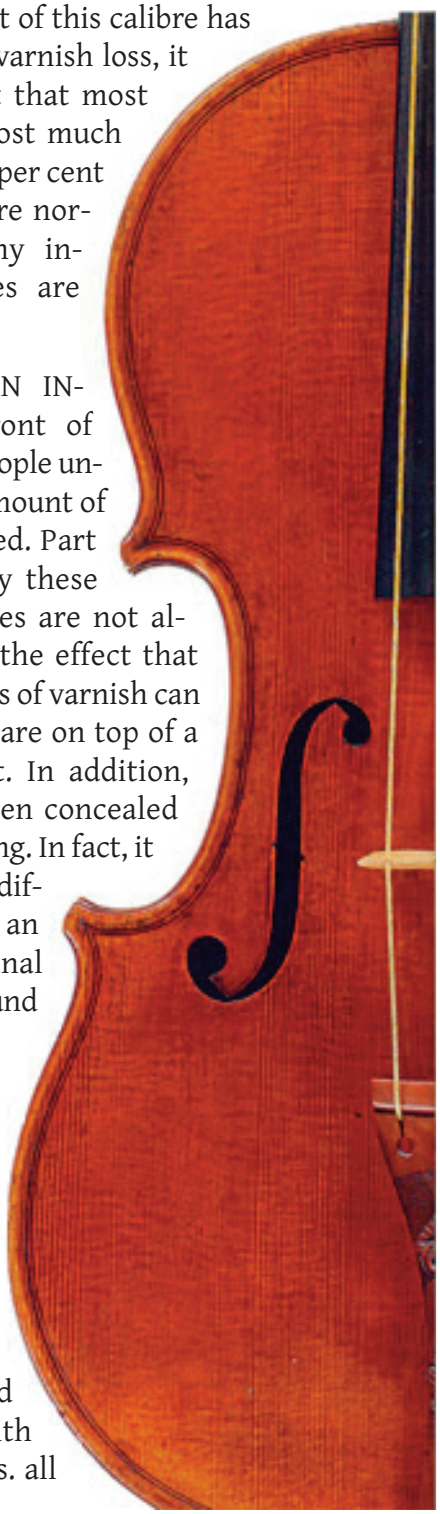
All these alterations diminish the instrument's originality. Unfortunately, even for experts, replacements of this nature can often be extremely difficult to detect with the naked eye.

Then there is the issue of damage. Instruments are often advertised as having been fully restored, a description that both the retailer and the purchaser usually see in a positive light. But an instrument that has a single simple crack in the belly is very different from an instrument that has been flattened by a car. And yes, instruments do (let flattened by cell's, and they are often resurrected by brilliant restorers. indeed, the restorers art has become so advanced that even quite serious damage can only he detected with the help of expensive modern equipment. Consequently, if the only clue is a statement that the instrument has been `fully restored', the instrument may be a confusion of cracks, riddled with woodworm, or as thin as a mayfly's wing.

BUT THIS IS STILL not the end of the matter. We now turn to the vexed question of `rich original varnish', that magnificent substance that makes or breaks any instrument. both visually and acoustically. Once again. the mythology of the violin can blind even the most cautious investor. So let me break down what is meant by `rich original varnish'. Most violins both old and new are highly polished, leading most people to believe this must be a feature of great classical varnishes. Nothing could be furth er from the truth. Great classical varnishes like those that adorn the 'Medici' tenor viola or the 1664 tenor viola by Andrea Guarneri in the National Music Museum in Vermillion, South Dakota, are often somewhat matt and can even appear slightly friable. In their original state. such varnishes were probably delicate and soft, and as a result varnish wear is frequently extensive.

The famous `Kreisler' violin by Guarneri 'del Gesu in the Library of Congress is undoubtedly one of the finest surviving examples of the master's work. And yet this instrument has almost no varnish on its edges and only 50 per cent or less on both the back and the head. The belly has lost more than 60 per cent, and possibly considerably more if the varnish's overall original thickness were to be taken into account. And finally. like the belly, the ribs have suffered losses of 60 per cent or more. Altogether far more than half of the violin's beautiful red varnish is missing

IF an instrument of this calibre has suffered so much varnish loss, it must be apparent that most old violins have lost much more. Losses of 80 per cent and 90 per cent are normal, and in many instances the losses are even greater.



EVEN WITH AN INSTRUMENT in front of their eyes. most people underestimate the amount of wear it has suffered. Part of the reason why these huge varnish losses are not always apparent is the effect that even tiny remnants of varnish can create when they are on top of a good ground coat. In addition, varnish loss is often concealed by skilful retouching. In fact, it is not particularly difficult to extend an area of `rich original varnish' if the ground coat is still intact.

What most people see on old instruments, especially classical Italian instruments, is simply old polish and patina mixed with retouching colours. all

blended and polished to a high gloss over a good ground - a ground that might also contain minute, almost microscopic amounts of genuine 'rich original varnish'. You can achieve a lot with a good ground. The ground is the mirror of the soul of all great varnishes.

So what is left? By now, excepting authenticity (a separate but no less challenging issue), it must be clear that the value of any instrument is directly related to its condition. The first problem for the layperson is to know the instrument's condition exactly. The second is finding someone who can provide such a comprehensive condition report. Unfortunately, there are very few genuinely independent experts in the world who are willing and able to assess the condition of instruments, and it is highly unlikely that their numbers will increase.

The only practical solution is to place the responsibility with the retailer. As with a house or a car, the more comprehensive the description a customer receives from a retailer, the better their chance of invoking the various trades description laws that are in force in most countries.

In other words, if I purchase a Stradivari for $6m,

I need more than just a receipt that says:

One violin by Antonio Stradivari of Cremona

dated 17??

Price six million dollars $6,000,000

Payment received with thanks.

Of course, no one would accept such a paper, would they? Well I can assure you that several people have indeed accepted such papers. And they have accepted them with little or no accompanying photographic certificates of authenticity, or any form of survey. Such papers, whether deliberately ambiguous or not, make it extremely difficult to begin any form of litigation. They offer no proof of the instrument's identity, not- any proof of condition.

Most people who purchase an instrument are happy with a 'good' certificate of authenticity, but these can also pose serious problems. In the first instance they are usually written by the retailer, or by someone commissioned by the retailer. As long as they are scrupulously honest this should not be a problem. Unfortunately, this is also not always the case.

MY SYMPATHY LIES mainly with the musicians who have been cheated. However, if all these people had insisted on a comprehensive survey before they put their money down, things might have been somewhat different. A survey may not have solved all their problems, but it would have eased the rove to successful litigation.

The minimum that should be demanded for any instrument from any dealer is a printed and signed document that must include some weighty opinion as to the authenticity of the major parts of the instrument; detailed photographs taken from several angles (including inside images if possible); detailed diagrams showing (as clearly as possible) all cracks, patches and replaced pieces; and a report about the overall condition of the varnish, including diagrams showing any areas of significant retouching. More expensive instruments should be accompanied by a dendrochronological survey and ultraviolet photographs.

This report should be written and signed by the retailer and should be kept in a secure place well away from the instrument. Ideally the contents of this document should be verified by a third party who should also sign the document.

Only by placing the onus on the retailer will the customer ever have a serious chance of success should problems arise. And if retailers deliver a truly comprehensive report, it can also be to their advantage, as they could use it in their own defence.

CHECKLIST

Declarations of authenticity

Detailed photos

Detailed diagrams showing repairs

Varnish condition report

Dendro report

UV photos