

Plenty of Strings Attached

A centurion moment with Florian Leonhard

by Helen Wybrew-Bond | August 10th 2011 | 11:00 am



Expert stringed instrument restorer and dealer Florian Leonhard specialises in instruments from the best Italian violinmakers. The German-born violin connoisseur is based in London, where his team of specialists carefully restore beautiful, priceless instruments in a quiet Hampstead workshop. In 2010, Florian Leonhard Fine Violins also opened a New York branch.

Leonhard himself is valued as a consultant by orchestras and leading solo artists around the world, as well as financial institutions, all of whom appreciate his restoration skills and his extensive knowledge of the violin market and its development. In this CENTURION moment, Leonhard muses on quality, longevity and an excellent return on investment.

CENTURION: Many noteworthy stringed instruments are 200, 300, 400 years old or more. Do these instruments improve with age or were the makers simply better then?



Violin for sale, made by Giovanni Baptista Guadagnini in Milan, c.1755.

Florian Leonhard: The most difficult thing to replace today is the wood. The wood, 300 years ago, came from ancient forests. When the Industrial Revolution set in, those forests were destroyed and they weren't all replanted. I am not sure why the wood grown since doesn't seem to be as crisp. The wood of ancient violinmakers' choice is light and very strong at the same time. This flexibility helps the violinist project sound powerfully with very little input, so it gives a fast response which the violinist requires to express music in a better way.

There is another part to this answer. If an instrument is played a lot by a good player who manages to make that wood vibrate, that strong massaging of the wood leads to it becoming more flexible in its response and ability to vibrate more than a violin played by a bad player – or no player at all. Imagine the input from the bow from a great player who plays with vibrato and makes it ring constantly, 6 hours a day for centuries. There are some top violin makers who might create similarly great instruments even with the wood we have today, but we will only find out in 200 years' time, after they have been used as much as the ones that we reference for sound today.

What makes a Stradivarius so good?

They have achieved all aspects of violin making in the highest sense. Stradivari chose the best-sounding wood, the best outline for volume, sound and power, nobility and beauty in sound, the best ground – treatment of the wood for glowing enhancement of the beauty of the instrument – and the best varnish as well, with the best craftsmanship. Many other makers had some of these attributes; many had the same varnish but didn't have the same model, or had less good craftsmanship. All those attributes are combined in Stradivari's work, which has led to a kind of reference of violin making as a craft.



Can you describe the growth in an investment area like stringed instruments?

I have been following the market for 30 years, but I have been studying [the last 100 years] for 15 years to understand the behaviour of this particular asset class. Looking at instruments sold again and again in 1961, 1973, 1985 and 2000 shows an average growth per annum in the last 35 years (that's when comparable bank data was available) of 10.9% p.a.

It sounds as if these instruments need a great deal of specialist care because their value is mainly in their sound.



Violin for sale, made by Nicolo Amati in Cremona, c.1650.

They are less high maintenance than one would think. They require once a year a service that costs perhaps GBP 200, so that is extremely cheap if you imagine how expensive these items are.

So these investment instruments will be loaned to a high calibre player who will be practising daily and performing?

Yes, absolutely. [I'm often asked about] the risk if the instrument is, for example, left on a train. These instruments are evaluated for insurance annually and the insurance is actually very affordable, because so little happens! It's very low-risk, a violin, compared to cars, because nothing ever happens to them, and if it does, it's immediately on the front pages of the newspapers.