



*Strings of
Success*

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Renowned violin expert Florian Leonhard opens his impressive Hampstead home to *Natasha Blair*, and talks about music, restoration and helping fledging artists



The name Florian Leonhard is not one that readily comes to mind, unless you are interested in classical music, and specifically string instruments. Because Leonhard is one of the world's leading specialists in rare and fine string instruments, and is globally recognised for violin restoration.

I first met him when I was invited to a concert at his home. Home is a house in Hampstead where one of his reception rooms, complete with Steinway piano, is frequently used for recitals, and fund raising events. "We usually have at least four a month. This is one of the ways we are able to help talented young artists, by providing them with a venue and audience".

Leonhard also helps set up syndicates to buy instruments that are loaned to up-and-coming artists. "However good an artist is, he or she will always be better if the instrument they are playing is of top quality" he explains. Although it is primarily a philanthropic gesture by the patrons, the scheme is structured so that the artist, over a period of time, can have the opportunity to buy the instrument. At the same time, as the instrument grows in value with age, the investors are able to get a good return, often as much as ten percent, on their investment.

Born in West Germany, Florian came from an artistic family where music was an essential part of everyday life. "My mother plays the violin, and from the age of four I was playing the recorder". By the time he was nine he had progressed to the cello. "We were always having musical soirees", he recalls. From an early age, he enjoyed repairing things, and used to dream of becoming a violin-maker. At the age of eighteen he gained a place at Mittenwald, recognised in Germany as one of the leading institutions for learning this skill. He was one of only six students chosen from over 1200 applicants. Shortly after graduating, he came to England, joining W. E. Hill & Sons, the leading violin dealership and restoration workshop of its day. Under Hill's uncompromising methodology, Leonhard

refined his craftsmanship, becoming the workshop's head restorer in less than three years.

Although at that time the company was based in Great Missenden, he used his leisure time to explore the many corners of London. He was particularly attracted to Hampstead. "I grew up in a small village and have always loved the countryside. I fell in love with Hampstead. Its position enables me to be near town, and yet the Heath offers the beauty and tranquillity of the countryside", he recalls.

He was eventually obliged to return to Germany as conscription was still in force in the country in his youth. However, as a pacifist, he was allowed to work in the community with elderly people, rather than enter the Forces. While he enjoyed the experience, his love for London remained. Considered the world centre of expertise for trade, and restoration of string instruments, he felt that it was

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important for him to be in the capital. He came back, and in 1995, the same year that he married his wife Elizabeth, he started his own business from a flat in West Hampstead. Within a few years his reputation had grown, and his business too. He was able to move to his current home which is closer to the Heath, and has a beautiful enclosed garden, shaded by apple trees. "It's so quiet here", he says. "It is like being in the country". The walls of Leonhard's home are hung with oils, and water-colours, some painted by his artist father, other by Florian, himself.

A key industry figure, Leonhard has conducted extensive research into the violin market and its development. He is often invited to investment conferences to share his knowledge and expertise on investing in violins, violas, and cellos, which are considered lucrative, long-term investments.

His artistic talent also includes writing. As a child, he used to write short stories. His book on *The Makers of Central Italy*, which he published himself, is due out in October. Italy has always been the Mecca of the violin-making world. The regions of Marche and Umbria, though distinct from the established violin making centres of the



North, represent an undiscovered wealth of instruments. Florian hopes that the book will improve people's knowledge and understanding of these important, though relatively unknown, Italian craftsmen.

Leonhard is constantly travelling. His work includes assisting many of the world's leading solo artists including Maxim Vengerov, Nicola Benedetti, Leonidas Kavakos and Natalie Clein in taking care of their instruments. His status as an instrument expert brings him into regular contact with orchestras in the UK, Netherlands, Israel, the Far East and the US. This includes the London Symphony and Tonhalle Orchestras. He is currently expert advisor to the Israel and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras, and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. In this role, he helps them purchase, and maintain the instruments of their members. To encourage people to appreciate the instrument, he has also held lectures on the history of violin development, in such cities as Singapore, Moscow, Salt Lake City, and New York.

More recently he has attended the Tchaikovsky competition, which was held in St. Petersburg and Moscow, where he was invited by the jury to listen to the participants. He is also a judge in his own right for the Lipinski and Weiniawski International, a competition for young violinists; and the London-based Ernest Bloch Music competition, which forms part of the Israeli Music Competition. Last year, he was a judge in a European violin making in Sofia, Bulgaria.

He is always on the lookout for good instruments for his dealership. His London workshop and showroom exhibits

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some of the finest examples of violins, violas and cellos currently available for sale. In the workshop, he and his co-workers sometimes have the opportunity to dismantle and completely reconstruct a world-class instrument during its renovation. At the moment, they are restoring instruments by Stradivari, Guarneri and Guadagnini. The intricate work allows them to learn exactly how the instruments were made. In this way, they have also been able to make exclusive copies of fine violins, which have mimicked the sound and handling of the originals.

Florian is not content with just being top of his field in London. His vision is to expand his business into the Far East and North America. His travel itinerary for this year already includes Shanghai, Beijing, Tokyo, Hong Kong and New York.

As I leave his Hampstead home, we see children playing in the next garden. He and his wife, with their busy lifestyles, have chosen not to have any, although Florian's legacy as a world authority in fine violin expertise and restoration will no doubt endure. In the house, preparations are being made for a charity recital to raise money for those who suffered in the Sendai tsunami. Florian is very conscious of his good fortune, and encourages people to become more interested in what he believes is the greatest form of music. ■

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