



FROM THE MAKER'S BENCH

The Composite Violin

by Laurence Anderson

The composite violin, an instrument made from pieces salvaged from two or more severely damaged instruments, was common in the 18th and 19th centuries. But as the value of instruments has increased over the years and restoration techniques have dramatically improved, the practice has declined. Now, no matter how badly damaged an instrument, makers are inclined to restore it rather than salvage it for pieces.

If possible, composite instruments were made from pieces of instruments of a single maker; if not the same maker, then pieces from makers of equal status and ability. During my last trip to Europe, I saw a composite Stradivari viola, made from two different Strad violas, and a composite Amati violin, made from parts of an Amati and a Ruggieri. Determining the exact composition of composite instruments often requires considerable detective work and provokes heated debates, especially if the parts have been altered to fit together or if parts have been made from either very famous or very obscure makers. The value of a composite instrument, of course, is determined in great part by the celebrity of the masters who contributed to it.

On my bench this afternoon is a violin

made in 1720 by Domenico Montagnana with a badly damaged 19th century German scroll. I have been handed the task of replacing the German scroll with a beau-

tiful scroll made around 1675 by Nicolo Amati. To hold the scroll in my hand is to hold a wonderful piece of history. I cannot help but wonder if perhaps one of his apprentices, Andrea Guarneri or Antonio Stradivari roughed it out before Nicolo Amati carved it.

fingerboard, replacing a transitional neck and fingerboard added around 1850 and not quite up to modern specifications. The neck graft will be made from a tightly flamed



The back plate is the Montagnana. The top scroll is the Amati. The bottom scroll is German.

20-year-old piece of red maple. This is a very dense piece of wood that should last 100-150 years. It might be the last neck the violin has.

The Montagnana violin is in excellent condition. Most of its original varnish remains; except for a few top cracks and some worm damage on the ribs, it shows surprisingly little wear. It has no major patches, only a doubling of the top edge and a button graft.

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The scroll graft is a standard repair. The instrument will get a new neck and a new

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20-year-old piece of red maple. This is a very dense piece of wood that should last 100-150 years. It might be the last neck the violin has. The varnish on the scroll is an exquisite 17th century Cremonese honey brown. Although the varnishes do not match, out of respect for both makers, neither

varnish will be altered. A composite violin is what it is, a reconstructed violin made of parts of different violins creating an organic whole. It is similar to a medieval church, built over centuries by several different architects, each contributing an addition in his own style.

Working on this violin is a rare thrill. There are just not that many Amati scrolls or parts of any maker of his stature floating around waiting to be reused, or a violin made by a maker of the stature of Montagnana in need of parts.

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