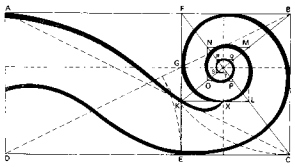

From the Maker's Bench

Cutting Your Losses

by Lawrence Anderson

For 5 months during the spring and summer of last year, I worked on two interesting old violins in need of major restoration. One violin was made in 1752 by the Spanish master Joannes Guillami who worked in Barcelona from 1725 to 1769. A student of Galeano, he is now considered one of the finest Spanish violin makers. He modeled his instruments after Stradivari, until late in his career, when he came under the influence of J.B. Guadagnini. The other violin was an anonymous Austrian instrument from around 1775. It was small — the body and string length of an early Amati. The instrument lacked elegance, with back and ribs made from unfigured maple. It was interesting mostly because it has survived for well over two centuries.

Both instruments had tops riddled with cracks and collapsed arches. The Guillami had suffered additionally from incompetent restorers who, when unable to bring cracks together, took out scrapers to even them out. Consequently the top was dangerously thin and the varnish, between the f-holes the entire length of the instrument, had been scrapped away. Even if the cracks were successfully cleaned and reinforced, touch up would be nearly impossible. Scraping the wood changes the index of refraction, so even if the touch up varnish matches the original varnish, the light refraction will cause the retouched area to stand out, even decades later. Previous restorers attempted to solve the refraction problem by coating the entire violin in a dark opaque varnish. This unfortunate solution of course covered up the beauty of the original varnish. Restoring the violin meant removing all the touch up, opening and cleaning all the cracks, restoring and reinforcing the collapsed arch, then retouching the damaged area accepting that the refraction problem cannot be resolved.

The top of the anonymous Austrian violin was in a condition almost equally sad. Riddled with cracks, with collapsed arch, and dangerously thin in the lower bouts, it would require at least a month to restore it. I purchased the violin — or rather I rescued the violin — in a flea market in Cleveland more than 10 years ago. For the past decade, I kept it on the wall above my bench, and from time to time, thought about how I was going to restore it. It had no pedigree and therefore I could not justify the time I would have to commit to restore it. I once even started working on the top but abandoned the project when

Violin of Joannes Guillami, Barcelona, 1757

I had to turn my attention to more urgent commitments. When I started working on the top to the Guillami, I decided then that I would make a new top for the Austrian violin. The solutions to the Guillami and the anonymous Austrian instruments were radically different. Although the Guillami top was in much worse shape, the top had to be restored. It is authentic. It is a piece of history and an important piece of Spanish culture. The Austrian instrument is not as valuable. The new top I made will improve the instrument and will insure its survival for at few more centuries.

When I started making a new top for the Austrian instrument, I decided to change the instrument to a ⅞-size violin. The over all length is nearly ¼ inch less than a modern violin. I turned it into a ⅞ violin by shortening the neck length and repositioning the f-holes on the new top. The arching on the new top was a definite improvement over the crude arching of the original. The maker probably worked in some provincial Austrian city and carved his arch from memory. When I made the new arch, I had records of dozens of magnificent instruments to guide me.

Making the new top took me less than a week. Restoring the old top would have taken me at least six weeks. In the end it would have been a piece of plywood that would have needed to be restored again in 50 years.

Restoring the Guillami took me nearly 4 months with an additional month for the touch up. Twenty cracks were opened, cleaned and reglued. The arch was pressed out to its original form and reinforced. It got a new sound post patch, new patches at the upper and lower blocks. The varnish was cleaned to reveal a deep rich brilliant orange color. The touch up was at times a nightmare. I would work on it every day in the afternoon, around 3 o'clock. And in the afternoon, the touch up looked fairly convincing. Other times of the day were problematic. As the light changed, especially from natural to artificial light, the varnish looked less convincing; and in the evening, under florescent light, it didn't match at all.

When doing touch up, I try always to remember the advice of my teacher, Horatio Piniero. He told me not to agonize over touch up, for touch up that screamed out

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at a restorer is usually invisible to the rest of the world. When I returned the violin to its owner, he e-mailed me back that the sound was as good as, if not deeper than, his Guarnerius. Those words are music to a restorer's ears.

The top to the Austrian violin was antiqued to match the rest of the instrument. Although any maker could immediately recognize the antiquing, the musicians I showed the instrument to could not. The instrument was a church instrument for most of its life, used by monks for religious service. Its scroll tells the story of its past. When monks got tired holding the violin during mass, they would rest the violin scroll on the pew in front of them. The back of the scroll was worn completely flat! By making a new top, I was able to preserve this charming bit of history.

Restoration is a complex process. But it begins with the question: what am I going to do? Last summer, I had two violins with identical problems. The solutions were radically different but each was appropriate for the violin. Sometimes you have to take the time and expense to restore and sometimes you have to cut your losses and replace.

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