



MAKER'S BENCH

When Disaster Strikes

by Douglas Lay

Every now and then one reads of an incredibly valuable instrument absentmindedly left in a taxi or lost on a metro train. Usually these incidents are reported to have a happy ending, such as the instrument being restored to its owner just in time for a performance. But not all stories end so quaintly.

Several years ago, a violinist came out of an engagement with an armful of performance paraphernalia and set it on the ground to make loading the car easier. With the car full of equipment and companions, off she drove. She hadn't gone far before noticing the absence of her early twentieth century Italian violin, and quickly returned to the parking place. Fortunately the case was still where it had been laid.

Everything seemed all right initially, except for some unfamiliar scuffing on the top of the case and some slight misalignment at the latch. Only when the case was opened was the truth revealed. The dark scuff on the top of the case was actually a tire track. The poor violin had been run over.

One might think that getting run over by a car is a pretty conclusive end of an instrument's usefulness, but the damage was not as catastrophic as one might expect. Before springing back almost to its original shape, the top of the case had sagged under the weight of the car, permitting the instrument's belly to be shattered. But remarkably, the ribs, scroll and back had been spared.



Original Damage

The owner left the instrument in its case, boxed up the whole thing and sent it directly to us. To my relief, she had resisted the natural urge to touch the damaged areas and try to fit the pieces back together. Unnecessary handling inevitably abrades the sharp edges of fractures and causes the loss of fine splinters. It also soils clean, broken surfaces. This secondary damage makes the

reassembly of parts much more difficult, and therefore more expensive, and the finished repairs can only be more conspicuous.

After considerable strategizing, conferring with the owner and gaining approval from the owner's insurance company, work commenced. The belly was carefully removed from the rib structure in pieces. Its rebuilding consisted of dozens of separate gluing operations, each requiring time to dry before the next could begin.



Gluing the Splinters

A plaster cast of the exterior surface of the belly was then made for support while bits mangled beyond recognition were replaced with grafts and strengthening patches were inlaid.



Repaired Belly

With other interior bracing installed and the damaged varnish retouched, the belly was reunited with the rest of the instrument. After a yearlong process costing several thousand dollars, the violin was restored to its intended purpose, its body with some barely visible scars, but its soul unblemished.



Finished Repair

It turns out that a car running over a violin is not all that rare an occurrence. I've personally seen the results of a couple such incidents. And I've heard of still others. I've also seen instruments that have been dropped, fallen on, stepped on, sat on and damaged in Biblical ways from flood to fire to pestilence.

Hopefully, your musical career will lack this particular type of drama. But sometimes bad things happen to even the nicest people. I've therefore come to realize how important up-to-date insurance coverage can be. Beyond this, there may be ways to mitigate the situation should some mishap befall your instrument, whether by accident or vicissitude of weather.

Generally, I recommend consulting

a reputable repairperson as soon as possible after damage occurs. He or she can give you options on how to address the problem. They can also help by providing documentation useful for an insurance claim, if required. If visiting a shop is not immediately possible because of distance or schedule, a phone call can elicit tips on correcting a problem or at least minimizing further damage until a visit can be arranged. Don't expect a price quote on the phone, though; nobody can reliably bid on an unseen job.

If the timing of the accident doesn't permit prompt communication with a repairperson, use common sense: if the

post has fallen or if cracks are present and visible deformation is occurring, release the tension of the strings to prevent further damage. If parts have actually become separated, such as a corner errantly struck with a bow, gently collect every bit you can find, carefully place them in a box or envelope and bring them with you to the repair shop. Resetting cleanly severed parts is much cheaper than having new parts made and grafted into place.

In theory, almost any damage to a violin can be fixed, provided the major parts are still present. But practically speaking, the potential value of the restored instrument should warrant the cost of repairs. Hope-

fully, with vigilance and a little luck, there will be no need of such considerations and music can remain the focus of attention.

Douglas Lay is Workshop Manager and Instrument Restorer at Claire Givens Violins in Minneapolis. He graduated from the Violin Making School of America. In 1986, the year he joined Givens Violins, one of his violins won a certificate for tone at the Violin Society of America's International Competition in Portland, Oregon. His extensive knowledge of stringed instrument making and restoration is founded upon hands-on experience. †