

STRINGS

Market Report

July/August 1998

Volume XIII, Number 1

Issue 71

A New Golden Age

"I am neither player, maker, nor dealer. And I'm musically illiterate."

Scant recommendation, but with words to this effect I introduced myself to all I met at the 1998 Exhibition of American Violin and Bow Makers. Clearly—in a room filled with luthiers, tables spread with their works, and a constant stream of musicians, ranging from children to concert soloists, any one of whom was apt to pick up an appealing instrument, find a bow to match, and begin a familiar passage from Bach, Brahms, or Tchaikovsky—I was out of my element. But I did possess the one necessary requisite—an interest in violins—and universally I was greeted with kindness, enthusiasm, and a willingness to teach and explain.

Brainchild of Todd French, director of Butterfield & Butterfield's newly created Fine Musical Instrument Department, the exhibition was conceived to help support interest in the firm's first-ever major auction of fine musical instruments, held February 9. Accordingly, the timing was the weekend before the sale. The setting was a large hall next door to the Butterfields' preview room. The location was Hollywood. And the weather was wet; all weekend, El Niño released its torrents.

Nonetheless, for those who braved the deluge, treats awaited from the first moment of entry into the exhibition.

There, in the Butterfields' lobby, French had rendered incarnate Darol Anger's recent article on innovative American makers ("Shattering the Mold," July/August 1996). Housed in a glass case were Christophe Landon's asymmetric blue violin, Guy Rabut's art deco violin with its gold-leaf ball for a scroll, and a pair of instruments by Danny Ferrington—spare creations without the least hint of ornamentation.

Nor were the instruments for display only. Inside the exhibition hall, improvisational violinist Stephen Nachmanovitch was gleefully wan-

dering the tables when he encountered Christophe Landon—there to show his work as well as to bid later at the auction. Nachmanovitch expressed an interest in the blue violin and Landon promptly had it brought to the hall. Nachmanovitch put it to his chin, looked far away at nothing I could see, then began to draw from the instrument the most haunting and tender of tunes, colored perhaps by the hue of its source. When he finished, I asked if he'd recorded the piece, and he said

"She was looking for a sound that pleases her, and she found what she wanted in a modern instrument."

—David Bromberg

no, he'd just composed it and probably would never play it again.

Clearly, he was pleased to have played the blue violin. It's the 20th century, said Nachmanovitch, and he likes exploring new sounds—pairing, for instance, a Baroque bow with an electric violin, exploiting the one's responsiveness and the other's capacity for volume. He said too, as I heard repeatedly over the weekend, that he liked "the idea of supporting new makers." But the sound, he said, for his taste was a little bright on the top end.

Moving on, he soon found himself at the table of Joseph Grubaugh, a prizewinning luthier from Northern California who works with his wife, Sigran Seifert. Grubaugh and Seifert's instruments are unquestionably more traditional than Landon's, but the couple is by no means afraid to put themselves into their work. Among their instruments was a new violin described by Grubaugh as a "free" del Gesù model. "We used the Paganini 'Canon' as a base"—pause—"and then just made a fid-



Butterfields' Hollywood location was the site of an exhibit of American lutherie held in February.

dle." Nachmanovitch picked it up, began to play, and again his eyes looked faraway.

"Fabulous," he said after a time. "Just fabulous. Really incredible."

He then tried an antiqued Grubaugh and Seifert viola. Originally, said Grubaugh, the instrument had looked new. But it had drawn little interest from potential buyers, and "so we put it through the witness protection program"—stripped and refinished it. Nachmanovitch was as happy with it as he had been with the violin, and when finally he put the viola down he said, "I'd buy both of these instruments right this minute if I had the cash."

Money, of course, was a concern of everyone at the exhibition: players, makers, and dealers—though each had their own take on the issue. Grubaugh was asking \$15,000 for the violin Nachmanovitch had played. On such an instrument, said Los Angeles luthier Kyozo Watanabe, materials can run as high as \$3,000 and the work can take up

to 400 hours. "Modern instruments," he concluded, "are so inexpensive!"

Certainly this is true compared to prices for "fine" older instruments. But still, \$15,000 (or more) is a lot to plunk down when you may be uncertain about how an instrument will sound in a few years and whether your investment will be safe or have grown.

Yet for at least one contemporary instrument, hard evidence about investment performance was available right there on the exhibition floor. David Gusset, an Oregon luthier who in 1985 won the gold medal for violin making at the International Triennale in Cremona, brought with him to Los Angeles a prizewinning cello that he made and first sold in 1986, for \$14,000. Now he was offering it on consignment for \$28,000.

A doubling of your money is not bad. But an investor could easily have done better in the stock market over the same period. This is no surprise to David Bromberg, a dealer and collector with a special interest in American violins (see "On Native Ground," September/October 1993), who told me: "I've actually studied this. And you make more money in mutual funds." The only rationale for investing in violins, he says, is because you use them as tools—and because you like them.

"And there's a lot to like." Especially now.



Nodding toward the Exhibition hall from the Butterfields' preview room, Bromberg said: "There's some great makers over there. These guys have tools at their disposal, with the modern age, that give them the ability to learn more, faster, than anybody in history." The focus today on violin and bow making is unparalleled, said Bromberg, and the result is "a golden age." He believes this is true worldwide, but that Americans are at the forefront. "Conservatively speaking, they are among the best in the world. Personally, I think they're the best."

No one, he suggested, should have a reservation about buying a properly chosen contemporary American instrument. And so he praised a decision on Sunday by violist Lin-Chuan Huang, a music student at the University of Southern California and member of the USC orchestra: "She was looking for a sound that pleases her, not for an

Perhaps the most eye-popping example of contemporary American lutherie at the Exhibition of American Violin and Bow Makers was the "Indian Red," made by St. Louis luthier Geoffrey Seitz. He was inspired to make his violin by the ornamented instruments of Stradivari.

But from the beginning, his intention was to make the "Indian Red" all-American. The woods are domestic—Missouri maple and Michigan spruce—and the decorative elements are Native American in origin: the inlaid mother-of-pearl Thunderbird, for instance, is a sign of good fortune.

Seitz is asking \$55,000 for the "Indian Red," on which he spent more than 1,200 hours. Even if he doesn't sell it, though, he says he still comes out a winner. "Because it's a wonderful instrument and then I get to keep it. And I love it."

—S.L.S.

investment, not for prestige, and she found what she wanted in a modern instrument. That's not so unusual."

Huang, who hopes for a professional career, came to the exhibition at the urging of a friend who had come the day before and knew she was looking to improve on her current instrument, an Italian viola made in 1939 by Ernesto Pevero. Huang paid more than \$40,000 for the instrument. Now, she thinks it might cost as much as \$100,000 to find the sound she is looking for in something older. "But I can't pay that much."

So she tried every viola in the hall, perhaps a dozen, and by the end of the day she had made a surprising decision. The one she liked the most was the least expensive: a \$4,800 instrument by John Speak of Capistrano Beach, California. Speak, a retired sound engineer and past president of the Southern California Association of Violin Makers, was the only amateur at the exhibition.

Huang took Speak's viola home. There, she compared it with her Pevero, and there she decided it wasn't the instrument for her. But still, she thinks she may have found the answer to her needs at the exhibition. Sharing a table with Joseph

Grubaugh was the Cremona-trained and San Francisco-based Francis Kuttner. Among his instruments was a violin that drew the attention of many players; it had what Los Angeles studio musician Peter Kent called "that magic wood." Huang had played it while making her rounds, and after returning the Speak, she asked Kuttner if he might consider making her a viola—on the small side, so it would accommodate her frame and fingers.

Yes, said Kuttner, he would consider it. And now the two are involved in that delicate dance that might or might not lead one day to a commission.

And the violin with the magic wood? It went home with Kent, a 20-year veteran of the studios and owner now of an 1874 French instrument by Joseph Hel. The Hel, says Kent, "is a marvelous recording instrument. But the sound under my ear isn't as satisfying to me as it is to others." Like Huang, Kent says sound is by far the most important consideration for him in selecting an instrument (though of Kuttner's workmanship, he says the instruments are "cut and finished beautifully"). And he has no reservations about going with a new maker—

particularly since what he calls the "break-even point" in the price-for-sound equation is so out of hand in the market for older instruments.

So enthusiastic is Kent about contemporary Americans that even while he tries the Kuttner, he's on the waiting list for an instrument from another maker, and if he likes them he is prepared to buy both. His enthusiasm is perhaps particularly meaningful given that Kent has already suffered the experience of buying a new violin and finding himself disappointed. "It had a pleasant tone," he says, "but not much of it." He kept it for two and a half years, all the while sending it back for adjustments, but the sound never materially improved and finally he sold it for a loss. From this, he mostly draws a lesson: "Don't think," he says, "that an instrument will play into something it isn't." Be sure it's got what you want at the outset.

Kent's appreciation for the quality of today's makers was strengthened in Los Angeles, but it first began developing several years ago when he attended a similar players-meet-makers forum sponsored by the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers. "These things," he says, "are real eye-openers. I've seen

a lot of new instruments now, and I really believe in the new makers."

Nor was he alone in this. Virtually all the players I met were excited by what they saw—by the chance, they said repeatedly, to see, try, and compare so much great stuff. And the makers, in turn, expressed satisfaction at the chance to show their work directly to musicians and to meet with colleagues.

Indeed, I heard only two laments the whole weekend.

One was a widespread regret that there weren't more such opportunities. And the second I heard on Sunday, when Joseph Grubaugh and I, along with bow maker Robert Shallock, stepped out briefly to a blues café-cum-coffee bar across the street. Grubaugh bought, and while he made our cappuccinos the barista asked if we were from the exhibition.

"Yes," said Grubaugh, we were.

"I've been meaning to get over there," said the coffee man. "I'm looking for an instrument."

"Really? What do you play?"

"Upright bass."

"And how much are you looking to spend?"

"Two hundred bucks."

But that he would not find.

—Steven L. Shepherd