

Fine Young Musicians Deserve Fine Old Instruments **Securing vintage stringed instruments for young players**

Helen Lancaster

“Having a voice which responds to every ounce of effort, which knows no limitations but my own, leaves open a wider door for future personal development and growth. It is an indescribable experience to produce a sound on this instrument.” So said cellist Denis Brott, recipient of the 1706 Brott-Terner-Tecchler cello from the Canada Council for the Arts Musical Instrument Bank. Brott is one of the lucky ones, having access to a vintage instrument which affords him an edge in professional growth. With more good players now than ever before, finding a way to stand out on stage is an increasing challenge. For young Australian string players, investing in fine instruments which might open that door to growth is often a pipe dream. As prices for vintage violins escalate, even the better quality instruments from modern makers are also appreciating in value, becoming inaccessible to young professionals.

Among serious emergent string players in Europe there is a common aspiration to acquire a fine instrument as early as possible, and in some countries there is equally serious support for achieving that goal. For example, Finland, Austria, England, Wales and Ireland all have government or philanthropic programs to assist young professionals to acquire fine instruments on an incremental basis – as they improve, so do the instruments. Cremonese violin maker Alfredo Primavera likens it to having your first car – you are happy to drive whatever it is, but gradually you begin to want something with better brakes, more acceleration, different qualities, even a newer model. So it is with musical instruments, although in this case, an older instrument is generally preferable. To be competitive, players need better instruments. In Primavera’s words, “A talented musician will find that an inexperienced instrument won’t meet his requirements. The player can’t develop his own sound because the instrument can’t do what he needs.” A violin has to take on the player’s musical personality. It’s a very individual relationship, and the same instrument won’t necessarily work with different players. A renowned violin teacher quotes the example of one student trying a Castanieri violin without success, but a second player connected with it immediately, drawing a very different sound from the instrument.

Given the cost of quality stringed instruments, there is a logical perception in Australian circles that they belong among older, more experienced professionals. The reality is that unless gifted players have access to fine instruments when they are in the early stages of their careers, then at best they lose valuable time in making an impact, and at worst, they may lose interest altogether. After all, to return to Primavera and his analogy of the car, he notes that such players are

practising approximately 7 hours each day, and likens it to driving from Sydney to London in a car which isn't built to get there. Playing for 7 hours a day needs inspiration, and motivation. There are many incredible hours of intimacy spent with the instrument. It should be easy to develop one's own musical voice, not impossible.

One young Australian violinist, Niki Vasilakis puts it very plainly: "Having a fine instrument isn't about taste, it's a necessity!" She explains that "We wouldn't expect a pianist to play a concert on an upright piano." Seen in those terms, there is plenty of sense in the argument. Niki plays an 1872 violin by Antonio Guadagnini, grandson of the famous G.B. Guadagnini. It is currently on loan to her from Lilly Camden of Musical Options in Brisbane. Niki, who won the String Final of Symphony Australia's Young Performer of the Year in 2003, has the instrument for one year, and she has already used it on tour with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, in performance with The Queensland Orchestra, and on her recording of the Bruch and Mendelssohn Concertos with the Tasmania Symphony Orchestra due for release in May. Niki is also featured in the television documentary series "Classical Destinations" currently being aired on SBS (Sundays, 6pm). In another film project she will play Vivaldi's Four Seasons with Jimmy Lin and Pekka Kussisto. Niki says of the Guadagnini that "it's not about having a nice instrument, it's about having an instrument which is necessary for the repertoire". Although she admits that on a personal level, "it's so beautiful, and wonderful to be able to play it", on a very practical level "it is the key to unlocking the sound you need to have as a professional violinist."

Niki is one of the lucky few. How can music teachers best help their own emerging young professionals to acquire an instrument which will give them the best opportunity to realise their potential? Being proactive is the first step, generating awareness and enthusiasm for an ever-better instrument. Students need to be made aware of the potential which awaits them, and enthused about realising it at the next level. A finer instrument is not a lost cause. Think of the number of friends and relatives who support young musicians with regular donations of cash and kind, with never any expectation of its return. Turned into an investment loan, those regular donations might well purchase a superb instrument for the player to use, and the donor has an investment which will appreciate significantly over time. A group of relatives might form a syndicate to do the same, extending the benefit from player and syndicate to the community as well.

An investment of this kind is more certain than that applied to real estate, or the stock market. The value of the great stringed instruments continues to steadily increase, and current conservative estimates of average annual returns between 10% and 15% are not unrealistic. In contrast to the more volatile art and financial markets, the violin market in particular is assuredly

reliable and the forces which make it so will continue to exert upward pressure on this particular commodity. A steadily growing demand for rare stringed instruments suggests that the risk of loss of capital is remote. According to Charles Beare, chairman of violin specialists J&A Beare in London, "Violins have beaten the house market. There are no losers."

While the return may be a certainty, potential buyers should still be wary. The fine instrument market has its share of fraudulent participants, and investors need to minimise potential problems by approaching a reputable dealer who will provide certification of the instrument's provenance. Even that is not enough - it isn't unusual to expect that the dealer would accept the instrument back with a guarantee to return the purchase price. In a comment on reputable transactions, renowned English dealer Peter Biddulph confirms that "dealers do more than simply brokering, we give guarantees about authenticity and we promise to buy back instruments." Lilly Camden explains that now it is very easy to communicate with the maker (if the instrument is modern) or the dealer, and to trace previous transactions. If a dealer won't give a buy-back guarantee, one should reasonably wonder why.

Clearly, not all young professionals will have access to family philanthropists. Enter the concept of a musical instrument bank which makes fine instruments available on loan to deserving young players. In other parts of the world, government organisations encourage philanthropists to purchase vintage instruments for their investment value and allow them to be used by emerging professional musicians for specific periods of time. This gives these young professionals the best opportunity to make an impact on the international stage. Violinist Nigel Kennedy and Jacqueline du Pre are two world masters who have benefited from such philanthropy in the past. In the present, a new competition has just been launched in Verona (Italy). One philanthropist has purchased 3 fine instruments of differing values, and is offering them as 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes in the competition. The prize winners receive the use of these instruments for 5 years, after which the philanthropist has the choice of selling them or re-investing in another round of the competition.

Whilst it may happen regularly overseas, in Australia there are fewer examples and most are private arrangements such as that between Camden and Vasilakis. For example, violinist Nicholas Milton plays a 1742 Guarneri del Gesu loaned to him by Nathan Waks. The corporate sector is beginning to dip its toes in the vintage instrument pool: Leader of the Australian Chamber Orchestra Richard Tognetti plays a violin from 1759 by J.B. Guadagnini, loaned to him on a semi-permanent basis by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia. Such loans extend the value of fine stringed instruments beyond the player and to the community generally. As David Murray explained about the Commonwealth Bank's decision to allow Tognetti use of their

Guadagnini, “this is something that can be taken out into the community to be enjoyed, whereas the [bank’s] art collection spends most of its time hanging on the walls in here”. Providing gifted musicians with access to otherwise prohibitively expensive instruments cuts both ways for the investor – the investment pays off at a significant rate for the investor, and it is socially responsible, extending the benefits into the community.

The Canada Council for the Arts Musical Instrument Bank is a good example of how it might be done on a broader basis. As with the Italian example, performance competitions periodically select players as instruments become available. To compete for the loan of the instruments, applicants should be professional musicians who have “a history of public presentation of their work.” Priority is given to musicians under 30, although established musicians in the first third of an international career are also eligible. Musicians who receive the instruments on loan play them publicly in concerts and competitions all over the world, and in recordings. Carol Bream from the Canada Council explains that “the loan of these fine instruments not only has an impact on how the musicians sound, but the profile they receive from winning these competitions has also increased their ability to obtain important international engagements and major recording contracts.”

Inspired by Camden’s example of making instruments available to a number of young musicians, a group of believers has begun the journey toward launching a stringed instrument bank which will benefit young string players in Queensland. Apart from allowing Niki the use of her own Guadagnini, Lilly has also arranged for another young Australian performer to use a Storioni from c.1780. This violin is featured in “The late Cremonese Violin Makers” and “Three Centuries of Violin Making”, which describes it as “inspired by the Guarneri del Gesù model [...] the voice is mighty and of great quality [and] the similarities with the work of Guiseppi Guarneri del Gesù are such to consider Lorenzo Storioni almost an ideal continuation of the spirit of the great maestro from Cremona”. With a price tag of AUD \$615,000, the Storioni was way beyond the purchasing power of the young player, but he played it in a major European competition in August last year. According to his teacher, the experience allowed him to develop his concept of what is possible expressively. “To be able to merge with the instrument and forget it’s there affords the player a different level of expressiveness, and an expanded vocabulary.”

While this violinist player experienced this renaissance, Lilly and her team negotiated with an interested party to try to make the arrangement more permanent. Although this first attempt to match philanthropist with performer was unsuccessful, it made the group even more determined to pursue the cause of a permanent instrument bank. For the moment, it’s a matter of ‘watch this space’! Meantime, one young player reminds us why it’s essential that emerging professionals

have access to fine instruments: "It's indescribable, the feeling of playing on a great violin. There's a quality that inspires you. A simple phrase I've played numerous times, suddenly you play it differently."

Alfredo Primavera will make his second trip to Brisbane in May 2006, bringing with him a number of fine Cremonese instruments suitable for a range of players and levels of investments. Persons interested in meeting with him are welcome to contact Lilly Camden at Musical Options on 1300 889233.

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