

## **Old for Young**

### **Securing vintage stringed instruments for young players**

“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 producing his music. 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 personal growth is often a pipe dream. As prices for vintage violins escalate, the better quality instruments from modern makers are also appreciating in value, and becoming inaccessible to emerging young professionals.

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 de Pre are two world masters who have benefited from such philanthropy. Whilst it may happen regularly overseas, in Australia there are fewer examples. Nicholas Milton who was until recently violinist in the Macquarie Trio, plays a 1742 Guarneri del Gesu violin loaned to him by Nathan Waks. 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”<sup>1</sup>. 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. Performance competitions periodically select players as instruments become available. To compete for the loan of the instruments, applicants should be professional musicians who have completed “basic training in music and have a history of public presentation

of their work.”<sup>ii</sup> In this scheme, priority is given to musicians under 30, although established musicians in the first third of an international career are also eligible. The 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.”<sup>iii</sup>

Inspired by the example of Lilly Camden who has already made instruments available on loan 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. Lilly's own 1872 violin by Antonio Guadagnini, grandson of the famous G.B. Guadagnini is currently on loan to Niki Vasilakis who won the String Final of Symphony Australia's Young Performer of the Year in 2003. Niki has the instrument for one year, and she has already put it to good use. She has used it on a tour with the MSO, and played it for her recording of the Bruch and Mendelssohn Concertos with the Tasmania Symphony Orchestra in December last year. Niki is also featured in the television documentary series “Classical Destinations” to be aired in Australia early in 2006, and in another film project she will play Vivaldi's Four Seasons<sup>iii</sup> with Jimmy Lin and Pekka Kussisto.

Lilly also arranged for another young Australian performer to use a violin in a similar class to the Guadagnini which Richard Tognetti has on loan from the Commonwealth Bank. A Storioni from c.1780, this violin is featured in “The late Cremonese Violin Makers”<sup>iv</sup> and “Three Centuries of Violin Making”<sup>v</sup>, 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 \$615,000, the Storioni was way beyond the purchasing power of the young player, but he was able to use it to participate in a major European competition in August last year, while Lilly and her team negotiated with an interested party to try to make the arrangement more permanent. Although this first attempt was unsuccessful, it has made the group even more determined to pursue the cause of a permanent instrument bank.

In the meantime, teachers should remain proactive in their pursuit of finding the best instruments for emerging professional players among their students. It 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 purchase a fine instrument for the player to use, and the donor has an investment which will appreciate significantly over time. A group of friends and 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%<sup>vi</sup> 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, it is still a case of 'buyer beware'. The fine instrument market is fraught with potential fraudulent participants, and buyers need to minimise the potential problems by approaching a reputable instrument dealer who will provide certification of the instrument's provenance. Even that is not enough - it is not unusual to expect that the dealer would offer to accept the instrument back with a guarantee to return the purchase price and generate confidence in the potential value. 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."<sup>vii</sup> Lilly Camden explains that now it is very easy to communicate with the maker (if the instrument is modern) or the dealer, and even trace previous transactions. If a dealer won't guarantee a buy-back, one should reasonably wonder why.

Making fine instruments available to young players is worth the effort, but all involved need to understand that an instrument will sound different from one player to the next. Players need time with the instrument before purchase, and reputable dealers encourage such experimentation. Elizabeth Morgan quotes the example of one of her students trying a Castanieri violin without success, but a second player connected with it immediately, drawing a very different sound from the instrument.

#### Benefits - EM

Musical expansion, understanding and connectedness – exploring all sorts of musical things which may have only been internal, now able to be realised externally. Concept of what is possible expressively. It was total joy for him to play and all the time expand on his ideas. Not immediate – any good instrument, like any good relationship it's like a marriage you have to learn

to work with it and let it go. Incredible hours of intimacy you spend with an instrument. “To be able to merge with it and forget it’s there” – different vocabulary.

Given the element of luck, could see him in a fine chamber orchestra, doing occasionally solo recital. Everybody is completely unique, as with the instrument.

“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,” (Philadelphia Enquirer, qtd by Jack Miles and Douglas McLennan, *Silencing the Great Violins*).

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<sup>i</sup> Qtd in Kelly Burke, *Commonwealth Banks on a Sublime Sound*.

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/musical\\_instrument\\_bank/](http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/musical_instrument_bank/)

<sup>iii</sup> “Canada Council launches largest-ever Instrument Bank Competition”.

[http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/musical\\_instrument\\_bank/](http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/musical_instrument_bank/)

<sup>iv</sup> Dmitry Gindin. *The Late Cremonese Violin Makers* (2002). Edizioni Novecento: Cremona, Italy, pp.8 & 20.

<sup>v</sup> Artemio Versare. *Three Centuries of Violin Making* (2003). Edizioni Il Salabue: Rimini, Italy, pp.116-182.

<sup>vi</sup> These statistics and other background material sourced from Machold Rare Violin Mission, [www.machold.com](http://www.machold.com)

<sup>vii</sup> Thorpe, V. “Violin dealer denies...” *The Observer*, Sunday April 15, 2001.