

A Tribute to the Memory of Ignaz Anton Lutz; and a Few Passing Remarks About His Work

By Charles G. Montgomery

In the city of San Francisco, on March 26th, there passed away a noteworthy man—a genius—Ignaz A. Lutz by name—master violin maker and connoisseur. Sensitive and high-strung by nature, he seemed of recent years to fully realize the shortness of life. “So much to do and so little time to do it in” I have often heard him say—and he worked at his bench with intense activity, completing his master violins, until a severe illness compelled him to lay down his tools forever. He passed away quietly three days later. Rest in Peace.

Born in Vienna, in 1881, this remarkable man came from a long line of expert violin makers. His father before him was a noted maker, repairer and connoisseur of old master violins—and so was his grandfather. After leaving his father’s shop in Vienna he rounded out his apprenticeship by working under the auspices of the best luthiers in Vienna, Berlin, Paris and London. He was naturally adapted to this high line of art work and was endowed with all the gifts necessary for the highest degree of perfection in his chosen calling. As a cunning worker in wood (especially in relation to the violin) the writer has not seen his equal, and in repairing the Italian master violins, his work may have been equaled, but never excelled. Many of the finest violins in the United States were repaired and adjusted by him and put in perfect playing condition.

In applying lacquer (wrongly termed “varnish”) he was indeed a master. He had a true artist’s eye for color and artistic shading effects, and the violins he turned out of late years speak for themselves. Into each violin he contributed a part of himself and his instruments will live after him,—Ignaz Lutz was a creator.

It is in relation to his rediscovery of the methods used by the old masters in producing, in new violins, the so-called “Cremona tone,” that his name will go down to posterity.

Connoisseurs and master violinists who have had the opportunity of playing on and comparing the tone (and looks also) of his new violins with those made by the best old masters of the Cremona school, are unanimous in agreeing that he succeeded in equalling these masterpieces. Amongst those who had the opportunity of testing the Lutz violins and approving of them, were Fritz Kreisler, Zimbalist, Spalding, Enesco, Carl Flesch, Felix Salmond, Persinger, Piaastro, Gygi and many other eminent soloists and symphony players and amateurs scattered all over the states, from San Francisco to New York—and some on the Continent. Fortunately, indeed, are those who possess one of his violins; the last one has been completed and the secret of the “filler” and lacquer has apparently died with the master as he left no successor or understudy.

The writer knew Ignaz Lutz intimately for the past fifteen years—ever since he came to New York the talks we had on the intensely interesting subject of the so-called lost art of the old Cremona violin makers. Numerous were the experiments he carried out on all the known gums, resins, oils and basic chemicals (both ancient and modern), and many were the failures recorded, until by the process of elimination, the right substances were found and tested—and proved successful. His father and grandfather before him (as previously stated) conducted many hundreds of experiments along the same lines of research and they kept a record of their experiments, and these valuable records were handed down to Mr. Lutz but, only one thing did Mr. Lutz learn from all these previous (and unsuccessful) experiments and that was what to avoid. I well remember that linseed oil (whether raw, boiled or otherwise treated) was utterly rejected, either as a “filler” body or as a lacquer base; it was found to be a destroyer of the Cremona tone in each and every experiment. and the passage of time only made it more so. Fossil gum amber, damar, copal and shellac were also discarded. Olive oil was never, at any time, considered as fit for a “filler” body or

lacquer base; and, neither glue, calcium, salt or other mineral compounds received favorable mention for use.

The right “filler” when found, was a simple natural substance, in use and easily obtained in and about the old city of Cremona during the days of the master violin makers. The same also applies to the lacquer base; the colors used by Mr. Lutz are stable and do not fade and sunlight does not affect them. The filler and lacquer on the famed violins of Antonius Stradivarius (which was the high standard he strived for), required warm, dry, sunny weather for drying—and so did the instruments of Ignaz Lutz—and, many times have I seen his fiddles hanging for two or three weeks, on the cherry trees in the orchard across the Bay, until properly set and ready for the final polishing process. True art cannot be hastened and master violins cannot be “filled” and lacquered in a week or ten days; dry weather, gentle heat and the filtered rays of the sun were required in the olden days—and the same simple methods hold good today. Modern haste, quick-action and high-pressure methods have indeed, virtually killed the noble and gentle art of violin making as it was practiced in Cremona. If we are to again duplicate the works of the great Italian makers, we must learn to “make haste slowly” and follow in the footprints of Amati, Stradivarius and Joseph Guarnerius . Mr. Lutz was fortunate in owning a remarkably fine toned Stradivarius violin made in the year 1726; and this he used as a model (both for shape and tone) for the instruments he turned out during the past seven or eight years. He left ample wood in his violins, and the passage of time will fully justify the wisdom of this procedure. Well-wooded, his violins sounded beautiful right from the start. With the proper “filler,” the top and back can be left much thicker in wood than most modern makers are in the habit of doing, and the violins will still respond perfectly, with absolute evenness throughout the entire scale, with richness or tone, flexibility and great carrying power. No doubt, this was the way old master violins sounded when first made.

The time element has little or nothing to do with violin tone; a rightly constructed and properly “filled” violin should reach its maximum within six months or one year after being completed. Stradivarius sold his new instruments in competition with the old violins of Gaspar da Salo, Maggini, Nicholas Amati and others, and the purchasers bought them purely on tone merit. The tone of the brand new Strads was fully as rich and mellow as the existing old violins, and they were just as responsive and far more powerful and far-carrying .It is hard and takes time to kill off foolish superstitions connected with this instrument, but truth will eventually prevail. It is needless to say that Mr. Lutz used the choicest wood, naturally (not kiln) dried; and same was chosen first for its tone qualities, and secondly for looks. Coupled with the foregoing, was the highest order of skill in graduating and attuning back and top, bassbar sound-post and bridge and, lastly (but vitally important) the application of the “filler” and lacquer. Result: a tone equal to that found only in the unspoiled violins of the ancient Cremona masters. It was a high goal, but it was well worth striving for.

Ignaz Lutz received a fine education in chemistry during his school days in Vienna, and he was an expert in the use of the modern high-powered microscope, and was also a deep student of the laws of refraction. In a way, he cheated death, as his works live after him. He lived a vital and eager life, full of hope and high ideals, and was brimful of enthusiasm for his chosen calling. In addition to his creative talents, he was a very good violinist himself and dearly loved string quartet playing. His loss is a great one and his early departure from this life will be sincerely regretted by a wide circle of friends and violin lovers .

READERS of “The Violinist” will be interested in the following excerpts from letters in this office;

“Readers of ‘The Violinist,’ saddened by the death of Mr. Ignaz A. Lutz, would be interested in a few passing remarks in regard to some of the vital points he stood for in the art of violin making. Being a close friend of his for the past fifteen years, I feel that I am in a position to speak, as it were, first handed.

“For the past thirty years, I have been delving into the mysteries of violin tone production and have had the opportunity of examining many of the best old master violins of the early Italian school; and have made tests and experiments { physical and chemical) in the endeavor to find out the so-called tone-producing secrets of the ancient makers.

“I know that you have had a long correspondence with Mr. Lutz, covering some years. As you well know, he advertised in your journal and told me that it was the best medium he knew of for getting results in the

sale of his master instruments. He also told me that you had complete charge of the three violins he sent for exhibit to the Sesqui-Centennial Exposition last year, and he appreciated your great interest and aid in making such an exhibit possible. I know you will be sorry to hear of his early demise.

“In looking through his shop today, I noted about 15 or 20 of Mr. Lutz’s own-make violins. Some are almost completed and only lack fingerboards, pegs, bridges and strings. He sold all that he had completed just as fast as he could turn them out. if you know any who want one of his master violins, kindly let me know and I will see what can be done to complete the few he left in his shop. also, if you know of a purchaser for his 1726 Stradivarius let me know. It is free from any bad breaks, has plenty of wood, and is a violin for an artist. Mr. Lutz secured this Strad eight years ago, and never opened it, as he said he liked to have it in its original condition. It was brought to California during the early Mission days, by a Spanish priest, who got it from his father before coming here.

“It is genuine in all parts—back, top, sides, scroll and label. It was made in the same year (1726) as was Fritz Kreisler’s Strad. There remains quite a little of the original lacquer (varnish) on the instrument and it has never been retouched. Bear this violin in mind and if you see an opening for same, let me know at once.

“You wanted to know the nature of the illness that laid Mr. Lutz low. It was a toxic goiter and it bothered him for some time, but he neglected it until too late. He was rushed to the hospital on a Wednesday afternoon, and passed away early on the following Saturday morning. The doctors said that the goiter had so weakened the heart muscles that he had not the strength to pull through. An operation, at that time, was out of the question. He passed away quite painlessly. Who will take his place ?

“Mr. Lutz was a real and true genius in repairing and judging and making violins. Such men are only born at long intervals. He was also a kind and true friend and many cases do I know of struggling and hard-up violinists that he helped financially.

“By the way, here is a rare opportunity for some first-class violin repairer and connoisseur to take over Mr. Lutz’ shop, 45 Geary Street, second floor, fronting on the street, one-half block from Market Street, the main thoroughfare of San Francisco, and fully equipped with everything needed for highest class work. He also carried a very full and complete stock of new violins, strings, parts, etc.— all of which I was informed to-day, would be sold at inventory prices. Here is a chance for a firstclass man to step in and take over a fine, going and profitable business. He made about \$1,500 per month clear. He employed one helper to do the roughing-out work and for rehairing bows, etc. All the fine work, re-barring ,lacquering, repairing and posts and bridges, he did himself—and in these things, he was a master hand.”

Charles G. Montgomery.

(Letters addressed to Sir. G. Montgomery, 240 Montgomery St., San Francisco, California or to the Lutz shop, will be passed on to the Public Administrator who is in charge. A. E. T.) ‘ We were all very shocked when Mr. Lutz passed on, due, perhaps, to the fact that his love for his work urged him on and on to such an extent that he wore himself out, and was an easy victim to an illness which might have otherwise been overcome. As his heirs are not in this country, everything was taken over by the Public Administrator. As far as I know he left no records by which the making of his varnish could be carried out. He kept everything in his own brain. Practically all of the violins he completed had been sold just before his death. However there are about half a dozen that are practically completed.” Adolph Klein.

From letter to the Editor of “The Violinist,” re the Sesqui violins:

“Lutz’s violins were fine. I liked the tone of all the strings, particularly the D which is generally the weak ‘brother.’ The tone was even, clear, and solid, suggesting the possibilities of development. The Callier violins had this also. The varnish is exceptionally fine. Perhaps it bears out this maker’s contention that varnish has much to do with tone. And it also looks well and durable.”