

Among the Violin Makers

Opinions expressed on controversial subjects are not to be construed as in any way reflecting those of this Editor

Waco, Texas

Nov. 10, 1943.

Dear Mr. Doring:

Last night, after hearing Patricia Travers play the Tschaikovsky Concerto on the "Tom Taylor" Stradivarius of 1732, it developed that her father is an amateur violin maker of no mean repute. In discussion of the "methods of the old masters," he expounded a theory to account for the superiority of the old Italian violins which I think should receive the attention of some of our technically minded research experts.

The theory runs something like this: "The wood must not be doped or treated in any way at all. The old masters made those thin plates because in their day, the pitch of the violin was lower than it is today, and they used a shorter neck, hence there was not such a great strain on the top as we have today. Moreover, nature aided these old masters in that the 200 odd years of seasoning and desiccation have *stiffened* the *resistance* of their wood and rendered it capable of greater response and resonance. The idea of plate tuning is preposterous. In making violins for tone, the best plan is to follow the principles of Joseph Guarnerius." (These principles were not stated for the writer, hence, the writer does not know what they are.)

Now, call in the experts. First of all, what does age do to thin plates that "stiffens their resistance"? If it did it to Stradivaris and Joseph Guarnerius, why did it not "stiffen" the plates of Peter Walmsley and others also? Next question: Leave out the idea of low pitch in 1715, and of the short neck—the thin plates are still there, and still here, and they produce great tonal results; hence, no matter why they were built, we are primarily interested in the present day results of such building, and we agree that those results are today "untouchable." But that still does not answer the question scientifically as to why those plates were built thin—in fact, some noted authorities even contend that they were not built thin, although such statements that Vuillaume and others thinned them later when putting in the new bass bars is unproven. And it does not explain why these thin plates give tone. It does not offer convincing proof that we should build thicker plates at all. A host of old makers built thin plates but the 200 odd years apparently did nothing for them at all as compared to the very few "great"—why?

A prominent authority in this column some time ago remarked that the old masters used spruce of a harder character than our present day spruce, and that their maple was of a softer character than ours. Now, if we follow the old idea of thinning hard wood and leaving soft wood thicker, why not build modern violins with thicker tops than we are now using, and thinner backs? It makes sense— if our spruce is softer, leave it a little thicker, while our maple, being harder needs a little more thinning? Anyway, the idea makes better logic than the idea that if we build a thick heavy violin, a couple of centuries will make it into a fine master-piece. Those who believe that seem to forget that Strads became famous in *their own day*, and were sought after by great virtuosos of the 18th and 19th centuries ! Moreover, many old makers built thick, heavy violins with too much wood, and they are still thick and heavy, and still have too much wood and not enough tone. The 200 years did not make of them tonal masterpieces !

Examination of a modern violin by a noted English maker showed that the top was a trifle thicker than we are accustomed to building, while the back was *thinner* than we are accustomed to building, by at least 2/64". In fact, the plates were of almost equal thickness ! Most modern makers adopt a principle directly opposite this —thick back and thin top. This English violin really has a fine tone, but poor varnish. I invite the experts to suitably expose this heresy.

Sincerely,

CARMEN WHITE.

Whitney Point, N. Y. October 26, 1943.

Editor, Violins and Violinists:

There has appeared in recent issues of your esteemed publication some considerable discussion as to the suitability of various woods for violin making. The consensus of opinion seems to be that the most suitable timber for tops is spruce and the most suitable for backs, ribs and neck is maple, and for the blocks and linings either spruce, willow, American white pine, or some other light wood. I note that one of your correspondents inclines to the opinion that, other properties being equal, plain maple is preferable to that having a distinct curl. At one time I

held to this opinion but have reached the definite conclusion that maple showing a distinct but moderately small flame cut across the layers is most suitable for the reason that it is more flexible than timber having an entirely straight grain. A thin slice of wood cut from the end of a block, and across the grain is much more flexible than a piece of the same timber and thickness cut lengthwise of the grain; and a piece cut lengthwise of the grain is more flexible to pressure applied in cross section than if applied longitudinally. Curly maple is more flexible than plain for the reason that the grains are to an extent cut across rendering it more flexible longitudinally. In passing, I will state that in my personal opinion birds-eye (pin) maple is not very suitable for violin making. This partially because of the hard spots which occur at each separate figure and, perhaps more largely because aside from these knots the wood is straight grained or plain and must be cut on the layers to show the figure. This also lessens flexibility. The violins I have seen and tested that had birds-eye maple backs have been universally inferior to those by the same maker in which curly maple was used. Presumably it is the rigidity of beech, oak and other hard woods that renders them less suitable than curly maple for violin making.

Spruce that is too heavy, too hard or too tough is more often encountered than that which is too soft or too flexible. Moderately soft spruce having grains running from 1/16th to 1/12th inches in width is, other things being equal, preferable. The wide grained wood is apt to be too flexible and very fine grained wood too stiff, and this for the reason that it contains more reeds. I prefer spruce that is not too tough to permit fracture across the grain, and is not anemic in appearance. Spruce should be free from pitch and should show practically no pitch stains on a recently worked surface, even when exposed to the air for some considerable time. In my opinion, very old wood, unless it be taken from the center of a fairly large beam, is not desirable for violin making; as I have heretofore stated, wood is perishable even if kept in a moderately dry atmosphere. This process of slow decay and disintegration has caused many fine old instruments to lose a portion of their power and brilliancy, in other words to become "played out." It would therefore seem that small blocks of wood suitable for use in fiddle making are best if air seasoned for about ten to fifteen years.

Sincerely yours,

EDMUND B. JENKS.