

Feb 1959

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Michelman Varnish  
by C White

The  
Violin Makers Journal

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OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF  
The Violin Makers Association of British Columbia

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# THE VIOLIN MAKERS' JOURNAL

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## EDITORIAL

### A BLIND ALLEY

A contributor to our last issue in the person of Mr. Larry Owen brought forward a very important subject, relative to the exceedingly loose adjective we makers employ in describing the tone of a perfect violin.

He indicates that we should, by some method, define in a specific manner the qualities that appear desirable in such a violin. For instance, some suggest brilliance as an attribute, while others suggest a mellow tone. Now these are two opposites. Also what might appear to one person as brilliant would irritate another by its shrillness - again, to the front row listener the brilliant toned violin would sound shrill while the person at the back of the hall would be delighted by that same tone.

This brings us to the subject of this Editorial. Many of us are working up a "Blind Alley" in our search for the ideal tone.

Every artist, whether he be a maker or player has in the back of his mind a conception of what he considers the perfect violin tone. At best this is "only one man's opinion". By manipulation of graduation, bridge, bass-bar and sound post he endeavors to produce this "ideal" tone and perhaps ruins an instrument that to another person might have sounded like the violin of his dreams.

It would appear that we are attempting to build into our violins an elusive tone whose beauty we cannot describe or define. We need an authentic definition of the qualities desirable in a good toned violin. Granted these qualities are ethereal in character but there must be some rules that can be laid down for such a tone.

Strad tone is considered by many to be the highest ideal. How unfortunate it is that most makers have never even seen a Strad, let alone played one. Yet they seek to imitate something they have never seen. Surely we are working up a "Blind Alley."!

.....

Take a real interest in the future—that's where you're going to spend most of your life.

.....

"We are a non-profit organization."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't mean to be, but we are."

.....

VIOLIN TONE: A NEW APPROACH by John Lawson, London Eng.

Like many other readers of the Journal, I have been intensely interested in the work of Dr. Saunders and his associates in this long-sought secret of good tone. I have little practical experience in fiddle making, but being of the modern generation I like to think with a mind unfettered by "traditions", one that is open to new ideas, however startling they may seem at first.

Man is now flying through the air at twice the speed of sound; he has also "jumped over the moon". These achievements would have been dismissed as fairy tales a mere 20 years ago. They began as cloudy ideals in the minds of the far-sighted and the details were worked out later, as science improved its basic equipment and knowledge. In this spirit, I offer my own thoughts on the subject of violin tone.

For a long time now, I have felt that in all the welter of information and opinion one factor seems to have been overlooked, namely, the ultimate effect of vibration on wood. It is well known that a good violin will not improve its tone if it is not played. Improved tone is sometimes (wrongly, in my opinion) attributed to "aging", presumably the effects of air, temperature changes, dust, etc. Throughout the years makers have been assiduously copying the Masters in every way, but the results have rarely, if ever, been justly considered the equal of the Greats.

I have heard it claimed that Strad's fiddles were as tone-perfect the day he finished them as they are today. This I find extremely difficult to accept. My own theory demands that I dismiss this notion as unlikely and impractical.

Members (particularly you, dear Editor) with whom I had the pleasure of discussing this tone subject when I was with you in 1957, may recall that I advocated the use of a scientific instrument - the oscilloscope - to "measure" tone waves given off by a plate. This was long before any of us had heard of the splendid experiments by Dr. Saunders. I am glad to have had at least a part of my "cranky" theory substantiated!

Dr. Saunders' work proves scientifically that every piece of wood is different - has what might be called a personality. You and I develop our personalities through inherited instincts and experience of life. Our biological and psychological processes also have a big influence on our personalities.

Like the human body, a piece of violin wood is nonetheless inert for having been cut from a living body. The Society's own motto comes to mind: "In life I was silent, now though dead, I sing" - only, the wood isn't really "dead"! It has a separate existence for, I believe, many years, before its atoms slow down to a stop and the wood "dies". But in that time, its personality is born, matured and permanently infused into the material. Every single cell and fibre has become attuned, so that when a note is struck out of the plate (that is, when the bow is drawn across the strings) they all become united in tone.

Although I cannot quote science to prove it, I feel that a wave produced by a bowed note is built up by countless micro-waves which arise in response from every fibre of the plate, to swell the final tone.

Inevitably, tone must be affected by the kind of playing and the personality of the player. I believe, if it were possible to test the theory, that a violin would have a different character when played for 40 years by one musician, that if it were played by four musicians, each of who owned it for 10 years. A fiddle is such a delicate structure that its plates may well be sensitive to the electrical discharges emanating from the human body, particularly when the musician is in a highly emotional state as during a concert performance. Good tone probably owes more to the electro-chemical process in us that is dreamed of. So

VIOLIN TONE:- A NEW APPROACH cont...

far as I know, no-one has yet thought of measuring the intensity of the electricity generated in a violin by an impassioned performer. The results might be interesting, if they were obtainable.

So far, I have dealt only with the possible flow of electricity by actual contact with the human body. But is there another kind of power which could "charge" a violin? There are many enthusiastic supporters of the theory of thought transference. Is it conceivably possible that the intensity of thought and resolution and the power of the basic life force could be willed into the instrument? I'll leave that idea there, for I have no knowledge to add anything useful. Perhaps one day, hundreds of years hence, science will again advance the facts to support the early theory.

Now that I have laid the groundwork, I can proceed to build a little higher in this theorising. There may be a logical extension to Dr. Saunders' work and I offer the following thoughts.

He and his associates have been engaged in measuring tonal values of plates in an effort to find the "correct" dimensions for each new plate. But this problem of tone might well be tackled from another angle - from inside the plate, so to speak.

Having recorded the "pattern" of a Strad tone, why can we not use this information to supply the missing link? Why should we not "build in" a Strad tone, using science and not merely woodwork?

As I stated earlier, I believe that constant playing has the effect of imprinting and indelible pattern of the fiddle's tone in the very structure of the wood. That pattern becomes clearer with the passage of (playing) time and so the tone becomes smoother and clearer. The wood, in effect, offers less and less resistance, as its molecules become "sympathetically" aligned with that particular tonal wave pattern.

I suggest that a cine-film be made of an oscilloscope record of a playing violin. There is a well known process, used in a number of machines, by which a spot of light scanning the film could according to be the film's pattern of light and dark areas. These currents, amplified greatly and recorded in the form of sounds on a tape machine, could be fed back into a new violin, through its bridge.

Subjected to many hours of this kind of electronic bombardment, it is possible that a structural pattern similar to that in the Strad fiddle might be "imprinted" in the new wood also prematurely aging it. (Scientists have already "aged" new wine by passing ultra-sonic sound waves through it. This is a new field of exploration - and it is still wide open for theories). Perhaps a straight tape recording of a Strad being put through its paces could equally serve in this "feed back" process.

The effects of years of playing might be accomplished in a few hours. (Of course, it is just possible the fiddle might fall into pieces under the strain! But, nothing ventured, nothing gained!)

My hunch tells me that when this "scientific" violin were played on, its vibrations would be inclined to align themselves with the established molecular pattern, in their frantic efforts to escape from the wood into the surrounding air, just as electricity always seeks the easiest way to earth itself. And so you would have super-imposed the "ideal" tonal pattern over that of the raw instrument.

As a closing shot, I should like to record my agreement with that great gentleman, the late "Doc" Porter, who (as we were reminded in Harold Briggs' letter in the December

VIOLIN TONE: A NEW APPROACH con...

Journal) said it was a shame we had to glue the plates to a set of stiff ribs, after all the trouble taken to tune them! Perhaps one day the world will see a violin without walls, or made in one piece bent, carved or laminated to form belly, back and walls. Once the basic problem of tone has been overcome by science, what matters the shape of the instrument?

.....

Youth is such a wonderful thing its a shame to waste it on  
the young people.

Shaw

.....

DOES A VIOLIN IMPROVE WITH AGE?

One of our contributors last month asked the startling question - "Can you state definitely by your own experience, that a violin will improve with age or by being played upon?" There are two answers and they both say NO! Will some of you people write in about this important matter?

Mr. Robert Wallace, Gilbert Arizona

I don't believe anyone could say for sure that a violin improves with age or that I would believe them. For I do not think a violin improves except that it may need a playing in period and to get adjusted maybe improve for about a year, until glue and varnish dries, and of course a man gets used to playing it. But I think a violin plays the best that it will ever play strung up in the white. I believe we hunt around for a filler to find something to keep the varnish out of the wood and do the violin tone the least damage. For I believe that both filler and varnish takes something away from the tone instead of improving it.

If I was a violinist I would make me a violin and play it in the white until the dirt damaged the tone (if it did) and then give it away and make another.

For heresthe way I see it, if you make a violin and arch and graduate it the thickness you want to make a perfect tone for your ear (or any one elses for that matter) then play it in the white. Now you fill it with something that hardens the wood so the varnish will not enter and now you have changed the onte because if the wood is harder, then it is graduated to thick for the tone you want. So you have it to ~~right~~ right? So if you are going to fill it with a wood hardening filler then you will have to graduate it thinner and guess how much higher the filler and the varnish is going to raise the tone in order for your violin to be the tone you want when finished, of such as this are what--Master violins are made of.

Of course dealers and men that own and play old violins are inclined to say and believe that violins improve with age. But dealers have a living to make. And who is it that owns any good violin, new or old, who does not think his is wonderful and improving all the time? That is the way it should be. I have never made a violin for anyone that after playing it he will forever say, "Bob, this is the best violin you ever made, and he believes it.

MR. LEE MC NEESE, Buffalo Wyoming

That question about age improving a violin tone is a real sticker. Personally I think they were better, when they left the maker or a fairly short time after, say 6 months or a year than they ever were again. My theory is that in the course of time the plates

Mr. Lee McNeese, Buffalo Wyoming cont...

went out of attunement, so that in 75 or 100 years the top had to be rebarred to bring them back in playing condition. Of course the French rempairmen who reconditioned them said the rebarring was necessary because of the raise in pitch and lengthening of the neck but did they really tell what they did?

It does not seem very difficult to make a violin with good tone, but somehow it does not last 30 to 50 years at the most and some of the Italian violins are still going strong after 2 or 3 hundred years. The only thing to do is to try every possibility, while some evidence is still in existence. It would not seem that the old makers could have used any very complicated system of tuning or varnishing. They were too busy making fiddles. Take Strad, a man with 11 children and many apprentices to teach. He probably did all his own selling. He used many patterns in his lifetime yet seemed to get outstanding tone with all of them. I cannot believe he was continually tearing them apart and regruating.

Regarding his varnish. He probably put the filler in the back with ribs linings and end blocks, and the finished top, dried then carefully in the sun, then put a very thin coat of one sort of varnish that the finish varnish could not penetrate. It might have been juniper, lac, propolis or something of that nature. He then checked the tuning of the plates carefully and glued it together. Then took the sealer coat down to on the finish varnish. He did not want any of the oil varnish to get into the plate and ribs. We do know that the filler was yellow to almost orange, as described by Ole Bull and other writers.

Finally I never could understand why all the modern writers completely ignore the pass effect of Ribs, backs and linings on the final tone of the violin. If it has no influence why did one of the old builders have rib, back and lining so heavy or so light and why did some have thin plates and some thick and even humpy? It looks like they got it to ring a certain pitch and then felt they had done all possible to insure a good tone. Oh well, as Mr. Sangster says, "they must have done something" -- But what?

.....

On Broadway as a hep character started to cross the street, he pulled himself back quickly as he almost collided with a fast moving foreign sports car. "Better watch your step, fell!" he shouted. "You almost ran under me."

.....

#### WORDS OF PRAISE FOR ONE OF OUR SUBSCRIBERS

The following is a reprint from ..... Should one congratulate a person for reaching the age of retirement? I don't know, but I feel sure all our readers hope that our friend Stephen enjoys many, many years of retired life in which to carry on his real love -- violin making. Editor.

#### Stradivarius in the Baggage Room

The Conversation was wrong for the setting. And so was the dress of the man who sat across the desk from me in the baggage and mail room of the St. Paul Union depot. He spoke of Paganini and the brilliance of a Guarnerius violin.

He had just finished a day's work of hauling mail pouches through those inner depths of the depot and his overalls were dust-streaked. It was late in the afternoon and also late in the career of Stephen Kujawa. At least the career he cut out for himself as a means of making a living.

WORD OF PRAISE FOR ONE OF OUR SUBSCRIBERS cont..

But not his second career, a hobby really--only because Stephen Kujawa is a realist. And a realist, in his opinion, knows that few artists, whether they paint or make violins, ever make a good living with that alone.

So for 38 years Stephen, tall, lean, with craftsman's hands, has hauled the mail pouches and loaded and unloaded the mail cars that brought the letters and packages to a city

And sometimes when they sat in the lunchroom, spreading the sandwiches on the benches, his fellow workers heard a little about Stephen Kujawa, the violin maker.

Stephen retired last week from the mail and baggage room. And now his secret is out.

For much longer than he hauled mail, Stephen has been one of the Twin Cities few violin makers, a member of a fraternity that was never more than two handfuls and constantly dwindling.

Kujawa's "Old Italian Cremona Varnish"--yellow to deep brown in color--has been used to finish violins throughout the world.

Among the Professional Violin Makers, his compatriots were his and my late friend Charley Herbrig, and his successor, Julius Lothen, on the second floor back at Fifth and Cedar. And he knows Lazaraus, the collector of bows and violin repairman on Fifth street. He knew Rubinoff--and his violin. And others now dead.

Stephen has made perhaps 100 violins since he was a youth of 18. He has sold about 50 "for the standard price of \$250 for a good violin."

But not since 1945 has he been willing to sell a violin "and my violins since 1945 have been my best," he says. "There are some who say the varnish is the most important....I don't believe it....The graduations of the wood--these are important, I feel....I think I should like to make a violin more like Joseph Guarnerius than Stradivarius....one that has penetration and brilliance....Paganini played one....called it The Cannon....A violin these days should be able to fill a concert hall with tone."

Our conversation was frequently interrupted by the rumbling of trains passing above us. This was another tone in Stephen Kujawa's life.

"I have no plans now to sell any violins, but I shall keep making them in my shop at home," he says. "Maybe some day I will sell 10 or 15 at a time."

"Let me tell you why I did not make violins for a living. A few years ago our little club honored one violin maker of 93. I saw him that night, his coat threadbare, barely ahead of poverty....Here at the depot I have earned a good living. ...I began carrying mail pouches in the old station....The work has spoiled my hands for playing the violin, but not making them."

"Now, with the security I have earned, I can retire and enjoy my other work."

Did Stephen have any vivid memories as a mail hauler? "Yes, once a carload of bees tumbled over. I took out the bees when nobody else dared try it. And after I got them all repacked, I looked for approval from my boss. All he said was, "Why did you pack them upside down?"

Stephen Kujawa should never have any difficulty remembering the year he retired, incidently. He lives at 1958 E. Hawthorne, St. Paul, Minn.

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NEWS FROM NORWAY

So! we thought we had a large important association here in British Columbia. Well lets look at Norway and Sweden! Norway with an association of 49 members and Sweden with 500!! We are indeed pleased to make their acquaintance and greetings from all the Continent are extended to our Scandanavian friends -- Scoll! (Editor)

Dear Mr. White:

I beg you to receive my best thanks for your letter of November 16th, enclosed three copies of your monthly magazine "The violin Makers' Journal".

We have an association like yours here in Norway, with the somewhat pretentious name "Cremona". The 49 members, mostly active violin builders, are living in all parts of the country, some of them are fairly good builders.

In Sweden you know, the interest for violin building is of quite high standing, and the swedish violin builders association (Sveriges Fiolbyggarefrbund) count more than 500 members. The association publish a magazine "Slyd Och Ton" (Editor, J.A. Carl, Upplandsgatan 65, Stockholm Va.) also sent to the members of "Cremona", which from time to time supply the magazine with articles.

Members of our association and myself have with great interest read your magazine and should like to subscribe to it.

Your magazine certainly is a good forum for the discussion of the problems, and I will ask the members of "Cremona" to participate in the discussion f.i. of the bass-bar, the varnishing and other details.

I have corresponded a little with Dr. F.A. Saunders, who answered my questions with amiable readiness, and sent me some reprints of his articles in different scientific journals, which I have studied with great interest. His investigation of the tone-quality of old and new violins are certainly remarkable.

I am very thankful to be called your friend Mr. White and send to you the best greetings from the members of our group and myself.

Arne Godal, Oslo Norway

.....

We should exchange problems. Everyone knows how to solve the other fellow's...

.....

LARRY OWEN LEADS WITH "A RIGHT"

Thanks for your prompt reply to my recent letter. Your comments on many violin makers never having heard a Strad is interesting, but to me seems rather unimportant. Due to the tremendous prestige of Strad violins (and a few others), many people who are interested come to believe that these relatively few makers productions are pretty much "laws unto themselves". People expect them to have accoustical properties that defy the usual laws, ie. as to carrying power. Few take seriously the scientific evaluations of the "master violins", or the many "blindfold" contests that have been held over the years in many countries, or the obvious fact that most of the old violins have undergone many operations both minor and major in the hands of the many repairmen who have handled them. All available objective evidence indicates that if there be a measure of superiority between old master violins and new ones,

LARRY OWEN LEADS WITH "A RIGHT" cont..

that superiority is so small as to be unmeasurable in the laboratory and by most human ears (when they don't know what is being played).

All of which leads me to the conviction that we can work using our own aesthetic judgements as guide to what to seek. (incidentally I have played about 15 Strads, 2 Guarnerius etc. and in several cases have actually found them poor!) We don't need to hear Melba or other famous singers of old to know that some fine young singer has a beautiful voice. Do you feel that you must have some "authority" to tell a beautiful voice when you hear it? If you are interested in, and have been seriously considering color (in painting) for years, does someone else conclude for you which is the most beautiful shade of red or blue? If one has listened to violins critically for years and can discriminate differences (in other words is sensitive to fine differences), he should be making his own value judgements. Too many people are trying to find some "indiscribable something" of the Strads, or pick a poor Strad as a standard. A well known professional violin maker of this area (now dead for some years) was seeking the SSSSSis of a Strad. He heard the difference as a SSSSSis, but who wants a SSSSSis?!

Am still interested in others experiences on plate tuning. It is becoming my opinion that Dr. Saunders methods of setting plates into vibration yield different pitches than tapping does. A minor sixth is the closest I have found a back and top in about twenty instruments I have been experimenting with.

Larry Owens  
535 Oakridge Dr., Redwood City, Calif.

.....

If you have a crack or split you wish to repair, be sure and use a glue that won't show afterwards, then let us know the name of the glue.

.....

HOW TO REMOVE A VIOLIN TOP by "Tex" Wallace

When taking off a top for repairs, get it loose all around except for the front block. Now that's the hard part of the whole operation. If it doesn't come loose fairly easily what you need for a neat job is an old thin long bladed knife. Your wife's thin bread knife is just right. Now pull the top away from the ribs at the back end so you can slip the thin bladed knife through so it is between the top and ribs all the way across the violin. Now place the violin neck down between your knees. Slide the knife edge down until it rests just where the top is glued to the block. Take one end of the knife in each hand and make several sawing motions to be sure the knife starts between the top and back. It's probably too tight for you to get it loose with just the sawing motions, besides by now you have cut one or more fingers on the hand that had hold of the blade end of the knife and ready to try my super-duper method anyway.

Now hold everything just as it is. Violin between knees, left hand on the handle of the knife and reach with right hand and get or have you wife come to the shop, you can call her fairly easy. That is, if she is not in the shower with the TV going loud enough for her to hear it three rooms away. And if the kids are whooping it up you can still call her if you holler as loud as I can. But I don't give a darn how loud I holler, and if she don't hear me, why then I ask the policeman to hand me the hammer when he comes to see what's the matter.

But if you are a little timid and she don't hear you, just sit and wait until she is finished. While waiting you can smoke and keep sawing the knife up and down every once in a while, using the fingers on the right hand that have not been cut.

HOW TO REMOVE A VIOLIN TOP cont..

When you have hollered until your wife hears you (K never give up) get her to hand you about a three-pound shop hammer, which she finds behind you where you could have reached it, but couldn't see it. Now take the hammer in the right hand (watch cut fingers) on the side of the violin that the blade is sticking through. Now be careful -- as you are probably both angry and nervous having to holler at your wife so long and loud, and her being so nasty when she found the hammer right behind you. So don't hit the knife too hard. Just a short sharp blow as they do in the western on TV when they tap a man on the head with a gun-- So to continue, hold everything real tight and hit the end of the knife. Wow! there it is, top off, just like that -- now wasn't that easy? Fooled you, huh?

Now if the top is still together all in one piece, you have been lucky as a lot of them break up that way. If so, all you have to do is see Bob Wallace and for \$5.00 he will sell you a much better top than was on it to start and you jump on it like a bit'en saw and in two days time have a brand new top on your violin. With a little varnish from Mr. E.H. Sangster of Dallas, Texas (TEXAS, that word I dearly love) you can match the back in color in about six weeks.

Now you probably wanted the neck out anyway so there you are. Probably part of the old front block came out with it. The rest of the block won't be hard to clean out of the violin as when you hit it a little too hard you remember you were squeezing it hard with your knees? That's what busted the front block loose from your back, breaking one about three inches from the block. So get a real thin strip, same width as the rib and fix the broken piece up snug and glue the strip on the inside. Good as new, almost. Now glue the ribs on the back. You will get the neck opening a little off, but that's easy to fix. Just take a rasp and work on the heel of the neck until it fits. If it is too small, a little 1/4 inch plastic wood fixes that. Now take a hot wet cloth and soak loose the button from the heel of the neck that you broke off the back when you hit too hard.

Now I have a wonderful method for renewing buttons on the backs, but it is rather a long and drawn out process and I'll explain it in another article, if I am ever asked to write another one.

Now for a job like that I don't feel bad at all when I charge a man \$5.00 for it. For I have done a good job after quite a bit of bother and chances are I have improved his violin, even if the neck is a little crooked. I fix that by just moving the bridge over a fourth inch or so.

Darned if I know what I'm going to do if that Don White (up Vancouver way) keeps telling those big windies on us Texas boys.

.....

Here's what one grammar school boy handed in for his composition on cats:

"Cat's that's meant for little boys to maul and tease is called Maultease cats. Some gats if rekernized by how their purr is and these is Pursian cats. Cats what has bad tempers is named Angora cats. And cats with deep feeling is called Felines. I don't like cats."

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When a habit begins to cost money its called a hobby.....

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LETTER FROM MR. ALFRED SLOTNICK:

The new issue of the bulletin arrived yesterday with many fine and provocative articles. I was particularly intrigued about the mention of Justin Gilbert and the apparent lack of information about him. Oddly enough I was thinking of writing to ask information about him. Recently I purchased a batch of old issues of the "Strad" and also "Violins and Violinists". It seems Gilbert wrote a quite controversial book which he advertised for sale for \$20.00 in the January 1942 issue of V & V (the earliest in my possession). Appears an ad of Gilberts as follows:-

CREMONA VIOLIN TECHNIQUE

The fourth year of this book is completed, and scores of violin makers have learned the old masters' art by which fronts that are 5 and 6/64th" under the bridge yield solidity and carrying-power unsurpassed, beauty of tone unsurpassed, and response unequalled by heavier violins. Proponents of the heavy violin have lost out. Violin making is scientific. Get the book, \$20.00 from - Justin Gilbert, Victoria, B.C. Testimonials on request.

As late as 1948 Wm. Lewis and Son of Chicago were advertising the book as follows; CREMONA VIOLIN TECHNIQUE, by Justin Gilbert. A book written after a lifetime of violin making and serious study of the principles and methods of construction followed by the Cremona Masters. Price \$20.00

Similar ads were to be found in the Strad. During this time, Gilbert had to take up his pen to defend himself from numerous detractors who wrote letters to the editor of both the Strad and V & V. Letters appear in the issues of January and May 1944, and October and November 1945 V & V. I may add that they were quite informative and interesting. Sorry I don't have his book (I wasn't interested at the time of availability, and I haven't come across any since my interest began about five years ago). However I have sought out and acquired almost every other book on the subject that is or was in print, and if you hear of one for sale please let me know. His main thesis, as I gather from the arguments had to do with bellies thinner under the bridge than at the edge. If you think you can use the letters I'll be glad to type them up for you.

While speaking of letters to the editor, mention should be made of several letters written by W. Jacklin to the Strad. He proved an interesting writer and I looked for some of his writing in your Journal. Except for the brief note some months ago, I found nothing from him. In one of his letters he denounced Heron-Allen (I think every writer finds it fashionable to take a pot shot at H-A) but unfairly. Generally, the criticism levelled at H-A is fully answered by H-A in a part of the book which was left unread by the critic.

Alfred Slotnick, 2163 - 77th Street  
Brooklyn 14, New York.

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MOSTLY ABOUT FIDDLES by Joseph V. Reid

About bass-bars I fit one half (approximately) first then the other half. So that when sprung down at each end a distance of at least 3/16" it fits perfectly all over. To fit one right and glue in place takes over 2 hours. The high point I make directly across from center line of the sound post - not opposite centre of bridge. The angle is very important.

I believe that we modern makers are working possibly in a wrong direction. I believe we are trying to get too much from a new instrument in too short a time. Everyone seems to spend a lot of time trying to discover the methods and secrets of the ancients. I don't think we will ever know for certain what they did. It would make better sense to create

MOSTLY ABOUT FIDDLES cont..

our own school and spend our efforts and time more at developing this modern school to its highest degree of perfection. We have many more advantages and sources of knowledge than the old masters and acting in unison we can certainly develop our techniques and methods in a steady orderly manner. I feel that everyone should keep a strict record of all their productions and endeavor to determine the reasons for one being better or inferior to the other instruments. Also feel that we should in some manner be compiling a list of all modern practising violin makers throughout states, British Isles and Europe. Certainly much information could be secured from classified directories in the cities in any country. If some of these makers could be persuaded to subscribe to your journal I'm sure they could render valued aid to all the members.

I have had some fine letters from Max Moller -- German violin maker. Most of these men will gladly pass on requested information to the enquirer.

I learned a great deal from Mr. Gilbert's book but am not in a position to judge upon the validity of his claims and methods mentioned therein. His estate was offering his own violins for sale at \$250.00 shortly after his death. Apparently he was an embittered man as his book shows he never succeeded in getting information from owners of Strads etc. or from collectors or connoisseurs of the violin. He was endeavoring by modern methods and means to quickly arrive at a tone comparable to the Italian School. I imagine if one could play on one of his violins made by this method you could certainly determine if he had succeeded or failed. Wurlitzer from New York intimated that he was on the wrong track.

The journal is indeed fortunate to have such experts as Sangster, Weaver, Kovac -- supplying knowledge based on experience -- We cannot get too many articles such as you have been printing. They all provide some information that can be digested to our betterment.

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Ah, to build, to build! That is the noblest of all the arts.

- Longfellow

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MORE ABOUT MICHELMAN VARNISH by Carmen White

Mr. Michelman is a chemist -- A Harvard graduate in Chemistry. He has proved by chemical analysis that the old Italian varnishes contain Iron, Aluminum and silicates -- none of which can possibly be produced in any gum in oil varnish or by boiling linseed oil and resin together as Mr. Sangster does. Note, this is not WHAT I THINK, or what I IMAGINE to be true--or what I would like to see-- it is the result of the most modern scientific analysis-- which to me, takes it out of the picture of I THINK, or I IMAGINE type of thing.

Michelman's colors are chemically produced by a process that dates back to ancient Egypt--the mummies were wrapped in cloth dyed by the simple mordant dyeing process--and all you do is to dye resin in a water solution with a simple dye (madder root was used by the Italians today we use Alizarin, the same chemical substance as madder root, and today we use purified chemicals so we can control the process instead of using lye water made from ashes, as the old masters did, as your own mother and grandmothers used in making lye soap).

The process is simple--you dissolve resin in lye-water, then, you add alizarin, or madder root extract, which will turn the solution red, and dye every particle of the dissolved resin--then you add Alum solution to it and this settles out the colored resin and hardens it by adding aluminum to it--dry this and dissolve in turpentine, add boiled linseed oil, apply to the fiddle! It jells in six hours--cannot be bottled and sold commercially--old masters could not control the process, and NO TWO BATCHES WERE ALIKE--nor are any two Strads alike in

MORE ABOUT MICHELMAN'S VARNISH cont..

color and varnish! I have had it beside of the best old Italian varnish--you simply cannot tell the difference! I challenge anyone to meet this test--any time any where in the world! I am willing to meet all comers, I will stake my money on it!

If you want to preserve the tone you get "in the white", just treat your wood with a solution of boiled linseed oil, turpentine, and plain resin or mastic, applied to both sides of the plates (after finished) apply hot, wipe off surplus after five minutes, place in the sun for two or three days, finish with fine steel wool and raw linseed oil, then, apply Michelman varnish! Your tone will be preserved! For 200 years or more. No one can tell after six months that your wood has been treated! But the tone will tell you plenty. You do not have to play in such a fiddle--I have one completed and strung up on October 6th, 1958 - copy of Guarnerius del Jesu--three weeks ago, we had it in the same living room with a genuine Petrus Guarnerius of Mantua, a fine specimen, and its proud owner thought it could not be bettered. He had never seen me before, nor had he seen any of my violins--so he could not have been prejudiced. He played my new fiddle, and anyone with two ears could have heard that it was better than his Petrus Guarnerius and the violinist himself admitted it! But he did not offer to buy my new fiddle. We may as well tell the whole story--you can make a fine fiddle, but you can't sell it. The violinist said: "Definitely Old Italian in tone--how do you do it, etc"--I believe he was sincere, as he had no reason to be fooling me, financial or otherwise. This is not the first experience of this type I have had with this varnish and treatment--and I am sure you have had similar experiences with your own violins.

So, you see, it is "art of art's sake"--certainly, no financial reward awaits anyone who duplicates the old master violins in tone and appearance. My theory is that the old masters finished their violins as Mr. Ellersieck says they did--but I think they took them apart then and got the weights of their tops and backs to correspond with the weights of one or more well known good violins--this would have required no special equipment or any knowledge of mathematics or physics. It is just what I would have done--or what you would have done. There is no mystery about it. I challenge you to get yourself a fine set of chemist's scales and to use them for three months--weighing all tops and backs before you glue them up into a fiddle--keep a record of same--you will find certain weights will give you what you want--and you will learn to keep within range of those weights--which will account for different graduations of Strads--what else will do so?

It seems to me that we use everything else except our plain common sense and intelligence in attempting to duplicate the old fiddles. Our greatest errors consist of using a gum-in-oil or a spirit varnish, or using raw wood untreated, and of slavishly using those calipers! Did you know that any modern German maker, such as Roth, Morelli, Meinel, etc. is much more accurate with those calipers and graduations than Stradivarius or Guadagnini were? True! But the German sounds toneless! Why? Just re-read the above and you can figure it out for yourself--nothing mysterious about it! You can do it with any good wood!

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CHIPS FROM THE CHISEL by John Lawson

Your piece about Dragon Skin reminded me that the other week I got a news item in at the Cabinet Maker office from the London agents of the Sil Corporation or 5033 Elston Ave., Chicago 30, Ill. It concerned a most important development in sanding and I made it the lead story in our supplies feature. Here are the details and I strongly urge you to send for one of these tools, as I believe they will outlast Dragon skin (which I have never seen).

The stuff is called "Perma-Grit". It is basically steel sheets on to which tungsten-carbide grit has been copper brazed (by an exclusive process) to give a "sand" paper



CHIPS FROM THE CHISEL cont..

which, in ordinary home use, will last a life-time. The grit is permanently bonded to its steel backing and is spaced so as to lessen the "loading". But even when the sheet becomes loaded with gummy materials or paint, it can be cleaned with any solvent and restored to its original state. The grit is available in several grades and is terrifically sharp. The London agents sent me a sample, in the form of a sanding block, with a sheet wrapped around it. When I sanded a piece of wood I thought I had had the sharpest of files on it. It makes a wonderful shaping tool. The sheets are supplied separately also. There is a big range of tools using this principle. They even have a wheel which fits on to a circular saw bench and actually replaces the saw. The grit is so sharp and strong that it cuts, ploughs, grooves, etc. as well as any toothed saw. Having no teeth, the wheel cannot "throw" the wood, which makes for greater safety. And it sands as it cuts! The firm makes abrasive sleeves and rods as well as flat and half-round files from the stuff. Drop them a line and get them to send you all the literature. (Editors note: "Perma-Grit is available through the local agents for Skill Tools)

FINGER BOARDS - When buying commercially made finger boards, it has been my experience that all of them need a certain amount of squaring up, particularly on the bottom face side. To avoid damage to the ebony when in the vice during planing operations, it is safer and more satisfactory to make a "cradle" for the fingerboard. Any piece of soft wood will do. Scoop out the top face until the rounded face of the finger board fits snugly for almost its complete depth. When the cradle is gripped in the vice, the finger board can be planed (or scraped) with perfect ease, and the board will not move or rock in the slightest. Incidentally, when testing for overall true-ness, I sprinkle talcum powder over the wood and carefully draw a steel straight-edge across the face. If all the powder is drawn off equally, I know the wood is true. I repeat this operation for vertical and horizontal readings.

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TEXAS MULE?

A new farm hand from the city was told to harness a mule one winter morning in the early hours. In the dark he tackled a cow instead of the mule. The farmer shouted from the house, "Say what's keeping you so long?"

"I can't get the collar over the mule's head," shouted the farm hand. "Both his ears are frozen stiff".

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WOOLF NOTES BY CHIBLABOS:

Another Advance - This issue marks another step forward for the "Journal" - the first number published with our own mimeograph machine. You will note we have changed the print color. We believe this will prove more attractive. Gradually we will insert special headings for our different departments and many different forms of illustrations and diagrams.

We trust this investment will prove a wise venture. It does indicate that the officers and members of The Violin Makers' Association of B.C. have confidence in our magazine. We hope that this feeling extends to all our subscribers for their assistance both with materials to print and financial support by means of their subscriptions is what really keeps the Journal in circulation. It is your paper, if you like it, keep it alive! Do you know another lover of violins? Then show him the Journal and ask him to subscribe. Thanks.

Renewal of Subscriptions: Some readers have been writing in asking when their subscription expires. You will receive a notice enclosed with the Journal one month before expiration. For instance if your subscription expires on March 1st you will receive a notice with this issue (February). We ask you to renew promptly so that you will not miss a number. Thanks.



Interesting Letter From England - Mr. Gilson Heyworth has handed me a letter from Mr. Bert Smith of Coniston, Lancashire, England. which gives some viewpoints of conditions in that country. Bert says that good, well seasoned wood is getting very scarce. Plenty for second rate fiddles but first class stuff is at a premium.

Competition among violin makers is also keen. "In order to sell your violins", says Mr. Smith, "not only must the instrument be of exceptional fine tone, but the workmanship must be of a very high standing. Otherwise the artists won't look at them".

Bert Smith's violins and viola's are found all over the British Isles and other countries.

Justin Gilbert - This has been rather a hectic month with little time for writing so the promised article on the Late Mr. Gilbert is yet to materialize. Gimme time!

Michelman's Varnish - I have not yet received, from Wm. Lewis and Son, the book on Michelman's varnish so cannot give the formula. I hope this will be forth coming for next month.

Corrections - What you know - no mistakes this month - at least they were very minor ones!

Our Advertisers - We in Vancouver are very lucky in having three very up-to-date music stores to supply our needs. Let me name them in case you don't read our ads. But I know you do.

Modern Music Store, Western Music Co., and Ward's (Ward's really have two stores in Vancouver). All three enjoy an excellent business and while they are in close competition with one another they have this in common - the desire to further the advance of good music. In this they are united and its "good business". Let's support them.

March Meeting - The meeting of the Violin Makers' Association of B.C. which will be held March 14th is our annual meeting. Officers for the ensuing year will be elected. This is an important occasion so - "get your thinking caps on" - and take this matter seriously.

John Lawson's Article:- We were very happy to receive John's article and hope he will submit more in the future. I cannot say I agree with all he suggests but much of it I will "go along with", and I feel the whole theory is good food for thought. Lets have some more John!

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#### MR. MICHELMAN'S VARNISH:

Pending the publishing of full details of Mr. Joseph Michelman's method and formula- We print the following letter from Mr. Michelman which indicates the interest he exhibits towards our association and Journal. (Editor)

Dear Mr. White:

I want to acknowledge with thanks the receipt of your letter of the 15th and the three copies of your Journal. All have been read with interest. May I add my congratulations to the many you have received on your splendid efforts to promote a most engrossing pursuit - violin making?

The laboratory can aid in revealing the secrets and in solving the problems that have confronted violin making for years and year. Violin making is an art - but Science can contribute greatly - if applied properly and sensibly.

By way of introduction, I am a chemist (for the past 35 years) and not a violin maker. I have played the violin for more than 50 years and still enjoy playing in string quartets. The research work on the old Italian violin varnish started as a hobby 25 years ago - but the hobby ran away from me with me holding on tightly - a not unusual occurrence. I have given the results of my researches freely and fully to the world and I have not commercialized on my work. I do not sell violins, in fact, I still have all the violins that I varnished in my possession for observation of aging characteristics. I do not make or sell varnishes although I occasionally supply raw materials to deserving workers, at cost. The entire investigation has been financed by Mrs. Michelman and myself. Now that we are better acquainted, I shall look forward to hearing from you again.

Joseph Michelman, 6316 Wiehe Rd  
Cincinnati 13, Ohio

Dear Sir,

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 10th inst.

and in reply to inform you that the same has been forwarded to the proper authorities.

I am, Sir, very respectfully,  
Your obedient servant,  
J. H. [Name]

I am, Sir, very respectfully,  
Your obedient servant,  
J. H. [Name]

I am, Sir, very respectfully,  
Your obedient servant,  
J. H. [Name]

I am, Sir, very respectfully,  
Your obedient servant,  
J. H. [Name]

I am, Sir, very respectfully,  
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