

## **Market Value vs. Intrinsic Value of Stringed Instruments**

By Reginald Williams

As with so many things offered for sale in this fickle world, the "value" of a violin or bow can be a very elusive thing. I would like to offer this introduction to the interesting dichotomy between market value and intrinsic value.

Simply put, the market of a violin is what an instrument will normally sell for in the open market. Intrinsic value, in contrast, may be much greater or less than market value, deriving directly from the quality of the instrument. Therefore, market price is often at odds with what any one person may feel about what he or she would be willing to pay for the same violin based on its intrinsic qualities.

It may be appropriate to compare the situation with the world of art, where there are paintings created by nothing more than throwing paint from a can onto the canvas. When the result appears on the market, an art collector might pay a price of one million dollars because the artist is "hot" or well established. Another person wouldn't pay the price of the materials to own the same painting. Nonetheless, the fair market price for that painting can be said to be one million dollars. Conversely, a painting done by an unknown artist may be of great beauty (great intrinsic value) and yet have a very low market price.

With respect to violins, the same factors apply. There are poor examples of violins by great masters which bring very high prices because of the name, and conversely, there are splendid instruments by relatively obscure makers available for relatively modest sums.

This article will provide some basic information on the three best-known "schools" of violinmaking, the Italian, the French, and the German, as well as other schools, and show how they fit into an overall perspective. I will also discuss how commercial, shop-made, and master-made instruments differ, and how age and condition come to bear on both market and intrinsic value.

### ***Italian, French, and German Schools***

To start, let it be said that without question, many of the finest examples of the high art of lutherie (violinmaking in lay terms) emanate from Italy. This is commonly held to be true for instruments made in the 17th through the 20th centuries. The unfailingly original designs of Stradivari, Guarneri, and Amati (the master teacher of both of the former, as well as of many other greats) remain, in the opinion of most connoisseurs, including myself, the height of perfection.

What many people do not realize is that Italy's old masters and their followers designed each individual instrument with slight but significant variations in the arching, the thickness of the top, back, and ribs, the overall dimensions, and the placement of f-holes. In spite of these variations, the consistency of luthiers' original, completely individual workmanship (as opposed to large assembly-line or shop-type production operations) has allowed the Italians to maintain their position of preeminence both in the minds of experts and in the marketplace.

The French school of lutherie is generally held next in line in order of importance. During the 17th and 18th centuries the work of the French was usually both highly original and individual. But in the 19th century, there emerged a large number of instrument makers who copied the designs of the Italian masters. J. B. Vuillaume is the most famous copyist of Stradivari's and Guarneri's work. Other such copyists include Lupot, the Gand family, the Bernadels, and the brothers Sylvestre.

These makers and their followers contributed to the continuing reputation of the French school for attention to detail and perfectionism in making. Here, from the standpoint of workmanship, the major criticism has often been that in the interest of perfection, the art of lutherie has sometimes been lost. From the standpoint of sound, French instruments have often been accused (in some cases unfairly, to be sure) of being too cold or too nasal. While there certainly have been a large number of master luthiers of considerable ability in France, another factor holding back the value of French instruments has been the production of a tremendous number of factory-made instruments in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The German school is in turn often referred to in disparaging terms for the same reason: the immense volume of factory-made and otherwise commercially mass-produced instruments from shops in Mittenwald, Markneukirchen, Klingenthal and elsewhere throughout Germany. This has caused the market value of the vast majority of German instruments to be held down, in spite of the fact that at one time Jacobus Stainer of Absalm, Germany, was more famous than even Stradivari!

Having now established the rationale for the relative ranking of instruments in the marketplace as Italian first, French next, and German following, the next article will address other key schools of lutherie. The fourth installment of the series will explain how, within this overall context, some outstanding opportunities exist in each of these schools for the purchase of relatively price-conservative instruments of high intrinsic value.

### ***Bohemian, English, and American schools***

The lutherie of Bohemia, encompassing most of the region of south-central Europe, includes makers from Austria, Hungary, Czech and Slovak lands, and easternmost Germany. The school is distinguished by its superior access to Italy and materials used by Italian makers in the 18th and 19th centuries. It also was influenced, however by its proximity to German lutherie, meaning that there are many commercially produced violins in addition to the master-made instruments. The strong Italian influence in particular resulted in many older Bohemian instruments being confused with or substituted for the work of Italian masters. There are many examples of Bohemian instruments passed along as deceptions, the makers' labels having been replaced and documentation created or forged to indicate that they were products of the old Italian masters, including Stradivari.

Similarity with fine Italian instruments included not only the materials and workmanship apparent to the casual observer, but also encompassed details less evident to the casual observer, and often confusing even to far more knowledgeable insiders. For example, linings and blocks inside these instruments were made from red or black willow rather than the spruce commonly used in instruments from this region. Purflings were made from materials other than maple, such

as fruit woods or whalebone. Even the varnishes and ground materials (the first color layer applied to the instrument beneath the varnish, similar to stain) successfully imitated the work of Italian masters.

Unfortunately, in many, if not most cases, today the finest work of the Bohemians has been obscured by removing and falsifying labels. The inferior examples of more commercial work are more likely to have survived with their original credentials (because they would confuse only the novice). The result is that the values of the Bohemian school have been held down, for the most part, to the level of the better known but lesser examples of their work.

The English school has long been overlooked and undervalued, despite the fact that London is the home of the world's single most influential family of connoisseurs and dealers in rare instruments, that of W. E. Hill and Sons. England's reputation is now beginning to improve, however, due to the increased awareness of the fact that virtually all English instruments are entirely handmade, and almost always by one, or not more than two, artists. There has been no significant English operation to mass produce instruments. While the designs do not tend to be as original as those of the Italian and American schools, they tend to be quite good.

During the 19th century, there emerged some world-renowned copyists whose instruments were patterned after the Italian masters. John Lott, John Edward Betts, Richard Tobin, Jacob Fendt, and the Voller brothers (German names notwithstanding) were all born, bred and trained in England. Instruments from these makers, especially John Lott and the Voller brothers, are known to sell at auction for \$20,000 to \$40,000, and after careful restoration and preparation, may be sold in showrooms for \$50,000 to \$65,000. The work of these copyists was so accurate that some instruments of the Voller brothers are still masquerading as old Italians!

A brief note about copies and forgeries: copyists' instruments are "patterned after" or "in the style of" an older maker or instrument. Close scrutiny of most copies will reveal some of the maker's unique characteristics that are deliberate, artistic variations from the pattern. Some copyists are able to make instruments that intentionally leave no trace of any deviation from the pattern. Such instruments should bear the label of the maker, date of production, and indicate on the label which instrument and/or maker is imitated. The difference between a copy and a forgery is the intent of the presentation. Many fine copies have had the actual makers' labels removed or changed to deceive the unwary buyer. Of course, such activity over the centuries has created many a dilemma for everyone associated with violins, players, and honest dealers alike.

The American school of lutherie includes more self-taught makers than any other, and there are a large number of them. Our native lutherie has only recently come into its own, resulting in the publication of a new book on the subject (*The Violin Makers of the United States*, Thomas James Wendberg, 1986, Mt. Hood Pub. Co., Mt. Hood, Oregon). Unlabelled instruments of the American school often confound experts with respect to identification of violins made in the 20th century. The originality and artistry of contemporary American makers rivals that of the earlier 20th-century Italians: until recently, there were few "slavish" copies of older violins, and relatively little "antiquing" of new instruments. It is interesting to note further that instruments of makers living in the United States currently command the highest prices at auction and in the showroom of any contemporary instruments.

In this series of articles, the Bohemian, English and American schools have deliberately been considered as a group for two reasons. On one hand, they are the least famous and least widely sought after. The corollary to this is the fact that the best examples of each are therefore the most likely to have a relatively high intrinsic value in comparison to a relatively low market value (with certain notable exceptions).

### *Summary*

Here I will attempt to illustrate how these different schools of lutherie relate to each other and to violinmaking as a whole in the marketplace.

Bearing in mind that when any maker, city, nation or school has become famous for its violins, some monetary premium will be attached to that "name." It goes without saying that in buying a violin without a name attributed to it, one should be paying only for the intrinsic qualities of the instrument.

Does this mean that buying a violin with an unknown name is the best way to buy? Not necessarily. This is because a truly great violin is an artistic creation, unique unto itself and to its maker. It is thus usually identifiable. Therefore, most masterpieces, even without labels, brands or other markings, come onto the market identified. Of course, those few which aren't identified may represent great investment opportunities in the higher price ranges. In the lower price ranges, an unidentified violin often represents the most music and beauty for the money.

Applying similar logic, it follows that when and if one can find good or great works of lesser-known masters, one should pay for the intrinsic qualities of the instrument itself rather than the name of the maker. In my own buying, I try to buy the finest examples available of any given maker's work. If I buy a lesser example of a given maker's work at a so-called "discount," I have actually still paid a premium price for the name. I end up with an instrument of inferior intrinsic value. I may pay more for the best of a lesser-known maker's work, but that may still be less than the cost of an inferior example of a better known maker's work. In many cases, the finest examples of lesser known masters have greater intrinsic value than lesser examples of a better known maker's work.

For example, prices for Stradivari's violins range from about \$500,000 to over \$5 million! There are few, if any, other violins that equal Stradivari's finest or that have ever achieved such prices. This is one premium price for a name that can't be avoided if one is to acquire the best examples of Stradivari's work. Or, instead of paying \$500,000 for a lesser Strad, one could use the same half-million dollars to purchase a true masterpiece: a violin in a spectacular state of preservation by one of Stradivari's contemporaries, Domenico Montagnana. Such an instrument would almost certainly possess far greater intrinsic value than a comparably priced Stradivari, particularly because the lower-priced Strads usually reflect the poor condition and preservation of those instruments.

Working with these principles in mind, we can now examine a ranking of the various schools of lutherie in the market today. A discussion about prices and intrinsic values within this ranking will follow. The national schools are usually ranked thus:

- Italy
- France
- England, Denmark, Austria and Switzerland
- Czechoslovakia
- Germany
- United States
- Other countries

There are examples of makers from all these countries bringing fairly-assessed prices higher than examples of makers from Italy, especially when we limit the discussion to makers of the 20th century. One example I learned of recently is that of Marco Dobretsovitch, a lesser-known maker of the early 20th century. Dobretsovitch was of Russian descent, who lived and worked in Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt. His violins are being sold today at \$15,000 to \$20,000. They have been compared by many artists as equal if not superior to those of the greatest modern Italians which range in price upwards from \$50,000.

In the lower price ranges, too, the finest examples of the work of the American, German, Czech, Slovak, and other makers from relatively undervalued countries continue to represent excellent opportunities. Within the context of buying instruments of makers with greater name recognition, there are still many opportunities, as long as one holds to the principle of buying the very best specimens of a maker's work. All things being relative, there will always be even more famous things out there commanding even greater name value premiums, unless, of course, you just happen to have \$5 million to spare, in which case you just may be stuck with one of the world's greatest instruments!