

BOOK REVIEWS

*THE CONSERVATION, RESTORATION, AND REPAIR OF STRINGED INSTRUMENTS AND THEIR BOWS.* Tom Wilder, ed. London: co-published by IPCI-Canada and Archetype Publications, 2011. London. Three volumes, hardcover, \$1,395.00. ISBN 978-1-904982-41-8.

*The Conservation, Restoration, and Repair of Stringed Instruments and Their Bows* is aptly named. Editor Tom Wilder identifies three facets of musical instruments that bear conflicting values—functionality, aesthetic appearance, and historical integrity—and outlines the strict definitions of conservation, restoration, and repair, which bear conflicting concepts of treatment. The interplay of values and treatment, as well as the tensions that follow, is a constant theme in this encyclopedic, three-volume masterwork. The monumental task of assembling 150 articles by 121 esteemed contributors in 1600 pages would be completely justified if only for the purpose of rousing the reader to reflect on the personal hierarchy of cultural treasures, but there is so much more. It is difficult to identify an issue of concern, from philosophic stance to craft technique, that is absent in this work. This publication is truly unrivaled in scope and merit. The audience that would benefit from the guidance of this encyclopedia of the violin and bow is greater than the title suggests.

Who needs to have this work? Volume 1 is certainly the most critical to a broad audience, presenting the case for the International Pernambuco Conservation Initiative (the root cause of the publication and beneficiary of sales), violin and bow histories and traditions, marketplace and performance forces, the basis of connoisseurship, and diverse voices in dialogue of attitudes about musical instruments. Although the focus is on bowed string instruments, the discussion of placing value on an artifact is transferable to any object that is revered for its function, such as automobiles, mechanical clocks and watches, or furniture. In that light, volume 1 is a must-read—even if someone is firmly in the camp that violins and bows, tools of a musician's trade, must always be made to play just as automobiles must always purr down the highway or firmly in the opposing faction that believes that objects deemed of immense beauty or historical significant should never be touched. Believers in these two opposing extremes will be stimulated to engage in thought and conversation with others who fall somewhere on the continuum

between always and never. How do we arrive at valuing function and historical significance, and who gets to decide?

Clearly, conservators and craftsmen gain practical bench knowledge from volumes 2 and 3. The articles are presented without judgment of appropriateness to every circumstance. Let the practitioner beware. The procedures are not prescribed as strict lines of action but as practical guidelines based on material experience that encourage further improvement and development. On the whole, these articles should not be read as a closed checklist or roadmap to decide an appropriate course of action in treating an instrument: any undertaking requires personal judgment of ultimate goals. Therefore, these chapters will not serve as a substitute for individual, case-by-case assessment of the scope of work at hand. The user has to choose from divergent approaches. Indeed, volume 3, which addresses repairs of bows, describes procedures that are the most extreme interventions. One needs to keep in mind that these volumes are targeted at the goal of continued playability of compromised violins and bows. They serve as a reminder of a remarkably unique facet of the violin—it has Renaissance origins and, with minor physical changes, has served musical sensibilities across five centuries and been in continuous use since its invention. Its playability predominates in the marketplace.

Because volumes 2 and 3 are a kind of handbook for artisans, volume 1 is a primer of sorts for preservationists, historians, curators, collections managers, collectors, and musicians. There is a little something for all of these people. One aspect of this volume is a discussion that ventures into the realm of preserving an elusive past—a vital concern of a scholarly community. A goal of treatment to a violin or bow may be to return the object to a known earlier state, but indeed, what is actually known about its prior incarnation? The diversity of the past is lost in the march of globalization and standardized practices, and because instruments have been altered for contemporary taste, the path to past traditions is obscured. The more numerous the interventions to an instrument over time, the less reliable it is as a document of history—both physically and musically. Institutions, collectors, and musicians, aided by craftsmen expertise, need to determine what piece of history embodied in an instrument warrants preservation and how much of that truly remains.

A practical component of volume 1 is a

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comprehensive table of standardized terms, as well as a thorough examination of the role of documentation. A clever CD-ROM supplement of measurement templates provides a handy guide for describing existing physical condition and indicating areas of intervention. The documentation material is dense, but the case for recording and annotating observations and treatments is skillfully constructed. Although everyone may not devote long hours to adopting all the suggestions listed in this section, it serves as a reminder that digital cameras are valuable and efficient tools. One can hope that computed technology scanning, a documentation dream come true, may one day be universally affordable and accessible.

Finally, volume 1 includes insightful and engaging discussion of the current issue of conservation and sustainable use of Brazilian natural resources and historical issues of violin history, repairs, and business practices. These aspects of the overall undertaking are compelling additions that enhance the appeal of the

entire body of work.

Although reference is made to “important violins” or “valuable instruments” from time to time across the three volumes, it is left to the reader to decide what is important or valuable. Family heirlooms of inexpensive instruments handed down for generations, as well as folk instruments, can benefit as equally as the priceless Stradivarius from the rewards of this publication. It is refreshing to see master craftsmen openly share shop techniques—a rarity in the history of violin and bow making—and express concern for merging traditional working methods with contemporary conservation ideology. These volumes are intelligently organized and incomparable in breadth and inspiration.

This undertaking gets two thumbs up.

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