



ADVANCED VIOLIN RESTORATION TECHNIQUES



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Executive Summary

Music and the instruments that produce it are an important part of Australia's culture. Music has played a large part in modern Australian history as a reflection of fashion and style, and as a vehicle for social commentary. The violin was known as 'the King of instruments' in the 19th century, and today maintains much of this popularity and mystique. There is a fascination with the violin, and a wonder that such a small box can produce such a big sound. Violin-family instruments are unusual in that they improve with age and playing; a well-preserved instrument is more than a musical tool, it is a part of history, appreciated by generations past and by generations in the future.

The violin trade in Australia is typically run from small businesses, frequently owner-operated, and often by self taught luthiers or those with limited relevant training. Many repairers have had to rely on instructional books to undertake complex repairs, or have spent limited time in the workshops of more experienced makers. While the situation is improving as more Australians attend Violin-Making schools overseas, not all these Australian graduates choose to return home to practise their trade.

Due to the small size of most shops there is no tradition (such as can be found in Europe) of training and education through apprenticeships. Australia also lacks the violin making schools that exist in more populous countries. Australia lacks a Guild or Association which could be a useful structure in facilitating the sharing of knowledge. The relative lack of formally qualified violin makers in Australia has added to a culture in some quarters of guarding one's 'trade secrets'.

While the reluctance of some makers to pass on knowledge learnt through years of study is understandable, the preservation and correct maintenance of instruments is the common goal of all those in the industry. Fortunately this secretive culture appears to be diminishing as more overseas trained makers return and the skill level improves.

The skill level of the average Australian luthier must be raised to best international practices. There are many competent and capable artisans who could attain this with further training and experience. Poor repair work is the bane of the luthier; to undo previous repair attempts and to redo a job is far more complex than to do it right the first time. With an adequately skilled workforce valuable instruments will remain assets to future generations.

The aim of this fellowship is to acquire the skills necessary to undertake repairs and restoration of a complex nature, and to complete work to the highest professional standards. In addition to practical skills, knowledge will be sought on issues such as assessing pieces for repair and restoration and making decisions as to which repair techniques should be applied to a given situation. In addition, dissemination of this knowledge is of high priority, with the ultimate aim being to raise the standard of workmanship in Australia.

A review of the skills required by luthiers identifies the following as areas in need of particular attention:

- Making plaster casts to aid in patching and arching corrections
- Matching old varnishes to a high standard
- Same grain peg hole bushing
- Neck grafts, and
- Rib repairs.

Europe has a long tradition of violin making, repairing and restoration. As it was impractical to attempt a traditional apprenticeship in the allocated time, intensive instruction from

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some of Europe's top restorers was the most efficient means of gathering information for dissemination.

In 1995 the British Violin Maker's association advertised its' first Violin and Bow Restoration Course, to be held from March 31 to April 9 at West Dean College in Chichester. While the framework of the course had been decided, the content was open to discussion. Daly was therefore able to request instruction in techniques he was not familiar with, specifically plaster casting, neck grafts and rib repairs. The course offered particularly thorough attention to these and many other repair techniques.

Daly decided to visit the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford to examine the Hills collection of musical instruments, which includes many famous violins in excellent condition.

Being in Europe presented an excellent opportunity to visit Cremona in Northern Italy. Cremona is arguably the world's premier violin making centre, and has been since the 17th century. Eric Blot, a highly regarded historian, author, restorer and dealer is based there, and had agreed to a visit from Daly should he ever travel to Italy. Daly had met Blot in Australia when he came to lecture at an Australian Violinmakers Convention.

Daly left Australia on the 29th March, and arrived jetlagged and weary at West Dean College after a long flight and train journey. Two weeks were spent in England and he then flew to Milan and stayed in Italy for another three weeks.

In order to optimise the outcomes of this fellowship it is essential to ensure that the knowledge obtained is shared with others. A series of recommendations have been made at the conclusion of the report regarding a range of initiatives and activities that the Fellow identifies as central to furthering the fellowship opportunity. Recommendations are also made for government bodies, professional associations, education and training providers, industry, business and the community.