



JAMES N. MCKEAN

ANCIENT ART IN A CRUMBLING CITY

The importance and sophistication of purfling—and the dangers of making it in the bathtub of a New York apartment

By James N. McKean

“Water is running down!” came a muffled shout from the apartment downstairs, along with the thump of what I imagined to be the handle of a broom—or more likely, a mop—on the underside of the cracked floorboards of my second-floor walkup that had started life as a tenement and hadn’t changed much in the intervening century.

The late ’70s: Welcome to New York! Last one to leave, turn out the lights.

People scurried between the obsidian shadows and diamond-edged light of a city beyond salvation. Drumming echoed from the dusty ruins of Central Park, answered by the harsh shriek of trains passing deep underground. They emerged like snakes, garishly plumed with graffiti and gang tags.

Cocaine and champagne high above the city, cockroaches and Colt 45s down on the streets.

And every morning, as the sun rose through the smoky haze of fires uptown or in the warzones across the East River, we awoke to discover anew that the center hadn’t held.

As a young violin maker, new to a timeless craft and a decaying city, there was only one thing to do: Spend a week making purfling.

The guy downstairs didn’t like it—more about that later—but what can you do? Art will find a way.

Purfling as a Practical Matter

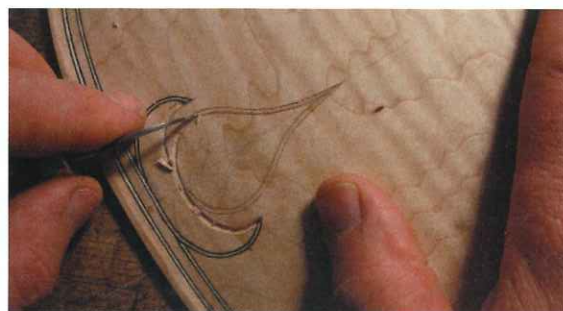
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top and back of your instrument. As with so much of the violin, it serves a dual role: practical and aesthetic. Practically, it helps keep your instrument together—literally. The purfling acts as a binder, preventing cracks from developing and traveling into the plates as they shrink and expand due to changes in the weather and humidity.

This is much more likely to occur in the spruce top than the back, which is why you often see classical Italian instruments (most often cellos) that will have real purfling inlaid in the top, but with the corresponding lines on the back only scribed on. And this is not the work of the lesser makers, laboring at the kitchen table in some farmhouse outside the city walls; it can be on the work of the very best makers. I know of outstanding cellos by Ruggieri and Mateo Goffriller on which they omitted purfling the back.

However, I’ve only seen one violin that didn’t have purfling in the top—a 19th-century fake Testore. Testore was a favorite of fakers, because there were so many of them, and they worked quite fast, to put it in the most positive light; the Hills dismissed the entire family as “Milanese cheapjacks.” This isn’t quite fair; I know of a cello, currently in the National Symphony, which is extraordinarily beautiful in workmanship, design, and varnish. One of the major clues that this violin was a fake was, in fact, the purfling, or lack thereof—not only that it



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wasn't there, but that the lines weren't scribed, but painted. The consequences of not having purfling in the top were painfully evident: I lost track trying to count the cracks. And then repairing it turned into some horrible version of whack-a-mole—every time I glued a crack and reinforced it, a new one opened elsewhere. Never have I been so happy to see a violin go out the door.

The Art of Purfling

Equally important to the practical role played by the purfling is the aesthetic effect. Take a quick look at your instrument and you'll immediately see why—it's the purfling that catches your eye, establishing the outline. If you've ever had the opportunity to see an instrument under construction, the outline, without the purfling, looks strangely diffuse and weak. It's the strong visual impact of those double black lines that pulls it together. Then, the double echo of the crown of the channeling and then the roundness of the edge add a sculptural element. It's like a frame, counterbalancing the dominating visual of the f-holes and the fingerboard and tailpiece.

Show your instrument to an expert for appraisal, and he or she will give the entire instrument a quick glance but then zero in on the purfling. That's because in the violin business, value is dependent on two factors alone: provenance and condition. Sound, interestingly, plays no part. I once asked Jacques Francais about this, and he said "Sound is too personal; that will only determine how long it takes to sell." The purfling

is as much a fingerprint as anything else on the instrument, not just because it can be so characteristic of a school of making, or an individual maker, but especially because it's so hard to fake.

The materials vary widely. Most of the classical Italian makers, especially the Cremonese, used dyed pearwood for the black, and poplar for the middle strip. They glued it into strips before inlaying it.

Other makers, like Montagnana in Venice, just took three strips and hammered them into the channel. Dutch makers often used whalebone, which gives many of their instruments a lovely spectral look, as the black dye has faded and the whalebone has yellowed.

A curious characteristic of the Neopolitan makers, most notably those of the Gagliano family, is that very often the varnish has chipped off the purfling. This was explained to me as a result of the makers employing the black paper used to wrap fish for the outer strips—the wax on the paper prevented the varnish from adhering properly. A wonderfully romantic story, but utter nonsense—that same wax would have prevented the glue from holding it together, or in the groove dug for it.

Each maker has his own style, both in the widths of the three strips and more especially, the way the mitres are resolved where the strips come together in the corner. Stradivari famously dropped his toward the inside of the curves, giving the corners a slight lift. Makers vary the length of the end of the joint, in what makers call the

"bee-sting." But the most beautiful, in grace and execution, has to be that of the Amati family, who showed a remarkable consistency through four generations and well over a hundred years.

And it wasn't just the style—those incredibly graceful curves, with mitres that seem to converge perfectly. It was also the color of the black—still as rich today, centuries after it was made. It's because of the elaborate method that went into dyeing it.

Which brings us back to my unfortunate neighbor downstairs, and the unwanted (and unwanted) cascade. Back in those days, dyed pearwood was quite simply unavailable—much less done the way it had been, with logwood stain.

Pearwood is remarkably dense, so getting the dye to penetrate takes several steps—boiling in a very strong lye, and then with logwood chips, and then with iron to fix the color; and all of that requires water.

Even more so, the resulting strips have to be thoroughly rinsed to remove excess dye. And if you're living in a walkup apartment in an old tenement, that means the bathtub, and plumbing that was none too great to start with.

It was worth the effort, although my neighbor would strongly disagree. But then I discovered a source in Canada for dyed pearwood—not with logwood, but a synthetic dye just as strong and lightfast.

Thus ended the water running down into my unfortunately neighbor's home; that, and a move across town to a better building. ■