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Shattering the Mold - Modern Makers Revolutionize the Violin

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Of the myriad tools that humans have invented to extend their creative reach, few have attained the level of perfection that renders change unnecessary, especially over the course of 200 years. Though we think of the violin as a rarity that has achieved this ideal, closer examination tells us that even our beloved box is not exempt from change; after all, necks have been lengthened and tilted back, bass bars have been extended, bridges raised. These, however are subtle functional differences that have nevertheless left the overall look and feel unchanged, leading to a general perception of the various violin family members as unimprovable objects.

That perception, like the Antarctic ice sheet, is beginning to break up. As string players delve into different styles of music, some of us may desire an instrument that reflects a nontraditional musical approach. Some of us may want a different sort of sound, without settling for an electric sound. Some of us might fall in love with unique handmade objects that reflect an original point of view. And some of us may find we're damaging our bodies trying to get sounds out of traditional instruments that don't fit us.

A group of instrument makers, individualists and fellow artists, are thinking about all these issues and acting on them, creating bowed instruments that inspire, surprise, and possibly frighten. I've been lucky to know and talk with five of these people recently, and they are a fascinating, passionate bunch. Surprisingly, only three were aware of each other's existence, and these, Guy Rabut, David Rivinus, and Christophe Landon, are what we might characterize as 'insiders.' They are individuals who deal comfortably and successfully with mainstream instruments as well as their own creations, through for different reasons. The other two, Suzy Norris and Danny Ferrington, have attained success in their field by not catering to the traditional violin market at all. Norris builds her original instruments in her relatively remote shop in the Santa Cruz mountains of California, sharing her business with her partner, guitar maker Fred Carlson. Ferrington is a star in the electric and acoustic custom-built guitar world, having made wildly creative guitars for just about everyone famous who play guitar.

A common theme emerged in conversations with the builders and players of these instruments: an affirming attitude toward exploratory creative expression. All five makers have strong ideas about their art, a trait that is obviously a necessity when bucking a tradition with the kind of heft the violin world carries. And each maker is as distinctly individual as his or her original designs, and each has a unique story to tell.

SERIOUS ARTIST

Guy Rabut runs a shop with a most prestigious musical address, Carnegie Hall, where he shares a seventh-floor atelier with bow maker Michael Yeats. Rabut does all the normal things - - major repairs, constructing conventional and highly respected instruments - and engages in various activities, such as designing Baroque bridges and appointments, which reveal a different side to his talent. But many players were amazed when Rabut produced a full-blown Major Object in 1995, a partly art deco, possibly neoclassical, purely Rabutian violin with a world-class sound and what amounts to a growing fan club. "I've had people come in and offer to buy it on the spot," he says. "Really, the reactions surprisingly, have only been positive." Rabut produced this violin in response to urging from members of the Turtle Island String Quartet -- and from, no doubt, within.

"After I left school, I worked doing repairs in a music store - banjos, guitars, even soldering flutes," he explains. "I got serious in 1975 and went to the Salt Lake City violin makers' school [the Violin Making School of America]. But I always wanted to break out again into something more creative, because I'd always done art and sculpture, and it was part of the same thing. But I haven't seen that many other attempts to innovate that were very successful visually and also as instruments. And I didn't want to compromise either."

"This violin happened over the course of a year or so, from sketches accumulated over 15 years. Some [designs] were merely decorative, some involved restructuring. My last idea was to keep the sound the same and push as much as I could aesthetically. It's only one of a whole series of ideas I've developed using an original vocabulary of design motifs that I have on file. But I used a Guarneri del Gesù model as the starting point. All the critical dimensions are identical: the same wood, arching, air volume, and thickness. It's real violin varnish, with lampblack pigment on a black ground, with 23-karat gold leaf applied to the ball on the scroll and ebony purfling on the top. Yes, it is magic."

Rabut can be forgiven the pride he takes in his creation. The elegance and power of its design leap at you, gaining strength from the purity of the color scheme: bland and black, with Rabut's very personal vocabulary of curves swinging through the purfling and gold-leaf paint on the back.

"The ball-and-stick theme runs throughout the instrument, the scroll, the sound holes," he says. "Some people said I should have put 'Spalding' on the ball and gotten them to fund the project! But the idea is for it to look like hammered metal, even though it's all carved wood."

The scroll design and the square notch in the lower right bout seem radical, but when you play the instrument you can close your eyes and imagine that you are playing any of the highest-quality new "classical" violins, tweaked for maximum projection, brilliance, and cutting power.

"I showed it to a lot of traditional players - I just told them to close their eyes. The first woman who played it was a Russian violinist, and she was nervous, but she closed her eyes and started playing Tchaikovsky - and she got very excited."

Rabut wants to complete a quartet of these instruments, but he hopes to interest a financial backer who could own and loan the set to some ambitious string quartet whose repertoire might match the audaciousness of the design.

