

THE WORLD OF THE SENSES

Trees that can sing

Only one makes it – just one from 10,000 spruce trunks reaches the worktable in Martin Schleske's studio, to be made into a master-class violin. A tree like this has to suffer – put up with 200 to 300 years on poor soil in a harsh climate, little water and the icy temperatures of the mountains just below the timberline. Only such a "crisis-stricken" tree, which has had to fight its way through life, growing slowly, can produce good tonewood. A lowland spruce growing in ideal conditions that shoots up and fills out quickly has no resistance. It has no resonant wood, no personality. "Our life is not a walk in the park either; humans, too, grow and develop through crises," says master luthier Martin Schleske. The *New York Times* has described him as one of the "most important living violinmakers" and the German daily *Die Welt* has dubbed him the "Stradivari of the 21st century".

So what is the secret of world-famous violins? Finding the right tonewood? Skilled workmanship or precise sanding? Or the almost therapeutic sensitivity of the violinmaker in recognizing what kind of violin precisely suits a musician?

They are only found in very specific regions of the Alps, these "mountain giants", often some 50 meters tall, extremely firm and with no branches. It is these mountain spruces that Martin Schleske says are "destined for sound". The 45-year-old used to scramble up and down trees himself in mountain forests, fighting his way through snow and ice in the Bavarian Alps with provisions and a chainsaw in his rucksack. Every violinmaker has his informants: a network of foresters and wood dealers. When a storm fells some of the massive spruces on top of a mountain, the race begins: quick, up to the top and bag the best ones before others hear about it... "The wood has to have a greasy shine when you cut into it. It mustn't look dusty," says Schleske. The expert can already tell whether the tree is a "singer" when the sawed sections of trunk rumble down the mountain on a truck. For as they bounce off each other some sound "like a bell, with a free and light tone," while others just sound "dull and wooden". What a violinmaker wouldn't do for that free sound!

Nowadays Schleske rarely has the time for such expeditions. He visits his wood dealer, who specializes in tonewood, two or three times a year. Yet there is still some detective work involved: "The most important thing is still to be the first in line when a new delivery comes in." Then he goes to his wood dealer and appraises the often 3,000 so-called "canopy-scrapers" with an expert eye, but only five of them are real top-grade specimens.

From the forest to the studio

Cut to size and marked with a precise combination of letters and numbers, the good trees are then sorted into the shelves of the studio in Stockdorf, south of Munich. Clients even come to the workshop from the USA and Asia and wait for months on waiting lists to have Schleske make a violin for them: "Since getting this violin I have stopped playing the Romantic concertos like Brahms or Sibelius on my Stradivari," says London-based soloist Jeanne Christé v. Bennigsen. Jehi Bahk, concertmaster in Seoul, highlights the "balanced sound on all the strings, which otherwise one can only expect to find in the best Italian master violins of the 18th century." And star violinist Ingolf Turban praises the most beautiful E string he has ever heard: "I have the feeling I am no longer playing the violin, but singing."

And yet the man whose trademark is his dark leather cap and who, in his youth, played electric guitar as well as violin, is always a little nervous when a client orders an instrument from him: "It is always a kind of act of creation," he says. Sensitivity and intuition are what he needs to recognize which violin perfectly suits this musician. "For a musician, the violin becomes part of their body, their inner voice." The root of the word "person" – composed of per (= through) and sonum (= sound) – attests to the original connection between someone's voice and their character. When Martin Schleske talks about Stradivari or Guarneri violins, we could think he were talking about female personalities, and we get the slight impression that his role is also that of a matchmaker. "A Guarneri is like a hot-blooded, dark-haired gypsy woman; she is brash, passionate and pugnacious. You can work on her tones, 'knead' them. There is a resistance – similar to a strong handshake." The Stradivari is a completely different kettle of fish: "She is more like a holy Madonna, and can sometimes be a bit of a diva. She is capable of producing incredible sounds, but is not interested in meeting the expectations of a musician who wants to take center stage. Then she can get offended and shut down." Such a demanding violin would find its way back to his studio worktable pronto, grins Schleske, but in a "Strad" – as they are known among musicians – this is considered part of a personality that has matured over 300 years, for which music lovers pay up to € 4 million.



In comparison to that, a Schleske violin almost seems a bargain: A violinist can purchase a soloist-class instrument for € 20,000–25,000. And that means one they can “break in” themselves – tailor, so to speak. The idea that a newly assembled violin is a finished instrument could not be more wrong. The violin only brings with it roughly half of its character; the other half it develops together with its player – teamwork, as it were.

Sensitivity and bespoke work

Yet there is a long way to go before getting to the first “date”, and it demands a great deal of a master luthier. Whereas some can barely tell the difference between an “E” and a “D”, the man with the cap is able to recognize up to 30 different variations of a single note on a violin. Listen very carefully time and again – another secret of the luthier’s craft. First listen carefully to the client, what he or she wants and expects, and later, when working, listen to the sound of the wood. Immense concentration and a fine feel for the instrument are imperative in this profession. And time to recharge the batteries is also very important: “When I get home from the studio in the evenings, often the first thing I do is turn off the music that my family has on. All I really want then is silence.”

Sitting opposite Martin Schleske, you feel the sensitivity to engage with both people and instruments. Sensibility coupled with a calm and considered charisma – presumably necessary for someone who works on an instrument for weeks with meticulous precision. When sanding a piece of mountain spruce for a top plate, just a few tenths of a millimeter can change the sound. “You have to pay great attention and do the wood justice,” is how he describes it. You must never go against the grain. A statement that, for the religious Schleske, can also be applied to life. In his book *Der Klang: Vom unerhörten Sinn des Lebens* (Sound: the unheard meaning of life) he compares violinmaking with human personal development. Essentially, he claims, people are like mountain spruce trees: It is crises that mature one’s personality. The tension between gentleness and strength, permission and formation, and trust and surprise determines our life. It is the same pairs of opposites that complete the sound and beauty of a violin. Not confusing aspirations of completeness with perfection is important to the craftsman: “A perfect sound with no rough edges has no soul, no character.”

Balancing act between craftwork and research

Is it difficult letting go of a finished violin, having spent so much time with it? No, answers Schleske, “it has to leave the studio and motivates me to make tiny improvements on the next instrument.” For in actual fact, he considers himself more a violin developer than a violinmaker. In order to better understand acoustic phenomena and explore why certain tones give us goose bumps, after qualifying as a master luthier he studied physics. From his cozy workshop, we step through a sliding door into another world – the state-of-the-art acoustics lab. The atmosphere is definitely more sober here. We almost feel a little sorry for the little wooden violin, hung up in the center of the room, all alone and unprotected, to reveal its sounds. Schleske taps it with an impact hammer, as with a patient in a doctor’s surgery. Sound and modal analyses are conducted using methods from aeronautic technology to establish its “acoustic fingerprint”. The violin wood can be magnified 600-fold using a scanning electron microscope to see the tiniest details. The varnish, too, of which 15 layers are generally applied to seal the instrument, plays a key role. It can dull the sound of the wood more than three-fold. Schleske has studied around 300 different varnish compositions over the past few years. He has invested many years in research; it seems he leaves no stone unturned. Having set out with the aim of copying the magic and charisma of a Stradivari, he has now found his own path of creating an instrument whose sound touches people and pulls at their heartstrings.

The best compliment for Martin Schleske is seeing that the “matchmaking” has worked. He recently made a violin for a talented young musician. When the school student played it for the first time, he did not seem merely proud, but downright in love. “His whole posture suddenly changed, he stood taller, he grew with his violin – it was simply right.”

Daniela Tewes

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Martin Schleske, luthier.

Der Klang: Vom unerhörten Sinn des Lebens.
With photos by Donata Wenders. Kösel Verlag, 2010
(there are currently plans for an English and a French version)