

"Eating" Violins

As a hungry boy, Jérémie Legrand learned to play the violin before training at Mirecourt

When I was five years old, I watched a programme on the television about an orchestra. It was filmed from above which gave me the belief that people played the violin on their belly and, being a greedy boy, I thought this was a great idea. I decided to learn to play the violin and this sudden decision was to be a major one, giving direction to my whole career. Years later, I was reminded of this when my *Maitre de Stage*, the famous luthier Etienne Vatelot one day told me: *To be a good violin maker you have to eat violins, eat violins, eat violins, morning, day and night!*

The Mirecourt Technique

After learning to play the violin at a young age, I finally started to enjoy it when I was 11 years old. Once I took pleasure in playing, I began to wonder about making instruments and the national School of Mirecourt in France was the best option. At that time in 1990, the school accepted eight pupils per year after the French Junior certificate, so I went to sit the test at the early age of 14. I was lucky to be selected and I started my apprenticeship shortly after my 15th birthday. (From around the year 2000, the school changed and began to accept candidates only after the school leaving certificate at age 18 to 21 or so.) I believe it was a great privilege to learn the trade at such a

young age as I did assimilate so much. I finished my studies aged 20, after five years of training.

The Mirecourt School was brilliant and I am delighted to have been able to take that particular apprenticeship. We had a ratio of one teacher for 4 to 8 pupils and we were solidly trained to follow the traditional Mirecourt technique (which was widely used until the second world war). The strength of the technique is the efficiency brought in mastering the use of a sharp knife and knowing how to properly sharpen the tools. The knife is so versatile. It proves very useful for fitting sound post patches, chest patches and for many other aspects of restoration. In making too, the knife enables the maker to go straight to the point, in carving a neck for example.

Gaining experience

After receiving my diploma in 1995 I decided to go to work in Paris for a while, in the workshop of Michel Gladieu, around the corner from the Opera Bastille. I learned a lot there but Michel was, sadly, not well at the time. I packed my bags and searched for some work in Ireland because I absolutely loved the people and Irish traditional music. It took me a while to find some serious work. William Hoffman and Conor Russell had a top class workshop outside Dublin. William





Jérémie seated at his stand at Makers' Day in London in March

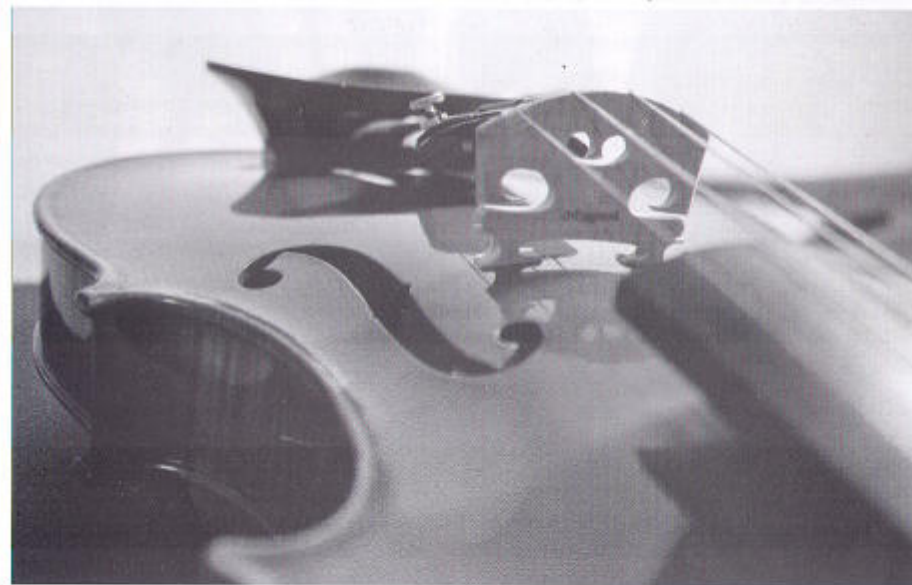
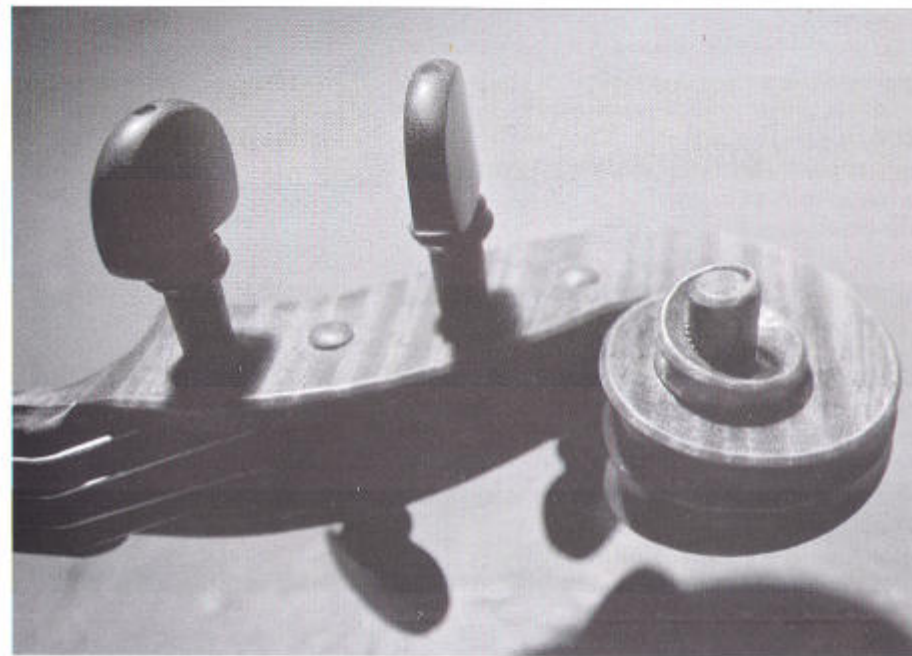
agreed to give me some freelance work and also told me about Hugo Vegter, a baroque instrument maker in Cork. Hugo had been a student when there was a violin making school in Cork, which lasted for around eight years. He was totally passionate and an absolute perfectionist and I learned heaps being his associate for three years.

Setting up in Cork

It was very exciting when I started my own business in Cork in 1998, doing repairs and restoration work although the early years proved difficult before I established a reputation. It was very unsettling to deal with periods of too much work followed by periods

of total calm when one wondered if the customers had all fled! But it was a good learning curve, and soon enough I was well known in the south of Ireland and handling some very nice instruments from the national RTE quartet and members of the national RTE Orchestra, as well as many fine Irish classical players based in London and America. I also worked quite often with traditional fiddlers, and was always surprised by their great virtuosity and amazing bow technique. On another level I was shocked by the desperate state of their violins!

I had a few different workshops in Cork City - the one where I stayed the longest



Violin and scroll by Jérémie, based on the "Kemp" of 1738 by Guarneri Del Gesù



Jérémie, after playing with Cork Symphony Orchestra, with Nigel Kennedy who played Brahms Violin Concerto and later played one of Jérémie's violins, providing complimentary feedback.

was in the heart of the city, on the quay with a panoramic view of Patrick's bridge, Shandon medieval church and the Opera House. Eventually I became very successful, selling old instruments and sometimes refusing repair work, making a very good living surfing on the Celtic tiger economy.

A change of direction

In Ireland, they have a saying: *Be careful what you wish for because you might get it.* In my case it was only when I reached success in my business that I realised that it was not quite what I wanted. After seven years, I suddenly decided to close my shop and moved to the Irish countryside to start making instruments full time. I have to admit that I had limited experience in making, as I had only made one or two instruments per year since leaving school. The journey into making instruments on a full time basis has been so fulfilling. I was lucky enough to meet some success early on, and have continued to be able to make a living. I usually make two models of violin - one after late Guarneri del Gesù and the other after Pietro Guarneri of Venice. For viola and cellos, I love the School of Venice and I follow the style of Mateo Goffriller, all inspired by instruments that I had a chance to have a close look at in my workshop.

Playing and making

I have always continued to play the violin. I had completed my musical studies at a Conservatoire in France, and this enabled me to play with some very good semi-professional orchestras in Ireland and in chamber music concerts.

In Cork I was surrounded by the finest traditional music and I immensely enjoyed playing and being immersed in this culture. To me, being a violin player and a maker makes sense, in that you have a close understanding of the working of the violin. It is important to have a very good relationship with musicians and to be able to listen to their opinions.

Returning home

Over a year ago I felt the call to move back to France and reunite with the beautiful landscape of the French Alps where I come from. Little had I realised that this would prove to be one of the toughest challenges I had to face. Returning home after nearly 20 years made me realise how Irish I had become - the French administration, laws and tax system didn't make any sense to me! I managed not to get totally depressed, and it was a great relief when I managed to open my business after six months of living in France. I managed to stay busy because I had over a year of work ahead of me in commissions, and was already working for people in Berlin, Switzerland, Vienna and London.

I am now trying to get known in France, where it is a totally different business landscape than in Ireland. There are lots of opportunities here and good orchestras but it is very saturated with violin makers. I believe there are no more opportunities in France whether working in repairs, restoration or sales. The great advantage in making instruments is that there are no boundaries and, for me, it has only

been a matter of getting into a plane and travelling around to sell my products. My workshop is now in an old coach house of a 19th century manor house, surrounded by a walled garden, in the town of La Côte Saint André. I'm now quite settled here, enjoying the produce of the local market, the amazing wines for under five euros per bottle and, of course, the beautiful weather of the south of France! There is very little in this tiny town except that it is the birth place of Hector Berlioz, and we have a brilliant one-week festival

in August, and a barely visited but beautiful museum about the man. I am becoming very interested in the music of Berlioz which I now play on the violin with the locals. I am also learning a lot about the life of Hector, another quite extravagant French man, not unlike myself!



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