

World of Strings

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The Modern Neapolitan School

Modern day visitors to Naples find a city which is crowded, noisy, hot, and dirty. They also find it to be rustic, unruly, and vigorous. Naples is the antithesis of those calm cities in the north of Italy, the great cultural centers where violin making first began. It is especially ironic for this reason that the Neapolitans, unlike their counterparts in the north, never had to 'revive' the art of violin making. Unlike the craftsmen of Milan, Turin, and Cremona, whose work differs greatly from that of their predecessors, the Neapolitan violin maker of 1900 worked with patterns and varnish substantially unchanged from those used by his fore bearers. Though impoverished, the tradition remained, an unbroken line leading back to the early 1700's. It is this consideration for intuitive knowledge which makes the modern Nea-

politian masters so unique and fascinating.

Of all the arts in Italy, the last to arise was violin making. The other great arts had drawn to a close even before Alessandro Gagliano, the patriarch of Neapolitan violin making, first took up plane and chisel around 1700. The Italian dominance in music sustained the demand for violins and so gave a constant source of employment to its violin makers. The 18th century thus witnessed the major Neapolitan shops of the Gagliani and Vinaccia. Artistic culture, though, tends to follow economic well-being. The center of art and finance shifted to France, and so by the 19th century the Neapolitan violin maker was lucky if his customers desired a mandolin. The center of violin making was now in northern Europe, and the limited demand for new instruments, coupled with

the ready availability of old ones, made it virtually impossible for the Neapolitan craftsman to make a living. Naples, for so long the source of many great talents in all the arts, had become a decadent cultural backwater.

By the end of the century, there was only one maker of the Gagliano family—the last, Vincenzo—still active in his home city, and he was primarily a string maker. His violins were made for him by Francesco Verzella, Giovanni Pistucci, and Carlo, Raul, and Diego Loveri. Francesco Verzella maintained a shop on the Via Constantinopoli, but the scarcity of his work indicates that it was not a very profitable one. Alfonzo Della Corte was dead. Many other makers had vanished into obscurity. Only the great Vincenzo Postiglione was able to run a successful

shop devoted to violin making.

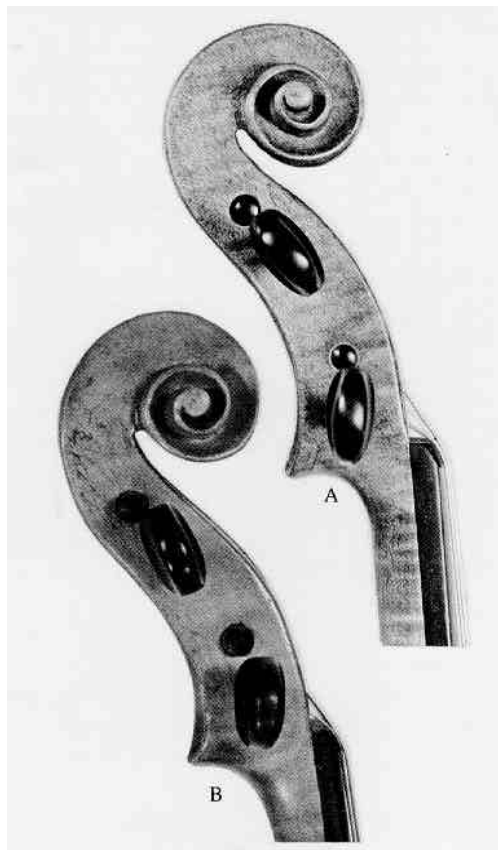
General conditions in Naples were no less bleak. The many thousands of immigrants who fled Naples for the United States at that time left conditions so appalling that the poor environment of American city slums seemed mild by comparison. Most of Naples' residents lived in shabby tenements lacking even the rudiments of sanitation and frequently shared their drab, windowless rooms with several other families. Starvation, disease, and poverty were rampant.

It is hard to imagine a resurgence in violin making occurring at this time, and yet this is precisely what happened. It is due to several factors. Firstly, there was a reawakening of interest in Italian culture brought on by the creation of the nation of Italy, new archaeological discoveries and a renewed fascination with the Renaissance. Secondly, there was a growing interest in the violin and its music, with a special interest in the creations of the classic Italian tradition. Lastly, there was a clever act of chicanery.

As other nations grew wealthy, their musicians wanted quality violins and naturally turned towards the classic Cremonese. Soon violin dealers from all over the world were scouring the Italian countryside in search not only of Cremonese violins but also those of the other Italian schools. The Hammas of Stuttgart were the most famous of those visiting Naples, but other shops included Lyon and Healy, William Lewis and Son, and Rudolph Wurlitzer from the United States. They were constantly in touch with the Neapolitan violin makers, not to buy their instruments but rather those of their predecessors. The availability was such that a violin by one of the Gagliani could often be had for little more than the cost of a new violin.

Violin makers soon realized that their creations, when given an older attribution and offered at a new violin price, sold very well. This soon became a major business, and the buyers never realized the deception. For the violin makers it meant survival and the ability to feed and clothe a family. Despite the necessity they were not proud of their actions, and the cloak of silence surrounding their deeds has for many years deprived them of their just recognition as masters.

And masters they were. In the modern Neapolitan school we find some of the most talented craftsmen ever to ply their trade in Naples. We encounter instruments rich in personality, originality, and



Scrolls by VITTORIO BELLAROSA (A)
and GIOVANNI PISTUCCI (B)

vigor. Many are prized for excellent sonority and ease of playing, qualities which have made the older Neapolitan instruments so desired by professional and amateur alike. Invariably the modern craftsman has worked with precision and care which far surpass that of his 19th century counterparts.

During the past few decades these masters have begun to gain the recognition they so richly deserve, and we are pleased to introduce many of our readers to five of the most important makers of this school. Our list is by no means a compendium, and many fine makers such as Raffaele Calace, Giuseppe Tarantino, Raffaele Esposito, and Francesco Verzella have not been included solely because of the scarcity of accurate information. The Neapolitans are notoriously poor record keepers, and so factual data is hard to find or often simply not available. We hope on some future occasion to devote our efforts to a more detailed examination of these fascinating individuals.

Armando Altavilla is the maker who we regard as the greatest craftsman of the modern Neapolitan school. He was born on February 28, 1876 and studied with Francesco Verzella, a pupil of Antonio Gagliano II. Altavilla remained in his home town throughout his lifetime and was still actively making violins as recently as 1966.

Altavilla copied the Gaglianos almost without exception, and many of his violins bear their labels. Fortunately, there was enough appreciation of his mastery that he was able to employ his own label as well. We find his works to be without exception splendidly crafted with carefully balanced, artistically carved scrolls, finely worked fs and a varnish of excellent quality, gold to reddish brown in color and frequently crackled in texture. We do not know how many instruments he actually made, and their rarity had only enhanced their appeal to the ensuing generations.

Vittorio Bellarosa is one of the most interesting of all the Neapolitan makers. He is the only one who studied outside of Naples, and yet he is the one whose work most closely resembles that of his 18th century predecessors. He was born on February 24, 1907, the son of Riccardo Bellarosa, a prominent violin maker and dealer in Naples. Vittorio grew up surrounded by the tools of his future trade, old instruments and the new violins of his father's creation. At the age of 15 he was sent to the nearby town of Rotello where he apprenticed with the violin maker Vito Vitantonio, and by the age of 18 he had made well over fifty violins.

In 1925 he went to Mittenwald to study. This was an unlikely choice for an Italian, but Mittenwald was and is the home of a leading school of violin making. Bellarosa stayed there for only six months. From there he went to Rome to study with Rodolfo Fredi. Fredi was a minor noble who had studied violin at the St. Cecilia Academy and had learned violin making from his father. Bellarosa spent several years in the Fredi workshop before returning to Naples in the late 1920's.

No doubt Bellarosa discovered at this time what his contemporaries already knew —that there was no market for a new violin but an endless one for old violins. It is from this period, during the 1930's, that the first of his Gagliano copies date. Bellarosa copied the Gagliani well and frequently, for the style and character of the later members of the Gagliano family ideally suited his own manner of working. The long pegboxes and small volutes on the scrolls, the outline which seems to bulge outward at the upper and lower bouts, and the traditional seedlac varnish of Naples further enhanced his violins and reaffirmed his stylistic affinity to the past. On one occasion he copied a Guadagnini, but always considered it to have been a failure. From this period we see most

frequently the label of Raffaele, Antonio, Joseph, and Ferdinand Gagliano.

Bellarosa gained a measure of commercial success during the 1940's and could at last sell his violins under his own trademark. In 1950 he began a series of instruments which bore, on the lower bouts adjacent to the saddle, his brand of two seahorses. He continued this only until about 1954, for it aroused more ridicule from his colleagues than it did appreciation from his clientele. He continued to work with the aid of apprentices until his death in 1979 at the age of 72. With his death the great age of modern Neapolitan violin making ended.

In a school of prolific makers, Bellarosa was one of the most active. His actual production is unknown but it was probably well over 1000. Most of these are violins, but we also know of a few violas and even of three basses, a surprise from a maker who refused to make cellos because they took too long.

Alfredo Contino began his career with a major shop to which he eventually succeeded, and therefore never appears to have made 'old' instruments. He was born on

February 22, 1890, and as a young lad of about ten entered the shop of Vincenzo Postiglione, the leading maker of his day. His initial task was to clean the workshop but he later assisted the master. We have seen violins, more or less the work of Contino, which bear Postiglione's brand and label dating from his final decade. We presume most of these were made by the apprentice, assisting his enfeebled master, but we cannot be sure of how many appeared after the master's death.

When Postiglione died in 1916 Contino assumed the duties of his shop. On his labels he proudly states that he was the sole pupil and successor of Postiglione. This is not entirely true. We understand that Postiglione never actually taught violin making. Perhaps Contino, like Giovanni Pistucci and the Swiss Karl August Berger, who also claimed to have studied with Postiglione, received his training by watching over the master's shoulder. Contino's work was always influenced by his 'teacher'. In addition to the label they also bear the brand 'A. Contino—Napoli' on the button and below the tail saddle. Inside his instruments can often be found the Jettatura, the "evil eye" drawn inside

the top. The Jettatura is a favorite Neapolitan superstition, and the presence of these panned eyes, surrounded by a cross and the maker's initials, presumably helped to ward off its evil power. Contino always built his instruments on classical models or his modifications of them. The flat edges and deeply cut scrolls are quite typical of his work. His traditional varnish makes heavy use of potassium bichromate as a ground. This gives his instruments a recognizable and distinctive look. Contino won awards in several competitions, the gold medal at the Concourse of Padua in 1932 and a special diploma at the National Concourse for Violin Making in 1917. As of 1949, he had made over 300 violins, 15 violas, and 70 celli. He died in the late 1960's.

Giovanni Pistucci was born on February 18, 1864. His first advice in violin making came from Albert Hamma, the son of the founder of that noted firm in Stuttgart, who made regular trips to Naples in search of classic instruments. Hamma was impressed by the young man's talent and advised him to study with Postiglione. We have no further information on his internship.

FOR THE DISCERNING PLAYER WE RECOMMEND THESE FINE INSTRUMENTS



GENNARO GAGLIANO, Naples 1767

We are always delighted to have one of Gennaro's outstanding works in our collection for he is unquestionably one of the greatest masters in the Neapolitan school. The deep rich tone of Gennaro's violins has long been admired by great concert performers. A handsome instrument covered with a rich reddish orange varnish.

SAMUEL GILKES, London 1820

Samuel Gilkes was William Forster's most talented pupil. Despite his untimely death in 1827, he is still recognized as one of England's greatest violin makers. This outstanding Stradivari copy possesses the ideal tone for the soloist—bold, rich and with great power.

About 1904 he began to make instruments styled after the Gagliano family. He made excellent copies which bore not only Gagliano labels but also those of more obscure craftsmen. They were very fine imitations and were occasionally sold in this country as authentic specimens.

Pistucci loved woodworking but hated varnish, and he frequently turned his finished instruments over to Bellarosa for varnishing. The close working relationship between the two men may explain the strong stylistic similarities of their work. Outwardly, the prime difference between a Pistucci and a Bellarosa is that the Pistucci scroll has pronounced drooping and rather elongated turns.

Pistucci made over 800 violins, 200 violas, and 25 celli, and won several awards for his workmanship. He won the silver medal at the Brussels Exhibition and at the Chamber of Commerce exhibition in Naples. On his death in 1955, his workshop, with all its tools, molds, and unfinished instruments, was put on sale, and it was purchased by Bellarosa.

Vincenzo Sannino was born on August 15, 1879 and was originally a violinist.

He began his violin studies at the age of ten with Professor Planeta of the Naples Conservatory. Sannino often visited the Altavilla and Verzella shops, and on one of his visits met Fridolin Hamma on one of his frequent Italian ventures. Hamma spoke no Italian; Sannino was bilingual, and thus he served as Hamma's translator during the last years of the 19th century. This experience gave Sannino some considerable skill at recognizing old instruments. It also inspired him to take up violin making, relying on Hamma and Verzella for instruction. At the beginning of the First World War he moved to Rome, where he remained until his death around 1973.

In his early years Sannino made many instruments bearing his own label. He soon discovered the lure of selling his own instruments as earlier works and, relying on his experience in identifying old violins with Hamma, began to make copies. In this respect Sannino deserves special mention, for he is the only maker among the modern Neapolitans to copy instruments made outside of Naples. Sannino reproduced nearly everyone—Guarneri, Stradivari, Guadagnini, Rocca, Pressenda,

Montagnana, Landolphi, and many others. Any violin maker of the classic Italian school was a candidate for a Sannino copy. He was quite proud of his skill but, nevertheless, preferred to make reproductions for his many clients.

Sannino never made exact copies; he never made what we would call a 'bench reproduction'. A strong personality cannot be suppressed, and so Sannino's copies invariably look like Sanninos, but influenced by a different style or different model. They deceive only those who are unfamiliar with the original and with Sannino's work.

His career was quite active, considering the additional time he had to devote to his work. He made about 700 violins, 50 violas, 75 celli, and various other types of instruments. They reveal a fertile and imaginative mind. The heavy edges, bold scrolls with their narrow throats and numerous chisel marks, and his method of giving the appearance of age to his varnish are very typical of his work. His varnish appears in many colors and is frequently 'antiqued', but it is always of fine texture and transparency.

PHILIP KASS

WILLIAM MOENNIG AND SON, LTD., 2039 LOCUST STREET, PHILADELPHIA, PA. 19103



GENNARO VINACCIA, Naples 1762

When the Gagliani were at their height they were rivaled only by the Vinaccia family and by its patriarch, Gennaro, in particular. This outstanding creation has the appealing Neapolitan character and tonally possesses all those qualities which have made the Gagliani so sought after.

NICOLO IGINO SDERCI, Florence 1972

Since his death in 1980, Sderci has been gaining recognition as one of Italy's greatest masters of the twentieth century. His glowing reputation is fully confirmed by this splendid Pressenda copy made in the master's 88th year. A violin for the serious professional.

A CONCEPT OF VALUES

There is a continuing pleasure in thumbing through the pages of past issues of "World of Strings" and its predecessor, "The String Player". Articles on musicians and violin lore seem timeless and always informative. The instruments and bows featured make a roster of names, cities and dates that would be coveted by any string lover.

It is most interesting that when noting the values of these works between the 1950's and the late 60's, one gleans something of the relative stability in our field. To be sure, one notes a definite increase in values: conservative, gradual and predictable.

The beginning of the last decade however, saw a startling change. Some have, in error I feel, placed the blame on the "collector" as the one responsible for the rapid escalation of values that began in the early 1970's. Yet who today can afford to amass a collection equal to that of R. D. Hawley, Dwight J. Partello, or Henry Hottinger? By present values the investment for most violin fanciers would be prohibitive.

"Collectors", if this is an accurate title today, would most likely have to content themselves with a mere sampling, compared to their predecessors. Instead, let us first consider an event that occurred early in the 1970's—an event that created more than a mild tremor throughout the string world—an Antonio Stradivari violin, Cremona 1721, known as the "Lady Blunt", sold for an astonishing sum of well over \$200,000. The result understandably saw every owner of a fine Italian instrument—most especially those owning a Stradivari or a Guarneri (del Gesu)—rushing to have their instruments reassessed to reflect a new plateau that the "Lady Blunt" had firmly established. Perhaps the "Lady Blunt", in perfect condition and traveling with its original neck, fingerboard, blocks, and bass bar, deserves to be valued at 20 to 50% more than an 'ordinary' Strad of the same period.

The point seems arguable. In any event, owners of fine string equipment took eager and justifiable pride in proving to their friends and colleagues, as did dealers to their clients, that the acquisition of fine instruments and bows was indeed a sound and profitable investment.

The vacuum left in the wake of the surge in values of the finest Cremonese works was rapidly filled by the next ranking Italian masters, as well as a few esteemed French makers. As value structures changed, so did the term "investment" from its traditional "violin salon" meaning to terms more appropriate for banking and brokerage institutions.

Another contributing factor for these rising costs began during this period. European purchasers visited our country

eager to reverse a trend that began immediately after the Second World War, when currency starved Europe and American musicians, temporarily deprived of their traditional source of string equipment, renewed a mutually beneficial exchange. The Orient, too, was rapidly expanding its own appreciation for Western classical music and was drawn to us by our outstanding string instructors, as well as a source for their string equipment. Currency exchange rates certainly favored the foreign purchaser. Other members of our profession must have shared our concern. As irreplaceable instruments left our country one couldn't help feeling concern for our musicians' needs, and that of the young graduates of conservatories and music schools entering the string world, desperately in need of affordable equipment to support them in their budding careers. It was alarming to see instruments and bows—certainly the finer examples— within the span of one decade virtually quadrupling in value.

Entering the 1980's, there seems to be a possibility that we are beginning to experience a leveling off, and that the term "investment" may be returning to an earlier concept—that of the professional and amateur string player's dedication: the inspiration or passion to create music. One fact does seem certain. Recent instrument and bow sales have, as in other areas specializing in fine arts and antiques, solidly established fresh price structures that will prevail. But many fine examples may be out of financial reach of deserving hands forever.

A comparison might be found in the advertising pages of fine art and antiques publications. Many galleries, because of soaring values and diminishing access to works by the old masters and highly prized impressionists, are enlightening their public to the wisdom of acquiring newly evaluated artists having, for the present, less heralded names. That recognition is now being granted to talented, previously obscure, often inaccurately researched Luthiers, whose creations are finally gaining the attention that they richly deserve. In time their names may be elevated to levels now held by J. B. Guadagnini, J. F. Pressenda and the Gaglianos. (Only 40 years ago, J. B. Guadagnini's identity was disputed.) As their stars ascend, so will demand for their instruments.

Acquiring these promising works as a monetary investment may not be the primary impetus, although that expectation should not be discounted. We prefer, however, to interpret "investment" as the enjoyment of music making, expressing one's emotions and creative psyche, and to explore one's sensibilities through the wealth of literature at the string player's command

WILLIAM MOENNIG 111



Two Outstanding

Concert Violins . . .

ANTONIO STRADIVARI, CREMONA 1667

"THE ARANYI"

This outstanding and extensively documented violin is both one of his first creations and one of his finest. It was displayed at the Stradivari Tri-centennial Celebration held in Cremona in 1937 and is illustrated in most of the major works on Stradivari's life. Tonally it is rich, full, and rewarding - a violin for the serious professional.



GIOVANNI BAPTISTA GUADAGNINI

TURIN C 1778

"EX-THISTLETON"

Earlier writers and documents give the date of this typical work of the middle Turin period as being 1770, but a careful examination of its original label reveals that its actual date, 1778, had been obscured by time. The Thistleton is a fine and characteristic example of Guadagnini's mastery and is covered with a rich golden brown varnish. It is easy to tell why its owners have long prized this splendid violin and its superb tone.