

2019

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Ryan and Wing-Paul, Dimitri (2019) "An interview with student presenter Ryan Lee," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*: Vol. 2018 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2018/iss1/24>

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An interview with student presenter Ryan Lee

Dimitri Wing-Paul

How did you present at GREAT Day?

I presented on what makes an eighteenth-century violin special. There are so many violins out there—millions of violins ranging from a couple of hundred dollars to fifteen million dollars and everything in between. So, what makes eighteenth-century violins more special than the violin that was made yesterday? My presentation was basically distinguishing those two things. I got a violin generously loaned to me through Tarisio, which is an auction house based in New York City, and it is one of the most famous in the world. They loaned me a Nicolò Gagliano made in the late eighteenth-century. I used that violin to convey a message and the message was just because an eighteenth-century violin is old does not mean that it is the best. There are contemporary makers that make the violins that are excellent, if not even better than these eighteenth-century violins. So, the whole idea was to tell people why they were special, but at the same time that they are not the only ones that are treasured.

How did you feel when presenting the violin and what were the reactions from the people?

Well, the thing with that is I had more time with certain people. If a certain group of people were clearly more interested, I would spend more time delving into details. The problem with my presentation was that I couldn't give it in five minutes. I spent fifteen minutes talking about one thing, which would lead to another if I received questions. So, I had to go in depth in order to really say something that was worth saying. I could not even briefly discuss each point, otherwise the point that precedes [would] not make sense.

I love presenting when it comes to violins because I find it so fascinating. There are so many facets to fine hand-crafted violins [violas and cellos]! What got me going was an internship that I got at Tarisio for two summers, learning from luthiers that are instrument caretakers for Sally Thomas, Ann Setzer, Joshua Bell, Sarah Chang, Giora Schmidt, Frank Hwang, and countless other world class musicians gave me an opportunity to learn from the best.

Why has the physical form of the violin remain the same over 400 years? Of course there are people out there that are trying to make the violin better by changing certain aspects such as the shape of the f-holes (sound holes). But for the most part, if you go to the RPO [Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra], you'll see that everybody has

something that looks similar. All of them have four strings that are strung up in the four pegs in the peg box. The reason why is because it worked. The shape of the F-holes worked. It provided the most power in terms of projection of sound. One part of the presentation had to do with comparing the F-holes of the violin and the sound hole of the guitar. So, why can't the guitar project more than an acoustic violin, and an acoustic violin versus a higher name? If I stood in this corner and started to play the guitar without amplification, people in Starbucks would not be able to hear me. If I did play the violin, they would be able to hear me simply because of the velocity—that is, the amount of air volume that is pushing out of the F-holes. If you take a look at the F-holes, they are used in corners, top and bottom, and it's like a white end and this is instrumentally projection because it acts like a wind tuck. For example, let us say it is a windy day in January in New York City, and there is a wind of fifty miles an hour. You do not feel the wind as much until you reach a corner and you feel you would be lifted away by the wind. That is the same concept in terms of projection. It won't project as much if it's at hold, you know because there is no velocity. Velocity that is not the right term. It is the ability to displace air. It is very complex.

[Violin-making] encompasses a lot of fields. It encompasses chemistry, mathematics, and even how trees grow. The determining factor is if you cut down a tree, it determines the wood and where the trees grow. Now, a lot of these violins, the wood that is chosen is primarily [more] evolved than in Balsam. It's just different for some reason. American maple and American spruce just are not superior to the spruce of maple that you would find in Europe. It is the process of making them is also very interesting to me. What does one person do when another person does not? Because everybody does things differently, every violin looks different. From afar, it might look the same except for the varnish, which gives the wood its vibrant color. If you look at two violins that were made by two different people without coating or varnish, it would look the same. It is really the varnish that deals with how it looks.

What do you think that the GREAT Day adds to the Geneseo community?

I think that GREAT Day is very important because it acknowledges what students have to offer. I think it is essential that students are able to learn more about what they love. I felt that GREAT Day was the perfect opportunity to organize my thoughts. I already did the research with many specialists in the field over the summer and they helped me. I did not do much in the fall. But in the spring, GREAT Day sort of crept on me and a professor actually told me that it was a great idea to organize everything that I know and present it. Because not a lot of people are interested, not a lot of people know the violin is such a complicated machine. People would just think that it just two pieces of wood with a neck and a head.

I think it is very interesting because physics, mathematics, chemistry, and history are involved in the making of the violin. It is fascinating because there is not one thing that makes a violin great. It is really multiple factors rather than just the quality of

the work, where is it from, what damage, and whatnot. Then, you go about color. How do you get to color slabs? There are two slabs; one you can make one piece and another two pieces back. The two pieces back... the back is made out of two smaller pieces of maple. It is hard to find good quality maple and it is from larger trees. So, in order to get good quality and to get a few small trees, you have to put these two pieces of maple together. You [have to clean the pieces] down to a walkable surface and you use smaller planes. After you trim out the excess, you cut the shape or form of the violin and do the top of whatever you have and finish that. I am giving you a very brief synopsis. Then you do the arching of the top and bottom. It is not just one flat piece of wood. It is carefully arched and you use mathematics and physics because it takes more than one spot and things like that. So, therefore it is more flexible. But then you run into the problem, "What do I thin out a lot and what do I not thin out too much?" Because, anything in one area that is too much then becomes too flexible. But then, a lot of makers do it on the top because it projects, and you get a louder violin. If you have a thicker plate, thicker back, and a thicker top, it is harder to activate those plates. You would just apply more weight, rather than speed in order to activate the strings. But, the strings' vibrations are just more difficult for its vibrations to enter the bridge, which then enters the top. Then, after you do the arching, finish [flattening down the woods], make the scroll, make the neck and clean the neck, you take a template and trace it out and pin holes so you know where to cut your angles. It is just such a complicated machine.

Over the summer I tried making a scroll. I went back to Tarisio, and they were planning to make violins but I just did not have the time. It was just so much work I had to do at the time. But, then after you finish the scroll you do the purfling, which is the decorative edge of the violin. Yes, it is decorative and more so serves the purpose so if you crack at the edge of the instrument, the crack would not go right through the instrument. The [purfling] of the violin, let's say that it cracks, is there to suck the pieces of wood. So, if there is a crack, [the purfling] stops [the crack] right there. That piece of wood protects the rest of the top. Then, you have the violin. Well, you do the pegs to cut the holes and push them and then you set up the varnish and the varnish is cooked resin. If we want a certain color and a certain hue, we want the resin [to be cooked] for a longer period of time. Cooking resin is usually, for months sometimes, very difficult and it's not easy. Let's see, you have the oil and resin to make the varnish. Some people use UV light in order to darken the wood over a short period of time because back then, they just laid it on the sun to just dry them out [and] to get it to a certain color. You have to make the ribs by making the top and back pieces together.

So, I do not want to go too far away from the subject. What make old violins special? It is hard to say. It could be the age, it could be the varnish. Some people say these violins have time to be passed down through generations because it was played a long time. Yes, the more you play the violin the more valuable it is, but then you reach that plateau where it would sound its best and when you do not play it, it would not sound as good. Some violins just sound terrible. A lot of people play a lot of instruments simply because it is not as temperamental. There are so many problems

due to humidity, it is too cold, if the air is dry—that affects the sound. But, I have a twenty-first century violin that was made this year [2018], and it was made by one of the world's leading violin makers. Their violins are played by renowned artists. Why do people choose these violins? Simply because they are better. They do not react so much and all these other factors. I personally think that the violin is beautiful. I am temperamental when it comes to sounds. It has been much better. The violin is just fascinating because they are so many facets. There are a whole set of problems if you go to expertise because you have really to know who make it [and] you have to know how violins are because every maker makes a slightly different [version]. Not every violin is the same. People would say, “Oh, there is a label!” Yes, there is a label in the violin, but five percent of the time, maybe eight or nine percent of the time, is fake. A lot of people take authentic labels and they are serving them as fake commodities. So, if you know if the violin is authentic, you have to look at the scrolls and the age of the wood.