

Patina and the Role of Nostalgia in the Field of
Stringed Instrument Cultural Production

by

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September 2007

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfilment of
the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

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ISBN: 978-0-494-38474-9
Our file *Notre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-38474-9

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Abstract

In this paper, the evocative nature of patina on stringed instruments is linked to the four agents of transformation that create it. These correspond to four nostalgic values: nostalgic reflection on the passage of time; nostalgia inspired by use; nostalgia for craftsmanship and pastoral nostalgia. Actors in the subfield of restricted cultural production of stringed instruments invoke one or more of these nostalgic values explicitly as a means to rationalize their actions to competing actors and to the broader public in their battle for status. Patina offers visible proof of their claims. Actors in the subfield of large-scale cultural production do not appeal to specific nostalgic values. Rather, they partake of the nostalgic aura surrounding antique instruments by “pasting” artificial patina onto their instruments. This serves to validate the *idea* of nostalgia. It also lays bare tensions existing in the broader field of cultural production over questions concerning the past and present.

Résumé

Dans ce document, la nature évocatrice de la patine des instruments à cordes est rattachée aux quatre agents de transformation qui la créent. Ceux-ci correspondent à quatre valeurs nostalgiques : réflexion nostalgique sur le temps qui fuit, nostalgie inspirée par l'usage, nostalgie d'un savoir-faire et nostalgie pastorale. Les acteurs du sous-domaine de production culturelle restreinte des instruments à cordes invoquent explicitement, auprès d'acteurs concurrents et du grand public, l'une ou plusieurs de ces valeurs nostalgiques pour légitimer leurs actions et leur prestige. La patine offre une preuve visible de leurs prétentions. Les acteurs du sous-domaine à grande échelle ne font pas appel à des valeurs nostalgiques particulières. Ils s'associent plutôt à l'aura de nostalgie qui entoure les instruments anciens en « habillant » leurs instruments d'une patine artificielle. Cela sert à valider l'*idée* de nostalgie. Cela met aussi à jour certaines tensions existant dans le domaine plus large de la production culturelle sur des questions concernant le passé et le présent.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Jonathan Sterne for his invaluable insight and advice in the preparation of this manuscript. I am also grateful to my colleagues Robert Barclay, Joe Grubaugh, Roger Hargrave and Ben Hebbert whose comments on the technical aspects of patina helped me to understand the nature of instrument surfaces and the process of wear. Finally, a great debt is owed to Louise Gauthier who coaxed me through prolonged periods of frustration and self-doubt with encouragement, patience and good humour in the course of editing the final text.

Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. Material Matters: The Structure and Transformation of Instrument Surfaces	
Surfaces	8
The Structure of Surfaces	8
The Transformation of Surfaces	10
Chapter 2. Nostalgia	20
Pathos: Nostalgic Reflection on the Passage of Time	25
Lineage and Heritage: Nostalgia Inspired by Use	27
Artisanal <i>Savoir Faire</i> : Nostalgia for Craftsmanship	33
The Reverence for Nature: Pastoral Nostalgia	37
Chapter 3. The Field of Restricted Cultural Production	41
Connoisseur-dealers	48
Musicians	55
Restorers	60
Collectors	67
Critics	71
Museum Custodians	72
Chapter 4. The Field of Mass Cultural Production: Patina Kitsch	76
Conclusion	85
Bibliography	88

Introduction

The world of Western classical music is intimately connected to its instruments. They uphold tradition, sustain careers and facilitate social interaction through musical and material exchange. Because instruments operate in so many spheres and link them together, they are invested with extraordinary symbolic power. They *are* symbols and function as metaphorical vehicles for transmitting the fundamental beliefs, values and sensibilities of the milieu.¹ Bowed string instruments in particular (hereafter referred to as stringed instruments) encompass a vast range of highly charged emotional and social dimensions above and beyond their original utilitarian callings.² They are nostalgic icons and the patina found on their surfaces a form of iconography that invites us to look beyond the physical world and reflect upon the myriad connections among objects, time and people.

The most likely source of the word patina seems to be the early seventeenth-century Italian term *patena*, which referred to a shiny, dark varnish smeared on shoes. Later in the century, its meaning changed to connote the protective varnishes commonly applied to paintings which tended to darken over time. Cesare Brandi, quoting Filippo Baldinucci's *Vocabolario Toscano dell'Arte del Disegno* (1691), defined patina as a "term employed by painters, which they otherwise call skin, it being that general darkness

¹ Christopher Tilley, "Metaphor, Materiality and Interpretation," in Victor Bulchi, ed., *The Material Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 30.

² Stringed instruments include violins, violas, cellos and basses.

which time causes to appear on paintings and which often enhances them as well.”³ Its present use as a term relating to the general effects of time is fairly recent and was originally restricted to paintings and later applied to metallic objects.⁴ All cultural artifacts, regardless of their original purpose will, with the passage of time, exhibit evidence of natural aging and wear. This is as true of objects of a purely artistic or aesthetic nature, such as sculptures, as it is of things of a more commonplace or utilitarian character, such as buildings or, for our purposes, stringed instruments and bows. The question of whether or not patina enhances objects is open to discussion and subject to changes in taste and fashion. Nevertheless, patina carries social meaning and acts as a unifying force that serves to tie the disparate elements of an object together in the course of muting bright colours, rounding rough edges and softening sharp corners.

But what precisely is patina and what are some of its characteristics? As a point of departure, we could describe it as the absence of newness. For patina manifests itself almost immediately upon the completion of an object’s fabrication. The mere handling of an object just completed imparts a measure of wear, if only a fingerprint. Likewise, simply posing the bridge on a newly constructed violin inevitably marks the varnish.

Secondly, human participation in the object’s creation is central. Even if natural objects are subjected to the same processes of age and deterioration, we do not choose to

³ Cesare Brandi, “The Cleaning of Pictures in Relation to Patina, Varnish, and Glazes,” in Nicolas Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley Jr. and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro, eds., *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), pp. 380-381.

⁴ Phoebe Dent Weil, “A Review of the History and Practice of Patination,” in Price, Talley and Vaccaro, p. 399.

recognize or identify the resultant scars or traces as patina: pebbles in a river bed get ground down and become rounded; a piece of wood will oxidize and eventually rot.

Thirdly, it is overwhelmingly unique or near-unique crafted objects that are described as being patinated. Except in rare personalized cases, such as dolls, manufactured goods are seldom acknowledged as having acquired patina. Antique cars or kettles obviously age and can even appreciate in our esteem, both as commodities and as cultural artifacts. But we think of mass produced goods as being too abundant, too mundane or too perfunctory to have survived the passage of time in a distinctive manner (excepting perhaps items previously owned by famous luminaries). Industrial labour is distinguished by the prevalence of repetition over craftsmanship and fragment over totality.⁵ Conversely, some objects are more highly valued because they represent an antithetical mode of production that is both inimitable and authentic.

Finally, patina is generally limited to an object's exterior. It is the surface that attracts attention – its shape, contours, colour, shading, degree of hardness or softness, fragrance and texture. This is unremarkable given that it is the surface of an object that is most accessible and therefore most readily appreciated. It is the surface that bears the finest craftsmanship and finishing of not only the original creator, but also of all those who have subsequently contributed to the object's conservation or restoration. And it is the surface which records the passage of time and which is exposed to environmental

⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 68.

elements and the vagaries of usage “as if, in the rigidity of its repetitions, it had existed forever, having been submitted to the pitiless eternity of the clockwork.”⁶

In the case of stringed instruments, patina offers visual proof not only that the instrument is genuinely old, but that the music itself is enduring and meaningful. In Western classical music, where the listening experience is heavily mediated, there is a tendency toward “a nostalgic myth of contact and presence.”⁷ Participation is both intangible and allusive; it exists beyond the sphere of the present and is displaced into realms where the antique, the natural, the rare and other phantasmal ideals are communicated. During this process of distancing, the memory of the body is besieged by the emotional evocations of the instrument which lie outside of it. The instrument is steeped in meanings which are revealed to the musician, the audience and observers as emotions.⁸ These emotions are nostalgic in nature and are nourished by the signs of corrosion, erosion and chemical transformation found on the object’s surface – by patina. In other words, patina is the material manifestation of nostalgia. Coincidentally, the nostalgic emotions that patina elicits are the same as those that animate the stringed instrument world.

In this paper, four transforming agents are identified as acting on the surfaces of stringed instruments: the passage of time, patterns of use, craft intervention and environmental factors. These transforming agents create patina and are linked to four nostalgic values: a respect for the past; an acknowledgment of the significance of lineage

⁶ Theodor Adorno, “The Form of the Phonograph,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 279.

⁷ Stewart, p. 133.

⁸ *Ibid.*

and continuity in the instrument's history; an appreciation for craft; and a reverence for nature. Actors in the stringed instrument field of cultural production – connoisseurs, musicians, restorers, collectors, commentators, museum curators and conservators, manufacturers and consumers – invoke one or all of these values to explain and justify their actions to competing actors and the general public. In the following pages, patina is understood as the material representation of these values – the physical touchstone underlying the assorted protestations of the actors.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, commercial manufacturers in the subfield of mass or large-scale cultural production have artificially induced patina to access the nostalgic values it awakens. Beyond partaking of the aura surrounding the original instruments, this paper seeks to demonstrate that the “pasting” of patina onto new instruments also reinforces the authority of the nostalgic values manipulated elsewhere in the field. Though actors in the large-scale field do not themselves specifically invoke these values, they do appeal to nostalgia in a larger sense. This raises important issues about the discordant manner in which the actors in both subfields interpret the past and its relationship to the present depending on their position in the field.

The literature on stringed instruments is vast. It includes historical works, technical treatises, repair manuals, picture books of famous collections, acoustical analyses and playing instruction handbooks. Similarly, the literature on patina is fairly extensive in volume if not in variety. The majority of it concerns the technical aspects of patina on bronze sculptures, and to a lesser degree, on paintings and deals mostly with questions of how it forms, whether it is desirable or not, and what should be done to protect or remove it. Very little of it inquires into the meaning of patina beyond noting

that it has a muting, almost soothing effect.⁹ Almost nothing has been written on patina as it relates to stringed instruments. Most of the literature borrows heavily from the fine arts¹⁰ and is concentrated on the technical aspects of how coatings degrade over time.¹¹ Otherwise, patina has recently come up for discussion with regard to matters of authenticity but even this is in its infancy – no typology has yet been constructed. Again, none of the sources broach the topic of meaning.

As a way to shed light on the matter, the writings of Susan Stewart, Michael Thompson, Grant McCracken and Arjun Appadurai on the role of material culture in society together with those of Fred Davis and Svetlana Bohm on nostalgia are considered here. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* provides a helpful framework that makes sense of the behaviour of actors in the world of stringed instruments.

The above works have been supplemented by twenty-five years of professional experience as an instrument maker, restorer and dealer. Most of the descriptive information that follows is based on the direct physical examination of countless instruments and on the opinions, comments and practices of luthier colleagues. It is also based on the observation of and interaction with people listening to, looking at and

⁹ Brandi, "The Theory of Restoration," in Price, Talley and Vaccaro, pp. 377-379.

¹⁰ Sources often cited include Brandi, "The Cleaning of Pictures in Relation to Patina, Varnish, and Glazes," in Price, Talley and Vaccaro; Knut Nicolaus, *The Restoration of Paintings* (Cologne: Könemann, 1999) and Sheldon Keck, "Mechanical Alteration of the Paint Film," *Studies in Conservation* 14, no. 1 (February 1969): pp. 9-30.

¹¹ Vera de Bruyn-Ouboter, "Schäden und Veränderungen transparenten Überzügen auf Musikinstrumenten," in *Studien zur Erhaltung von Musikinstrumenten*, ed. Friedemann Hellwig, vol. 16 of *Kölner Beiträge zur Restaurierung von Kunst und Kulturgut* (Munich: Anton Siegl, 2004), pp. 150-235.

reacting to these same instruments, whether they be actors in the field of cultural production or members of the general public.

Before embarking on an exploration of the connections between patina, nostalgia and the field of cultural production, it is first necessary to outline the general nature of patina, then examine some of the specific physical features of instrument surfaces and the manner in which they age. The relevance of these technical matters will become apparent upon examination of their specific roles in invoking nostalgia. The four nostalgic values that emerge will then be explored individually. Finally, their relation to the subfields of restricted and large-scale cultural production will be discussed.

Chapter 1

Material Matters: The Structure and Transformation of Instrument Surfaces

The Structure of Surfaces

When we look at a varnished object, what we actually see is the interaction between the substrate and the various transparent layers which have been applied on top of it and act as a lens or filter.¹ Collectively, these covering layers are referred to as the coating. In reality, it may be difficult to differentiate between the various layers of a coating depending on the materials involved, the method of application and the time which has subsequently elapsed between applications.

The substrate, wood in the case of stringed instruments, is generally subjected to specialized mechanical treatments to prepare its surface for the application of the coating. These treatments have varied over time and place. They include simple scraping and burnishing with specialized metal tools or broken glass, but also polishing with powdered abrasives or rough materials, such as horsehair or sandpaper. The manner in which the substrate is prepared influences the appearance of the coating.

The coatings of stringed instruments are comprised of two separate components. The first is a layer known as the ground. It can be very thin and virtually undetectable to the naked eye, or it can be quite thick and clearly visible. It may be transparent or coloured. In fact, the ground may not be a layer at all, but rather the end-product of two or

¹ Koen Padding, "A Rational Look at the Classical Italian Coatings," *VSA Papers* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2005): p. 13.

more different applications.² Regardless of its composition, the ground protects the wood fibres of the substrate and provides a stable and level foundation for the varnish to follow. Aesthetically, it influences the colour, luminosity and texture of the finished appearance. Because stringed instruments are continually handled and subjected to wear and tear through use, the ground is typically exposed on different areas of the instrument and therefore can be scrutinized relatively easily.³ While most “classical” instruments from Italy seem to share the same ground when illuminated under ultraviolet light, there is nevertheless enough variation to situate them according to regional traditions.

The second component of stringed instrument coatings is the varnish layer. This layer protects the instrument from dirt and damp, homogenizes surface texture and gloss level and gives colours depth and saturation. As is evident when looking at most stringed instruments, the underlying coats of the varnish layer are often pigmented (this qualifies them technically as paints) and the later ones are usually transparent and uncoloured.

Although there is tremendous variation among varnishes, they fall into three broad categories based on their composition and their preparation method preparation: Alcohol varnishes, spirit oil varnishes and drying oil varnishes.⁴ Regardless of category, all of

² In painting, the ground is often comprised of a preparatory sizing to seal the wood or canvas, a filler to provide a uniform surface on which to apply the succeeding layers and then a primer, often very fine in texture and sometimes coloured, to ensure the paint adheres to the surface. Andrea Kirsh and Rustin S. Levenson, *Seeing through Paintings* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 71.

³ The ground in paintings is often difficult to examine, since it is sandwiched between the substrate and the more opaque paint layers.

⁴ Correspondence with Stewart Pollens, 14-15 February, 2006.

them may be described in terms of thickness, hardness, colour, transparency, surface texture and luminosity.⁵

Varnish has acquired mythical status in the violin world. Historical accounts, technical studies and sales catalogues of instruments are often filled with florid or extravagant descriptions of varnishes. These accounts may vary from simple praise of a varnish's optical properties to exaggerated claims concerning its effect on the tonal qualities of an instrument. In reality, such claims are spurious. While the chemical components of older varnishes can be determined, their application method cannot. And even if it were feasible to control the hundreds of other variables that determine sound quality, the physical transformation of varnish over time is impossible to reproduce in the lab. Varnish is fetishized precisely because it *is* a mystery. And this despite the fact that the original varnish on most antique instruments has worn away and what remains can at best be described as residual. The explanation for this can be found in the manner in which surfaces transform over time and in the emotions these changes induce.

The Transformation of Surfaces

There are four principle agents involved in the transformation of musical instrument surfaces. These are the passage of time, patterns of use, craft intervention and the environment.

⁵ For a more complete discussion of varnishes, see Stewart Pollens, "Cleaning and Retouching Violin Varnish with a Discussion of Colour Theory" and Mel Wachowiak, "The Nature of Coatings and the Care of Historic Varnishes," in Thomas Wilder, ed., *The Restoration and Conservation of Stringed Instruments and their Bows* (forthcoming).

The Passage of Time

The passage of time refers to the physical and chemical metamorphosis of the wood and coatings over time, independent of usage (or accidents), craft intervention and environmental factors. Few materials can be considered permanent and some, such as coatings, may even be inherently instable when layers or ingredients interact destructively with each other.⁶

While it is true that the exterior surface of the substrate of stringed instruments is isolated by protective coatings, the wood nevertheless oxidizes over time – albeit at a slower rate than would be the case if it were left exposed. Such oxidization leads to a certain darkening of the surface.

Wood (spruce in particular) may also harden and shrink as it dries over time. Indeed, all organic media transform as they age, losing plasticity and elasticity while gaining in hardness and brittleness.⁷ There is also a tendency for them to shrink. This is true of both the ground and the varnish layer. In the case of the ground, however, these two developments are difficult to quantify. Depending on its composition and degree of pigmentation, there is also the possibility that the ground colour will fade, or more likely, that it will darken over time. Again, this is not easy to determine when it is contiguous with the wood. One fairly common problem of the ground is poor adhesion to the substrate. This may be the result of faulty preparation of either the substrate or the ground which betrays itself increasingly with the passage of time.

⁶ Sheldon Keck, "Mechanical Alteration of the Paint Film," *Studies in Conservation* 14, no. 1 (February 1969): p. 9.

⁷ Keck, pp. 10-11.

Because varnishes are more generously applied than the ground and are left bare, the physical and chemical transformations of the varnish layer are more easily observed. For example, any hardening and shrinking of the varnish manifests itself noticeably in the surface texture. Grain lines, wood figure and tool marks are all accentuated as the varnish dries and contracts. Likewise, most brushed-on transparent varnishes tend to discolour to yellow or yellowish-brown (this aside from any pigment that may be suspended in the varnish) as they age. This discolouration is apparent in areas of the instrument where the varnish has worn off gradually. Like a stratified geological formation, the residual varnish layers reveal the intensity of pigmentation and the degree of discolouration of the varnish.

To be sure, different varnishes transform in different ways depending on their composition, the manner in which they were applied and the circumstances of their existence. Regardless, colour, transparency, hardness, thickness, surface texture and luminosity are all subject to change. Some varnishes appear to be more stable than others. In fact, it is only a matter of degree, since every varnish evolves with the passage of time. And this evolution is not necessarily linear – different phenomena may manifest themselves at different times in the course of aging depending on the instrument and the material makeup of the coating. Varnishes may take many years, perhaps even decades to dry, harden, stabilize or bond with the underlying ground and substrate.

Patterns of Use

Because stringed instruments are working tools, the most dramatic transformation to the substrate and coating – and the one that most resonates emotionally with musicians and listeners – arises from extended use. This transformation is striking because most markings are localized and restricted to those areas in constant contact with the player or

the case. Virtually the entire surface area of an instrument will be marked by abrasions of assorted shapes and sizes. Markings due to impacts arising from minor accidents or forceful playing are oftentimes random and superficial. In contrast, those due to steady playing or routine handling are localized and usually deeper. The difference is conspicuous. Here, the coating wears away over time. Large areas of the substrate are thereafter exposed to the elements and to human secretions, such as sweat and oil. On the one hand, the wood changes in colour to a grey-green, sometimes verging on black, even as the distinction between winter and summer grain of the spruce table decreases. The figure of the maple back and ribs appears muted. On the other hand, the wood's texture becomes rougher, more pronounced: winter grain lines stand out on the spruce table; the figure of the maple back and ribs is heightened.

While most of this wear is attributable to the playing of the instrument – tuning, shifting, bowing, pizzicato – some of it derives from routine manipulation: taking the instrument in and out of its case wears down the outer edges; repeatedly placing the instrument on hard, flat surfaces, such as tables or floors, either abrades the edges or scratches the back plate; and more recently, the continuous adjustment of the shoulder rest has resulted in the erosion of the lower bout edges on the backs of violins and violas.

Because the ground is thinner and often contiguous if not constituent with the wood, its erosion in most cases leads to the deterioration of the substrate. Once the protective varnish has worn away, the ground becomes vulnerable to corrosion and staining. Of course, each ground is different, and the degree to which an unprotected ground is able to withstand exposure to the environment and use tells us much about its durability.

Since the exposed surface area of the varnish layer is so large and variable and so much thicker than the ground, the manner in which it wears is, to the eye, more varied. The larger areas of wear give us clues as to the varnish's thickness, durability and hardness. As the outermost layer, the varnish wears away first through abrasion from the corrosive effects of sweat, beards and makeup.

In contrast to the substrate and ground, it is not just the parts of the varnish surface subject to continual rubbing on hard surfaces or those in sustained contact with the player's body that exhibit signs of age. Other parts of the instrument are vulnerable as well – to accidents and minor mishaps related to playing and to the normal mechanical wear and tear engendered by the instrument's setup and use (such as scratches around the peg holes, bridge-foot impressions on the table, fine-tuner marks under the tailpiece, fingernail pocks beside the fingerboard). Add to these the bangs (usually on edges), nicks, scratches, burns and stains occasioned by unfortunate incidents typically unrelated to playing or storage, and one notes that most instruments over a hundred years old are covered by literally hundreds, often thousands of blemishes. The innumerable smaller, more random markings – the superficial scratches, dings, dents and pocks that rarely penetrate to the ground or substrate – inform us of the varnish's relative brittleness, reveal the varnish layer's depth and provide some insight into the nature of the bond between the varnish and ground coats.

Craft Intervention

Craft intervention refers to those operations undertaken by craftspeople (skilled or otherwise) to repair damaged parts, to counteract the three other agents of change, to maintain the instrument in optimum playing condition or to modernize it according to the

technical and aesthetic standards of the day.⁸ Given that music is forever evolving, and with it the demands placed upon the instruments, these standards are in constant flux. Other factors contribute to this state of affairs: economic conditions vary, techniques improve (altering the parameters of what can be done), skills progress, materials change and colours fade. Further, matters of taste are culturally and historically bound – not only as regards sound but also in terms of what is considered visually appealing.⁹ In any age, the things we repair and the way we repair them say something about what we value. Standards of intervention have never remained static; they have always been open to re-examination.

The interventions sustained by an instrument provide an important record of previous technical and aesthetic standards and of past repair methods. Recognizing and analyzing such interventions is important, because in many cases, they transform the surfaces irrevocably – removing texture, filling in abrasions, accentuating grain lines and sealing in dirt. In some instances, the interventions inadvertently remove existing patina, only to add to it later. Other times, interventions are undertaken with the express purpose of “correcting” forms of naturally occurring patina judged aesthetically wanting. Most contemporary restorers seek to simulate the already extant patina in an effort to render their work “invisible” to the naked eye in daylight (and increasingly under black light). Regardless, these operations necessarily impact on the integrity of the instrument’s surface, since the retouch varnish used to protect and disguise repairs and restoration can never truly match the original.

⁸ For example, in recent years, we have witnessed the resetting of cello necks with higher overstands and projections in accordance with new string technologies and a desire for more “power.”

⁹ Witness the late-twentieth-century craze for French polish and a shiny finish which is only now abating.

Environmental Factors

Finally, changing environmental conditions can have far-reaching implications for various components of an instrument – including the coating. Wood expands and contracts in proportion to changes in temperature and humidity, while surfaces are further affected by continuous exposure to airborne substances, pollution, bacteria and ultraviolet light.

In addition to the extended lateral shrinkage that accompanies the slow drying of wood, the substrate is also subject to continuous change due to fluctuations in humidity. Wood, whether new or old, is both hygroscopic and hygroscopic – it absorbs and releases moisture consequent on the surrounding atmospheric humidity.¹⁰ As a result, wood is dimensionally unstable: it expands (laterally) when conditions are humid and shrinks when the surrounding air is dry. Prolonged exposure to excessive humidity can lead to physical deformation, such as warping. Extreme dryness invariably leads to cracking of the wood and subsequent craft intervention to repair it. The instability caused by swings in humidity levels may manifest itself in the overlaying ground and varnish layers, depending on their thickness and elasticity. Highly elastic and resilient coatings are better able to accommodate the uninterrupted expansion and contraction of the substrate and less likely to exhibit certain types of deterioration.

Since the ground is covered by varnish, environmental factors come into play in those areas of an instrument where abrasion or corrosion resulting from extended use have stripped away the last protective varnish layer. Once exposed to the elements, there is a risk that humidity and temperature changes may hasten the deterioration of the

¹⁰ See David Grattan, “Wood Properties and Bowed String Instruments,” in Wilder (forthcoming).

ground or perhaps weaken the bond between it and the substrate. Furthermore, airborne particles (aside from those related to playing, such as rosin dust or sweat) can attach themselves to the ground and even impregnate the underlying wood. When mixed in with the ground, these particles may darken the overall appearance of the unprotected surface. In contrast, direct exposure to sunlight can lead to fading where the ground is heavily coloured.

Each coat of the varnish layer is affected by environmental factors from the moment of its application. For example, even as the last coat is drying, ambient dust particles may settle on its surface. In the end however, long-term exposure to shifts in temperature and humidity, and to UV radiation are the principle environmental considerations.

Temperature can impact on varnish profoundly. Most varnishes will soften in warmer temperatures, which can lead to case marks, fingerprints and rosin dust adhering permanently to the surface. These blemishes will remain in the varnish indefinitely, unless they are mechanically removed with an abrasive or filled in with polish. In instances of extreme heat, such as fire, blistering occurs.

Humidity is also an important factor – both indirectly and directly – in the alteration of the varnish layer. Indirectly because, as mentioned earlier, the dimensional volatility of wood precipitated by swings in humidity levels may prompt the varnish to “crack” depending on its elasticity and its thickness of application. While the presence of a coating on the exterior surface moderates the rate of expansion and contraction of the wood, this is not to say that the varnish layer, much thicker than the ground, is in itself resilient and able to withstand the constant changes. More directly, high humidity levels can affect the varnish and give rise to an assortment of conditions.

Exposure to UV rays, or sunlight, causes colours to fade. Virtually all pigments are fugitive – it is simply a question of degree. Thus, the varnish colour as we see it today is markedly different from when it was initially applied. Reds in particular are quite unstable. It seems likely that many of the redder varnishes we appreciate on older instruments today were quite bright to begin with. Counterbalancing this general lightening of varnish colour is the aforementioned tendency of the substrate to oxidize and darken gradually over time. While it varies from pigment to pigment, in general, the varnish's rate of colour fade is faster than its rate of colour change due to oxidization of the coated wooden surface. Both alterations serve to mute the overall appearance of the surface.

This trend is further enhanced by the accumulation of rosin dust, dirt and soot (an important consideration in the days of coal and candles) that accrue naturally on top of the varnish, even if the instrument is sitting unused in its case. The build-up of dirt inevitably takes place in areas difficult of access, such as under the fingerboard, tailpiece, chinrest and edges. Similarly, the turns of the scroll and the area surrounding the endpin are apt to become encrusted with dirt. In certain instances, deposits of foreign matter may, through the acts of “cleaning” and “polishing,” become constituent of the varnish itself. This occurs when the dirt mixes in with cleaning agents or commercial polishes and settles in abrasions, cracks or low-lying parts of the surface. The process of “French polishing” seals and consolidates these accumulated dirt deposits.¹¹

To summarize, the four agents of transformation – the passage of time, patterns of use, craft intervention and environmental factors – act on instruments in a myriad of ways

¹¹ See also Pdraig O'Dublaidh, “The Cleaning of Musical Instruments,” in Wilder (forthcoming).

and renders each one simultaneously unique and of a piece. Unique in the sense that each instrument leads an individual existence as inscribed on its surface, and of a piece insofar as a generalized evidence of patina also implies membership in a class of objects endowed with particular symbolic attributes that transport the observer into the past. Breaking down patina into its constituent forces allows us to better understand how this phenomenon takes place, since each one bears on the past in a particular way and evokes a different emotional response. How and why this occurs is discussed below.

Chapter 2

Nostalgia

Because of its close association with age and artifacts, nostalgia is a useful concept when talking about the past and individual attitudes toward the past. Nostalgia is really just one particular form of memory. The word nostalgia has Greek roots – *nostros*, meaning to return home, and *algos*, meaning pain. It was originally coined in 1688 by a Swiss medical student to denote a medical condition of extreme homesickness unique to Swiss mercenaries.¹ It was seen as an individual “disorder of the imagination” from the start – but curable nonetheless. By the end of the nineteenth century, the word had mutated into a generalized description of an incurable condition of the spirit. The term also lost its military and medical associations.² What facilitated that transition was a shift in emphasis from the spatial to the temporal. Nostalgia ceased to be a simple yearning for home. It transformed into a yearning for a time, specifically a time of youth. Unlike place, time is irreversible and can never be returned to. It is the irrecoverable nature of the past that rendered the sickness of nostalgia incurable.³

Today, while homesickness remains a core component of nostalgia, though in a supporting role, it is no longer characterized as a medical condition. Rather it is seen as a sentiment whose primary referent is the past. Where nostalgia was formerly confined in

¹ Linda Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,”

www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html, 19 January 1998, p. 3.

² Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), p. 4.

³ For more on the medical and psychological aspects of nostalgia, see Willis H. McCann, “Nostalgia: A Review of the Literature,” *Psychological Bulletin* 38 (1941): pp. 165-82 and “Nostalgia: A Descriptive and Comparative Study,” *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 62 (1943): pp. 97-104; George Rosen, “Nostalgia: A ‘Forgotten’ Psychological Disorder,” *Clio Medica* 10, no. 1 (1975): 28-51.

space or in the immediate past of the subject, it now engulfs the entire past – an imagined past detached from personal experience of the subject. This may be related to what Karl Polanyi refers to as “the great transformation” whereby the notion of “home” in the traditional sense appears increasingly anachronistic, given the mobility of families and individuals in contemporary Western societies.⁴ The frenetic movement of peoples and information in sociogeographic space has served to temper people’s deep psychological attachment to any specific locality. Instead of place, an idealized past is now the predominant psychological touchstone in this age of rapid and uncertain change. It is a variety of memory “whose active tendency is to envelop all that may have been painful or unattractive about the past in a kind of fuzzy, redeemingly benign aura.”⁵ Moreover, it is a form of memory that is increasingly shared by members of a community. That is, it is no longer restricted to individuals but rather has taken hold of the entire population. It is collective.

In *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, Fred Davis argues the contrary: that while rooted in a collective past, nostalgia is essentially an individual phenomena since, for him, it is based on personal experience. For Davis, nostalgia is qualitatively different from “antiquarian feeling,” which he describes as “story-derived enchantment” with particular periods of the past.⁶ Because antiquarian feelings are sustained by history books, legends, memorial tablets and oral narratives, they are unduly susceptible to imaginative speculation. They are unreliable because they are not constrained by the memory of events and places from one’s own life. Davis then goes on

⁴ See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farar & Rinehart, 1944).

⁵ Davis, p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

to weaken if not subvert this distinction by noting that our general “awareness of the past, our summoning of it, our very knowledge that it *is* past, can be nothing other than present experience.”⁷ In other words, what occasions us to feel nostalgic or antiquarian derives from the present and our interpretation of the present, regardless of how much it is sustained by memories, real or imagined, of the past. The simple and pure past is juxtaposed with the bureaucratic, rapidly changing and technologically complex present. Nostalgia is selective. It sanitizes the past, making it seem authentic and pristine as opposed to the anxiety ridden and inauthentic world of today. Emotions that idealize the past, or at best render it innocuous, say more about the present than they do about the past. Linda Hutcheon has observed that, “the aesthetics of nostalgia might, therefore, be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with dissatisfaction with the present.”⁸ But the present is always shared, and this is what allows us to speak of nostalgia as a collective enterprise.

It is not my intention here to offer a detailed critique of community and its sociological features. In the present context, it is functional as an idea by virtue of its very lack of precision, its dependence on defining characteristics, its vague, mutating contours. For these are qualities it shares with memory – itself a misty idea clouded with uncertainty and marked by ambiguity. In drawing attention to the basic connection between human groups and memory, community as a term is flexible enough to take into account the variety and disparate intensities of collective memory.

Maurice Halbwachs maintains that collective memory is a social construct which endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people. That is, it is

⁷ Davis, p. 9.

⁸ Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” p. 3.

individuals as group members of a community who remember.⁹ Individual memories are largely informed by group attachments and as such are habitually collective in nature.

Everything seems to indicate that the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present. It is necessary to show, besides, that the collective frameworks of memory are not constructed after the fact by the combination of individual recollections; nor are they empty forms where recollections coming from elsewhere would insert themselves. Collective frameworks are, to the contrary, precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society.¹⁰

The collective nature of memory in combination with its tendency to confound or recombine in some sense the present with the past, to project the present onto the past and vice versa, bears witness to the unifying force of memory. If communities are to survive into the future, they are obliged to reach back into the past for their shape, their justification and their defining moments – in short, their identity. This searching finds expression in the material world. For the cultural artifacts imbued with symbolic import and historical significance to a community also serve to define it. They are collective mementos. Curios gleaned from the past. The nostalgic reflection, triggered by old objects which do not necessarily feature in the direct past of observers, is a shared emotion. It is what we feel when two temporal moments, past and present, come together.¹¹ The patina inscribed on the surfaces of such objects is a sort of language, a collective memory code, understood by all members of a community. It is a language that helps us manage with change as it becomes increasingly apparent that the present is rapidly becoming unrecognizable. As Victor Buchli argues, “the nineteenth century idea that culture change could be evinced from our relationship to objects and thereby coped

⁹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 22.

¹⁰ Halbwachs, pp. 39-40.

¹¹ Hutcheon, p. 5.

with effectively has not really shifted much.”¹² By evoking a shared past, cultural artifacts pay homage to a collective present seemingly under threat.

What is it about old objects in general and instruments in particular that strikes a chord in the public imagination? They seem to address a reservoir of nostalgia shared by all of us. The four agents of transformation outlined above provide a clue. Each one corresponds in some manner to a particular aspect of shared nostalgic memory. The passage of time relates to an idealized past brought into the present and projected into the future; use patterns conjure up images of continuity, lineage and artistic accomplishment; craft intervention is suggestive of disappearing artisanal skills; and environmental factors speak to the enduring reality of nature. All four nostalgic values are alluded to in the following passage by John Ruskin:

It is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and color, and preciousness of architecture; and it is not until a building has assumed this character, till it has been entrusted with the fame, and hallowed by the deeds of men, till its walls have been witnesses of suffering, and its pillars rise out of the shadows of death, that its existence, more lasting than that of the natural objects of the world around it, can be gifted with even so much as these possess, of language and of life.¹³

Though here concerned with architecture, Ruskin’s sentiments apply equally to all cultural artifacts. And it is clear that the emotions evinced by such artifacts relate to the qualities that we impute to them as members of a community. Ruskin termed this collective ability to clothe objects with aesthetic attributes the pathetic fallacy.¹⁴

Communities attribute these qualities to the material as means to gain access to a guarded past – a past devoid of the conflict and complexity that marks the present. One

¹² “Introduction,” in Victor Buchli, ed., *The Material Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 13.

¹³ John Ruskin, “The Lamp of Memory,” in Price, Talley and Vaccaro, pp. 42-43.

¹⁴ Robert Barclay, *The Preservation and Use of Historic Musical Instruments* (London: Earthscan, 2004), p. 8.

that is frozen, objectified and reified, but grounded in a certain continuity, an acknowledgment of artistic accomplishment, a respect for fine craftsmanship and an appreciation of nature. But it is also a past that demands physical proof; that the traces of time, patina in fact, remain as evidence of the community's glorious history and enduring relevance. In our own day and place, stringed instruments provide such assurance. They put forward the fantasy that at least a narrow aspect of history has been preserved intact. The four nostalgic values are the doors that offer access to this fantasy. Patina is the key of entry.

Pathos: Nostalgic Reflection on the Passage of Time

In a certain sense, the life of an instrument begins when the luthier prepares the materials and then forms and assembles them into a recognizable and functional object. This construction phase may last anywhere from two or three weeks to two or three years depending on the age of the wood and the construction methods employed. As a process, the making of an instrument may hold a certain romantic appeal given the ever rarer and highly specialized skills involved in its creation. But during the construction phase, the object remains little more than a curious assemblage of parts. It only acquires meaning upon completion as a finished artisanal object and as a useful tool for making music. In the second phase, the construction of the object is supplanted by the construction of meaning. During this active phase, the instrument accumulates meaning through the simple realization of existence as a discreet, finished entity – as something that is old. It may stretch across decades, if not centuries, through alternating intervals of respect, disdain, indulgence, neglect, indifference, despondency and adoration. No matter the nature or degree of attention showered on the instrument, it is always accompanied by

material and semiotic transformations aside from use, the environment or the work of succeeding craftspeople.

The mere fact of longevity, of having survived centuries, produces an effect of idealization and spiritualization. This allure of longevity is of two orders: Firstly as it relates to the genus of orchestral instruments, since most of them have retained their basic form and function for over 150 years and the violin for as long as 450 years. In comparison with most other artifacts of Western culture, such constancy in design is truly extraordinary.¹⁵ And secondly as it relates to specific members of that genus, to individual instruments that continue to endure even as they show signs of transformation or even decay.

The closer the instrument comes to returning to a state of “unformed mineral mass out of which its (maker) had taken it,” the more it seems to speak to us as a semiotic object.¹⁶ Antique instruments possess a “dream-like” quality which persuades us that present reality preserves within itself a potential timelessness, despite all of the evidence to the contrary.¹⁷ Patina, in which time is literally inscribed on the instrument, has the ability to summon forth both personal and collective memories in cultural form and to provisionally enshroud the present with attributes of the past. Patina facilitates a conversation between the two in which the past suggests the possibility of continuity or even eternity. It is a simple question of immortality – the fact of the instruments having avoided destruction, despite the scarring, after so many centuries of continuous use.

Because immortality is a condition denied human beings and communities, we look for it

¹⁵ Karin Bijsterveld and Marten Schulp, “Breaking into a World of Perfection: Innovation in Today’s Classical Musical Instruments,” *Social Studies of Science* 34, no. 5 (October 2004): p. 649.

¹⁶ Marguerite Yourcenar, *That Mighty Sculptor, Time* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), p. 57.

¹⁷ Michael Rowlands, “Heritage and Cultural Property,” in Buchli, p. 110.

in objects that predate us and that promise to survive us as well. Pierre Bourdieu has eloquently declared: “Time is one of the most efficient ways to put reality at a distance ... and thus paradoxically to create eternity.”¹⁸ Nostalgic reflection on the passage of time is, in effect, nostalgia for the future we will not experience.

Lineage and Heritage: Nostalgia Inspired by Use

Objects that manage to maintain their relevance over a long period of time are a rarity in a consumer society that revolves around fashion and is characterized by the built-in obsolescence of most of its products. Violins are appreciated for this very reason. For the most part, it is the scarring due to playing that most clearly resonates with observers since they *want* to associate the majority of wear on its surface to use. Accordingly, patina related to playing is not only left untouched or “uncorrected” by craftspeople occupied with the instrument’s upkeep, it is actively emulated when pieces wear out and are replaced. This is particularly true on the exterior of older instruments, where patina is simulated so that new or damaged parts blend in inconspicuously with the rest of the instrument.

Most objects pass through particular stages of existence. They are in motion so to speak. Initially, commodity status is bestowed upon them as a result of their function to suit a specific need. From a strictly economic point of view, a commodity is an item that has a use value. Once its utilitarian role is served, the object becomes disposable, unless a process of singularization takes place. Singularization is a social transaction. Society

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 246.

needs to set apart some portion of its objects, or commodities, as “sacred.” Culture makes certain that some objects remain unequivocally singular.¹⁹

The case of stringed instruments is rather unique since those that have been singularized are, for the most part, still in use. If not in active circulation, then they have been retired to museums or private collections to be admired as sacred relicts. Since many of them were commissioned by the nobility, they acquired singular status directly upon completion. This, according to Michael Thompson, qualifies them as art:

Those objects that go straight from production to the durable category represent a miniscule proportion of all the objects being produced. Objects which make this transfer are clearly distinct from those involved in the other transfers ... they are art.²⁰

In Thompson’s system, cultural commodities can be assigned to one of two visible categories which he identifies as “transient” or “durable.” Those objects in the first group decrease in value over time and have limited life spans while those in the durable category appreciate in value and have, in an ideal world, indefinite life spans.²¹ Objects are consigned to categories by means of a social control mechanism which identifies those qualities, positive or negative, associated with each one. “Objects have the qualities that they have as a result of a social process of endowment” which may or may not relate to their physical properties.²² This process of endowment is a social construct compounded of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions. The assorted readings of an object and the various actions that result are influenced by the cultural disposition of

¹⁹ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 73.

²⁰ Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 115.

²¹ Thompson, p. 7.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

the observer and determined by the social, cultural and historical milieus in which the observation takes place. In general, the attribution of desirable qualities is controlled by an elite or by other more restricted groups that wield cultural hegemony who define what is worthy within a particular cultural sphere. Only members have the power to decide which objects are transient and which are durable and thereby guarantee that their own objects are forever durable and that those of others are always transient.²³

These two categories do not encompass the entire universe of goods however. Others, those of zero or at best unchanging value, constitute a third unrecognized group referred to as “rubbish.” Thompson argues that because it is hidden, this third group of objects is not subject to the same social control mechanism as the transient and durable categories. As such, rubbish acts as an underground conduit for objects to transfer from one category, usually the transient, into the other, the durable. An object may slide from the transient category into rubbish before leaping into prominence as a durable object.

Most artworks, including stringed instruments, resist this system. They are durable upon conception. Since artists handle the symbols of society, art involves at all times a pursuit of high status. Artists deal overwhelmingly and explicitly in symbols. Engineers and merchants also handle them, but only incidentally and complicitly. They rarely create them. Where economics is concerned with transience, art is devoted to durability.²⁴

Through ownership, or better still through use, the value of artworks increases – their status as durable objects is never in doubt as long as they maintain an exterior facade of originality. Instruments do not risk falling into the rubbish category unless they suffer a catastrophic accident, or worse, accidentally fall into the hands of an uncultivated

²³ Thompson, p. 9.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 124.

individual outside of the elite. Visibility and provenance are important determinants. Even then, wayward instruments can be rediscovered and damaged ones restored. In the latter instance, the instrument's value may even increase depending on the personalities involved, the nature of the accident and the manner in which it is resolved. A good story always sells!

And stories are home to nostalgia. Not home in the original sense of the word. Rather, as the point of entry for our own personal and collective narratives. People relate to the affairs of others, finding in them parallels to their own past and present experiences. Objects which may have survived such singularizing incidents, including those classified as transient, acquire, by association, "historic" status by the application of any number of cultural markers relating to ownership, age, aesthetics, monetary value and, of course, events that the object is thought to have witnessed.²⁵ Though their designation as durable is never in doubt, "historic" instruments often find themselves in museums, which ironically, may precipitate a relative decrease in their value, as they are cut off from the symbolic revenue generated by use.

Objects gain in value if the "witnessed" events have been properly recorded – not only on paper, film or electronically but also, and most significantly, on the surface of the instrument in the form of patina. While participating in noteworthy events is essential (and simple acquisition by a renowned personage qualifies as essential), the social and semiotic value of durable objects may also accumulate through simple ownership or prolonged use – by the right people and with the appropriate papers. Some objects lend themselves to this process more readily than others. Arranged hierarchically, those at the

²⁵ Barclay, p. 5.

top are more easily preserved, documented and available to scholarship such as the beaux arts, classical music, literature, architecture and more recently film. Those at the bottom are more ephemeral and include performance art, dancing, cooking and gardening.²⁶ Instrument making and classical music belong together despite the fact that the former is less developed or appreciated as an art form. They belong together because their stories are entwined and because instruments, like classical music, are, at least in theory, accessible to scholarship and comparatively easy to preserve and document. This is not to say that this has always been the case – on the contrary. Whereas classical music is written and lends itself to documentation, it is only since the 1950s that artisans have committed their methods to paper and photography. While expensive photo albums, biographies and autobiographies of players and makers, and detailed historical studies are now the norm, prior to the mid-twentieth century, scholars and enthusiasts necessarily relied on a handful of texts restricted to renowned soloists and teachers and to the Cremonese school of instrument making. As a mechanical art, lutherie was not considered worthy of extended exploration by the literate classes.²⁷ Most of the written material pertaining to instruments was recorded by amateur observers with little real knowledge of the workings of the instruments. The descriptions are invariably anecdotal and always saturated with romantic values – the very stuff of nostalgia.

The instruments seem to gain meaning through association with particular historical moments “that ultimately have less to do with history as such than with some

²⁶ Thompson, p. 128.

²⁷ Barclay, pp. 27-39.

version of cultural fantasy about what the past represents.”²⁸ Accounts dramatize the personal and professional adventures of the musicians playing the instruments while dwelling on the finishes of the instruments, as if the varnish, or lack thereof, were responsible for the sound emanating from the instrument’s *f*holes. Instrument makers have never been motivated to disabuse their admirers. As part of an oral tradition where historical and technical information are passed on through example from master to apprentice, violin makers have actively cultivated an aura of mystery while claiming possession of secret methods and formulas.

In the absence of any serious documentation relating to the craft, players and makers alike have often ascribed human qualities to their instruments. Certainly musicians have a tendency to humanize their instruments and to view them as affable companions or, on occasion, capricious adversaries. This attribution of human traits to instruments betrays a specific anxiety associated with them – that they are unpredictable, impetuous but also fundamentally vulnerable: that they will die if left to rot in museum display cases, under beds or in the attic. We speak of them as having memories and personalities, of being masculine or feminine, of being weak or strong, dull or lively. In short, the fact of being handcrafted and in constant use breathes life into them – endows them with souls. But life is fleeting. Instruments can become weary and sick. They can fall asleep and even die if left un-played. A belief in the musical personality of an instrument – the conviction that it is an organic organism capable of absorbing hundreds of years of music and that this reservoir of music accrues in the instrument’s soul – is premised on continuity, even though violins are necessarily transformed over time. The

²⁸ Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 284.

exigencies of use demand it. The instruments may be adapted to new uses or “restored” to previous states. At a very minimum, they need to be maintained. The greater the use, the worse the wear and the more thoroughgoing the amount of work necessary to bring an instrument back. In all instances, the original is overlaid with something else – with new material but also, and more significantly, with the aura imparted by its players. These ultimately overwhelm the original, turning it into a repository of meaning even as it physically melts away on the inside. The instrument must not be allowed to repose or slumber and die in obscurity, unknown and unloved, taking with it the visible signs of their owner’s past and present greatness.

What has always spoken with authority is patina. Patina is the accumulated record of continuous use. The visible cracks, scratches, abrasions, patches of corrosion and modifications encrypted on the instrument’s surface substantiate these claims to greatness. Patina, though it embellishes, does not lie. Again, this says more about the present than it does about the past.

Artisanal Savoir Faire: Nostalgia for Craftsmanship

In the following passage, Marguerite Yourcenar rejoins the nostalgia for craftsmanship with that of a reverence for nature:

The statues reconstituted and repatinated by eighteenth century restorers, made to harmonize with the shimmering parquets and polished mirrors of papal or princely palaces, have an air of pomp and elegance which is not antique but evocative, rather, of the festivities at which they were present, marble gods retouched according to the taste of the period standing side by side with ephemeral gods of flesh. Even their fig leaves clothe them like the dress of that time. Lesser works which people have not taken the trouble to shelter in galleries or in pavilions made for them, quietly abandoned

beneath a plane tree or beside a fountain, ultimately acquire the majesty of languor of a tree or a plant: that woodbine that embraces her.”²⁹

Though the reference to nature lends poignancy to the scene, it is the statues themselves that kindle our sympathies – artifacts painstakingly created and later restored by craftspeople that intimate both permanence and fragility.

Such objects can figure prominently in the current experience of observers as a foil for the majority of manufactured items consumed. By calling attention to the newness, the anonymity and the banality of most of the articles that surround us, “memory objects” inscribed by time share a certain translucent quality that harken back to a purer, more authentic time. As noted earlier, they act as *aide-mémoire*, as touchstones, even as the memories summoned forth exist only in the imagination. The fact that this past is imagined or invented makes it all the easier to idealize: there are no unpleasant events to temper the ideal.

This nostalgia for an imagined past predating the subject and awakened by patina – *la vie en rose* engendered by antique objects – is a fairly recent development. Since the onset of the industrial revolution and mechanical reproduction, manufactured goods have not only become abundant, they have become invidious. Impeccably constructed and aesthetically reserved, they often seem to suffer from what Ernst Grombrich calls “the error of the too well made” – to lack personality in direct proportion to their pervasiveness.³⁰ In contemporary mythology, the modern is “cold” and the antique and exotic are “warm.”³¹ Manufactured goods are the offspring of what Bourdieu refers to as “the cult of technique ... which seeks less to say something than to show that it is well

²⁹ Yourcenar, p. 59.

³⁰ Bourdieu, p. 244.

³¹ Stewart, p. 146.

said.”³² In contrast, those objects that are somehow remote, whether in time or space, that we do not fully understand and whose outlines are either physically or figuratively ill-defined, acquire a special pathos. Because they are distant, because most of us do not possess the requisite manual skills to craft them, and because their very flaws of production make them quaint, such objects speak to us on a human level. They seem to embody our own shortcomings – our individual faults, foibles and imperfections while at the same time evincing the lesions, the blemishes and the injuries that typically accrue over our lifetimes. This is especially true of musical instruments, where tool marks and any unevenness in the original wood finish become very apparent as the varnish wears. Patina draws attention to defects and idiosyncrasies that might otherwise remain hidden. It not only reminds the viewer and listener of the remoteness of the instrument in time but offers visual proof of the all-too-human element in its construction.

Just as modern manufactured goods are too impersonal, the present itself can appear alienating and emotionally distant not to mention unstable and ever-changing. This compares with an imagined prelapsarian past where one experienced life contentedly and authentically. A hand-crafted antique object offers a direct link to this more authentic past and allows for nostalgic reflection to play out on its surface. Violins and other stringed instruments offer this same advantage supplemented by music capable of transporting the listener to any number of places and times.

The arts and crafts thrive on nostalgia. Nostalgia frequently shapes and forms the content of much artwork which in turn often precipitates nostalgic experiences. That is, nostalgia is as much an instrument of art as it is a consequence of the practice of art. Even

³² Bourdieu, p. 244.

something as nonrepresentational and abstract as music can easily provoke nostalgic emotions with audiences which have “through long associative exposure assimilated the aesthetic code that evokes the emotion.”³³ This holds true for all art forms wherein the artist makes use of culturally encrypted formulas of form, style, materials and content to elicit specific reactions. “Crafts are contiguous to preindustrial modes of production, and thus use value lies at the core of their aesthetic forms.”³⁴ The use value of stringed instruments is well established; their aesthetic immutable. For these reasons, the stringed instruments produced today obey the same formulas that have informed the craft of lutherie since the days of Andrea Amati, the first violin maker (b. 1505/11, d. Cremona 1577). Contemporary violin makers consciously employ the same methods and materials established during the Golden Period in Cremona with the aim of reproducing the very imperfections that characterize the workmanship of the “masters” and which illicit nostalgic attachment to a bygone era.

The same methods apply to instruments that have been restored. Bit by bit as the materials which comprise them are transformed by time, use and the environment or replaced by craftspeople who recall an earlier age, the instruments acquire semiotic value: “So, paradoxically, while we in the Westernized world attach great emotional and aesthetic value to material objects, we do so even though the very material of those objects is quite obviously mutable.”³⁵

³³ Davis, p. 82.

³⁴ Stewart, p. 165.

³⁵ Barclay, p. 11.

This is what Svetlana Boym calls restorative nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia “puts emphasis on *nostros* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up memory gaps.”³⁶ It manifests itself in the deliberate reconstruction of monuments to the past – oft times a created past enrobed in mythology and “invented traditions.”³⁷ It is not the sentiments of spatial or temporal longing that bring on bouts of restorative nostalgia so much as anxiety about historical incongruities between past and present: it raises questions about the wholeness and continuity of tradition. As Susan Stewart suggests, “time is seen as concomitant with a loss of understanding, a loss which can be relieved through the reawakening of objects, and thereby, a reawakening of narrative.”³⁸ This is the nostalgia that animates the music industry and nurtures the craft tradition of instrument restoration – the need to keep them in playing condition at all cost. This is what motivates restorers to simulate patina on instruments as a means to reconcile original material with parts that have been replaced.

The Reverence for Nature: Pastoral Nostalgia

The nostalgia fostered by fine craftsmanship but also by the simple passage of time is amplified upon consideration of the changes wrought by nature. The conditions under which they have spent their lives and the manner in which environmental factors have contributed to their deterioration imparts a certain validity to old objects. They have lived. They have survived not only time but heat and cold and humidity and infestation. Just as we accord a certain respect to older people who have experienced traumatic events and

³⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 41.

³⁷ See Eric Hobsbawm, “Inventing Traditions,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-14.

³⁸ Stewart, p. 142.

overcome trying ordeals, antiques, especially those crafted out of natural materials such as wood or stone and that have been exposed to and resisted the vagaries of nature, acquire a special legitimacy. Part of this legitimacy relates to the passage of time which provides corroborating evidence. But another part of it derives from the reality of nature; that in an era during which nature has supposedly been “conquered” and circumscribed by humankind, we can afford to appreciate from afar the ravages inflicted on our own extant creations.

Because mankind is part of nature, because stringed instruments are constructed exclusively of organic materials, and because the music they produce in a concert setting is unmediated by electronic equipment, we attribute the same purity to instruments that we confer on Mother Nature. Combined with the fact that the physical transformations effected by nature are inevitable and beyond human control, violins hearken back to a simpler age predating our births – an age with a more direct connection to nature in which work was overwhelmingly physical. These transformations manifest themselves on the surface of instruments as patina. They serve to unify the instrument (just as, according to Brandi, the golden over-coating varnish supposedly serves to visually consolidate a painting and is suggestive of ruggedness and integrity).³⁹ They act as the catalysts for nostalgic emotions by transporting the viewer to an era in which man and nature coexisted harmoniously in an unspoiled landscape devoid of electronics, malls, cars and plastics.

As the original components decay and disappear, as the instrument ceases to bear a physical resemblance to its younger self, and as the outer protective coating corrodes

³⁹ Brandi, “The Theory of Restoration,” in Price, Talley and Vaccaro, p. 378.

and chips away, the instrument gains in vitality. It draws life from its confrontation with nature and with it, acquires the sage bearing of a knowing God that has eluded death. The proliferating alterations and disfigurements, oftentimes sublime, which accumulate on the instrument's surface, bring it in closer proximity to nature because they are of nature. "Our sense of the pathetic is gratified by these bruises" which recall the ephemeral condition of all things.⁴⁰ At such times, we are perversely attracted to those elements which tend to negate a pervasive human presence. They call attention to a spontaneous beauty associated with the perils of history which, being the result of natural causes and time, generates an original but also organic work of art.

Antique instruments have "undergone the equivalent of fatigue, age and unhappiness. They have changed in the way time changes us."⁴¹ The conditions under which they have spent their centuries of existence suggests a certain wisdom which we habitually reserve for ancient trees and aged animals that have witnessed the collective follies of humankind. Patina is the written record of this existence. The story that it recounts, nostalgic because mournful, transports us to a simpler time presided over by nature.

This simpler time brought to mind by patina can be contrasted with our own age: transitory, ahistoric, industrial and polluted. An era marked by extreme fragmentation and unrestrained competitiveness that seems to permeate all classes and all professions. The contemporary world of stringed instruments is no different. As string playing has evolved over the centuries, the level of technique has never ceased to progress. Likewise, the demands made on the subsidiary occupations have increased in kind with the result that

⁴⁰ Yourcenar, pp. 60-61.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 58.

everyone involved in the identification, merchandising, restoration and documentation is now highly specialized. Gone are the days when one individual could successfully (professionally speaking) work on making a violin in the morning, identify cellos in the afternoon and play a concert that evening. Such dilettantism is no longer admissible or even viable in the highly competitive domain of stringed instruments where participants must battle among themselves for wealth and prestige. They operate in a field of cultural production.

Chapter 3

The Field of Restricted Cultural Production

In any given field, agents, consciously or unconsciously, engage in a struggle over the resources of that field. The field of cultural production is no different. It is characterized by competition for authority among agents, or what I would prefer to call actors (since there is a large performative component to their actions). It is a confrontation between established personalities and younger contenders, between those who have already made their mark and who are fighting to uphold their positions and those who cannot make a reputation for themselves without encroaching on the territory of the other. Generally, it is a battle over the authority to consecrate.¹ Consecration in this sense refers to the ability to define boundaries: to decide who and what belong within the field. It is about the power to impose legitimizing categories of perception and appreciation within the field and to determine what has meaning and what has value – the very subject of the production of culture.² According to Bourdieu, it is not just the producer or artist who actually creates the material object, but rather the entire cast of actors engaged in the field that, through confrontation, collectively imposes a particular meaning and assigns a precise value. This cast of actors includes connoisseur-dealers, artists, collectors, commentators, museum curators and conservators (custodians), and commercial producers. What confers authority or makes reputations is not necessarily recognition or public support by one or another influential individual. Rather, reputations and status are played out collectively in the entire field of cultural production which can best be

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 60.

² Bourdieu, p. 106.

described as the system of objective relations among actors. This is the arena in which the struggle for the power to consecrate is waged and in which the value of cultural works and the belief in that value is produced.³

The field of cultural production contains two subfields: restricted production and large-scale production. The first subfield encompasses what we sometimes refer to as “high art” such as classical music, the beaux arts and serious literature. It also includes, by association, the world of fine stringed instruments since these are entwined with classical music and are limited in number. The second subfield, concerns what we normally think of as mass, or popular, cultural production. With regard to stringed instruments, the large-scale subfield involves the manufacture, distribution and consumption of commercial violins, violas and cellos.⁴

In the subfield of restricted production, the competition between actors is mostly symbolic and relates to matters of prestige, fame and the right to consecration. Economic concerns are generally disavowed – at least overtly by the artists themselves. The hierarchy of authority among actors is based on symbolic profit and sustained by an elaborate social apparatus of studios, galleries, museums, libraries and schools.⁵

Whereas in avant-garde cultural production the right to consecrate constitutes the central preoccupation of its actors, the antique market, of which fine stringed instruments are a part, is animated by a different logic. Here, the right to consecrate is extraneous because the principles on which it is based have already been established. Clashes over the meaning or value to be assigned a work of art, which is the focus of consecration, are

³ Bourdieu, p. 78.

⁴ The term “commercial” is common usage in the violin world. It refers to mass-produced instruments.

⁵ Randal Johnson, “Introduction,” in Bourdieu, p. 15.

rare because all of the actors are already in agreement as to the appropriate criteria to be applied; their legitimacy is not in question. This is because the criteria are nostalgic in nature. Pathos over the passage of time, a respect for continuity through use, an appreciation of craft and a reverence for nature are collective values accepted by all actors in the subfield. The struggle to accumulate capital in all of its forms is in reality a function of the competition between the four nostalgic criteria. The battle is not over consecration but over control of existing values of nostalgia – their relative import and the translation of these into prestige and reputation. The antique market is characterized by negotiation among the various actors as to the comparative importance to be accorded each of the criteria.

Three forms of capital are really at issue: economic capital, social capital and cultural capital. Economic capital is self-evident and is primarily material. However, the interests and resources at stake in the various fields of production go well beyond money matters to those concerned with prestige and recognition. This is particularly true in the field of cultural production where social and cultural capital can be more important. Social capital is the aggregate sum of resources that accrue to an actor by virtue of possession of a durable network of institutionalized contacts and is very easily converted into economic capital.⁶ Social capital is about having connections. Cultural capital, which itself exists in three forms – embodied, objectified and institutionalized – is a matter of competence, that is to say, of cultural knowledge which endows the participant with the necessary skills and internalized code to appreciate a work of art and suggests that such

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu and L  ic J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 119.

appreciation can only have meaning for others who possess the same code.⁷ Actors in the subfield of restricted production of stringed instruments must go to great lengths to publicize their *connaissance* (knowledge) and bolster their *reconnaissance* (peer recognition). In performing this function they inevitably rely on one or more of the nostalgic criteria. This public appeal to nostalgia is a kind of rationalization; a means of justifying to other actors and the larger community that their intentions are both “informed” and perhaps even noble; that their acquisitions or pronouncements satisfy in some measure the nostalgic requirements of the entire field of cultural production. In the stringed instrument world, nostalgic criteria are invoked because a musical instrument combines within itself utilitarian and symbolic properties. Actors must differentiate among instruments on the basis of a complex set of criteria. Age, use, an appreciation for the traditions of production and a reverence for nature are the most important ones, even if at times they come into conflict with one another. These criteria are found in the past because people in general, including the actors themselves, have a particular need for order, see more order in the past than they do in the present and take for granted that longevity in itself legitimizes. The past lends itself to structure because those in the present can impose it – though in actual fact that structure has to be constantly renegotiated among all who have an interest in it.⁸ This constitutes the subfield of restricted production of stringed instruments wherein the assorted actors confront one another over the relative merits of nostalgic criteria as they apply to individual instruments as well as to entire classes of instruments. For them, the only worthwhile

⁷ Randal Johnson, “Introduction,” in Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 7.

⁸ Brian Spooner, “Weavers and Dealers: The Authenticity of an Oriental Carpet,” in Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, p. 225.

goals consist in acquiring prestige, obtaining the power to impose criteria and claiming the right to appropriate profits.

The world of stringed instruments is very small and self-contained; the number of participants limited. Nevertheless, mapping this world populated by connoisseur-dealers, musicians, collectors, restorers, critics and museum custodians is no easy task notwithstanding their small numbers and mutual dependence. Given the diverse competences of its actors, with their often conflicting agendas supported by different or differently weighted nostalgic criteria, this subfield is characterized by symbiosis and complicity. Even so, actors often find themselves at variance with one another over matters of price, attribution and condition. The commercial value of a sacred, consecrated cultural artifact is only marginally related to its cost of production. Instead, its value derives from “a vast operation of social alchemy jointly conducted, with equal conviction and very unequal profits, by all the agents [actors] involved in the field of production.”⁹

Underlying this social alchemy is a basic assumption shared by virtually all actors about the superior tonal qualities of older instruments, in spite of scientific evidence to the contrary. This assumption is rooted in legend and the Romantic Movement.¹⁰ Though Romanticism reached maturity in the nineteenth century, the subjectivism that characterized it arose toward the end of the eighteenth century. As a reasonably homogeneous literary, artistic and philosophical movement, Romanticism embraced the mythical, the legendary and the unconscious. It also fostered the concept of genius wherein individual achievement is overstated and the arcane is summoned with allusions to magic, lost recipes, eccentric working practices and exceptional talents. It was at this

⁹ Bourdieu, p. 81.

¹⁰ Barclay, *The Preservation and Use of Historic Musical Instruments*, p. 41.

time that the myth of Antonio Stradivari, the genius inspired by the muses, was born. Before this period Stradivari (b. 1644, d. Cremona 1737) was merely considered an accomplished and innovative craftsman with a good head for business.¹¹ Time and scientific enquiry have done little to quell the legend. On the contrary, most scientific research up to and including the present day has taken as its point of departure the presumption of Stradivari's (and a few other's) genius. It is assumed that his instruments are not only constructed of finer materials and assembled with consummate skill, but that they sound recognizably better. Researchers regularly uncover secrets that explain their "undeniable" superiority but which have supposedly mystified violin makers for hundreds of years.¹² Nothing is left to hazard: working methods, the age and sources of wood, the preparation of materials, systems of measurement, dimensions, aesthetic considerations, varnish formulas, pigments and resins, techniques of coatings application, performance practice and the acoustic principles current during Stradivari's lifetime.

The only thing that is consistently overlooked is the fact that humans are actually not biologically equipped to distinguish between the sound of Stradivari's instruments and those produced by contemporary violin makers. In *The Violin Explained*, James Beament claims that what we hear and how we interpret sound are totally determined by how the player bows the instrument; that tone is the product of the brain of the listener and the performance of the musician and not a function of the methods and materials of the instrument's fabrication.

Every listening test confirms the conclusion reached from considering our hearing system, that we are incapable of remembering sound (the tone of the instrument) over quite short periods. It cannot be used to determine the

¹¹ Barclay, p. 44.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45-48.

change of an instrument over time, or to identify an instrument when played.¹³

In other words, it is a fallacy to ascribe qualities of tone during a performance to the instrument in question, let alone to the entire body of work of its maker. This may seem a rather extreme position to hold but it is not indefensible. The tonal footprint of a specific Stradivari, as measured with sophisticated scientific equipment under controlled conditions, will differ from that of most other violins. But this happens to be true of all instruments. Every instrument is different, as one would expect where the materials are organic and the forms of construction fluid. Human beings, however, are physically incapable of discerning, of hearing, most of the complex overtones that differentiate one instrument from another.¹⁴ This fact, combined with our “sound amnesia,” ensures that any distinguishing characteristics attributed to an instrument or maker is more a question of personal faith than it is of objective scientific analysis: “If people believe that they can remember [a] sound, they will persuade themselves that they can, and this is why ... sound is so subjective and susceptible to suggestion, belief, and myth.”¹⁵

There is a reason for this. One that explains why people continue to indulge in this chimera despite the evidence: self-interest. But a particular kind of self-interest which involves each of the actors in the restricted subfield in their pursuit of status and financial gain. It is a self-interest animated by self-preservation as a field and is based, of all things, on nostalgia. Patina provides the visual corroboration.

¹³ James Beament, *The Violin Explained* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 236.

¹⁴ Barclay, p. 208.

¹⁵ Beament, p. 236.

Connoisseur-dealers

In a culture that shuns signs of age in humans, we mark them as signs of authenticity in artwork.¹⁶

Along with musicians, connoisseur-dealers are the actors whose status is most intimately tied to the instruments themselves. Like collectors, connoisseur-dealers are most likely to invoke the nostalgic criteria of continuity and the tradition of craft in their battle for recognition in the field of cultural production. This relates to the Janus-faced nature of stringed instruments.

Utilitarian cultural goods such as stringed instruments present two sides: that of commodity with a use and an attendant commercial value based on demand and availability; and that of symbol with a corresponding cultural value. Though these commercial and cultural values remain relatively independent, the former tends to corroborate the latter during the process of exchange.¹⁷

However, connoisseur-dealers are not merely actors who assign commercial value to instruments in bringing them to market; nor are they just ambassadors of the works they represent. Rather, they are the ones who can proclaim the broader cultural significance of the works they represent when they invest their prestige in their cause. The connoisseur-dealer acts as “a ‘symbolic banker’ who offers as security all of the symbolic capital he has accumulated (which he is liable to forfeit if he backs a ‘loser’).”¹⁸ In a comparatively stagnant market such as antique instruments, the risks are small. Then again, the potential for gain is correspondingly weak.

¹⁶ Kirsh and Levenson, *Seeing through Paintings*, p. 152.

¹⁷ Bourdieu, p. 113.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Connoisseur-dealers can leverage this advantage, this display of *connaissance*, by pronouncing on the authenticity of instruments. This situation privileges them at the expense of collectors and musicians, whose authority resides elsewhere and who lack the expertise. While the power to pronounce has enormous repercussions in the restricted subfield, it is not tantamount to the right to consecrate since the operative meaning and value of antique instruments have already been recognized. Authentication is a different process, but one which impacts on all of the nostalgic criteria indirectly. It does not validate or invalidate the criteria, but it does establish jurisdiction.

The commercial and cultural values of an instrument are largely premised on its being authentic. In the modern world, as the distance between consumers and producers or vendors has shrunk, the issue of exclusivity as an instrument of sumptuary distinction has given way to one of authenticity. Formerly, the long-distance transportation of precious commodities such as violins, or alternately the time and effort required to travel to the site of exchange, entailed huge expenses which made their acquisition a marker of exclusivity. As such, their distribution was severely circumscribed. With modern technology, recent advances in mechanical reproduction and a heightened demand for quality instruments from the middle class, the only way to preserve their symbolic function, legitimizing status claims, has been to complicate the criteria of authenticity.¹⁹

As consumers and observers of cultural artifacts, we must differentiate among any number of practices and traditions. Good must be distinguished from bad, old from new, Italian from French, genuine from copy. However, the criteria of quality are vague to say the least and are unfailingly dependent on the question of authenticity. Even the most

¹⁹ "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in Appadurai, pp. 44-45.

mundane specimen requires at some level, an implicit assessment of authenticity.²⁰ Here, authentic is taken to mean “of undisputed origin” or “genuine,” which implies a specific source in space and time.²¹ Ideally, such a source is a maker with a documented history. For maximum symbolic worth is contingent on visual (not aural) “proof” that a work is from a particular hand. The physical demonstration of authenticity is central to affirming an artifact’s historical, age and exchange value.

In the case of musical instruments, the question of authenticity, or genuineness, is somewhat problematic. This is because musical instruments are continually subjected to repairs, restorations, adaptations and modifications in an ongoing effort to maintain continuity and prolong their “playing careers.” Attempting to apply a strict definition of authentic would disqualify virtually all stringed instruments, excepting those in pristine condition that have not been modified or modernized. As such, organologists have come to accept a broadened description of the term that includes changes made to an instrument under the guise of usability. Altered instruments are usually understood as being authentic as long as the changes wrought were done to guarantee uninterrupted use. Alterations undertaken by collectors or dealers for aesthetic reasons unrelated to musical performance, break the chain of playing continuity and exclude the instrument from consideration.²²

As with fine art, the question of authenticity is determined by “connoisseurs” who may or may not be in agreement with the organologists’ definition of authentic.

Connoisseurs, all of whom are also dealers (though the reverse does not hold true), are

²⁰ Spooner, p. 119.

²¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 7th ed., s. v. “authentic.”

²² Friedemann Hellwig, “Determining the Authenticity of Musical Instruments,” in Wilder, *The Restoration and Conservation of Stringed Instruments and their Bows* (forthcoming).

specialists in the identification of artifacts. It is a political position: connoisseurs must be recognized as such by other actors in the field of cultural production; they cannot unilaterally lay claim to the title without the latter's consent. Connoisseurship is an "art" which cannot be taught in the form of precepts or doctrines. Apprenticeship to it involves extended contact between master and disciple in the presence of the work(s). Just as students unconsciously internalize the principles of their discipline – including those that are not explicitly made known to them – initiates will, by abandoning themselves to the work, absorb the rules and guidelines of its construction without ever wilfully understanding them as such. Herein lies the difference between art theorists and connoisseurs who are rarely capable of explaining the principles upon which their judgments are made.²³ Connoisseurs rely on intuition and the subconscious. This leads them to invoke nostalgic criteria in defence of their decisions.

As Roger Hargrave points out, the practice of identifying and valuing antique stringed instruments and bows is invariably based on sight: "The idea of a tonal fingerprint unique to a specific maker is pure fiction. While it is possible to identify a fine tone in a violin, it is not possible to identify a violin by the tone."²⁴ Even a modern scientific technique, such as dendrochronology, is a sophisticated form of looking and comparing, and is employed as a means of corroborating or disputing what the eye has already determined.

As a result, the identity of an instrument's maker is a far more important determinant of symbolic value and price than the quality of the sound the instrument

²³ Bourdieu, p. 228.

²⁴ Roger Hargrave, "Some Things You Should Know Before Purchasing a Cremonese Violin," in Wilder (forthcoming).

produces. Sound quality or sound colour is rarely, if ever, referred to in insurance valuations or auction catalogues. It is only in newsletters and retail sales brochures that “tone” is invoked, even emphasized, as a significant characteristic of the instrument in question. For example, the sound of a Montagnana violin c. 1741 was recently described as “warm, deep, and full” and that of a Nicolo Gagliano 1749 as “strong and deep.”²⁵

Having said that authentication is essentially a visual endeavour, it should be noted that any physical examination of an instrument or bow by a recognized connoisseur is necessarily informed by a prior familiarity with the relevant (and rapidly expanding) literature: historical treatises, archival material, photo-documentation and technical writings. Expertise is profoundly dependent on written sources to corroborate and contextualize any visual information garnered from an inspection.

While connoisseurship is largely intuitive (a claim often made by connoisseurs themselves) or becomes so over time, in the end it is contingent on mastering the details of a particular maker’s work. These details, however, are subservient to larger stylistic features arising from distinct construction methods characteristic of regional or historical traditions. Makers working within a particular tradition can be expected to share specific elements engendered by the system of fabrication, for example in the choice of materials, while simultaneously demonstrating a certain individuality. In general, it is the interchange between the construction method and an individual maker’s interpretation that forms the basis of expertise.²⁶

Features associated with construction techniques are many and varied. They include the specific outline of the instrument, the type of form employed in its

²⁵ *Bein & Fushi Inc. Newsletter*, no. 16 (January 2004), pp. 3-4.

²⁶ Hargrave (forthcoming).

construction, the materials and tools used, the systems of measurement, the purfling materials, *f*-hole placement, the style of linings and mortises, the shape and form of the blocks, and the preparation and application of ground coats and varnish layers.

Methodologies necessarily impose parameters. While there may be some variation within a tradition, for the most part one can discern an underlying conception that animates the rest. On the other hand, the stylistic minutiae that ultimately distinguish an individual maker's work are more personalized. They include labels, tool marks and wood selection, as well as idiosyncratic elements engendered by optical stigma, unique details such as the cut of the *f*holes or scroll, the application of coatings, the nature of the edge-finishing work or of the champhering.

To be sure, construction techniques and individual stylistic features are not mutually exclusive categories – for example, wood selection is necessarily a function of convention and individual expression. It is in the multilevel interaction of these two categories that connoisseurship comes into play. The combination of intuition, a thorough grasp of stylistic features and a mastery of detail allows the connoisseur to assimilate all of the evidence and to assert that a particular instrument or bow was actually made by a specific individual at a certain time and in a certain place.

Like wood selection, the preparation and application of the coating (the ground and varnish layers) are both part of a larger regional tradition associated with a method of construction and the product of individual experimentation within that tradition. The coatings of classical Cremonese instruments are a determining and perhaps even a defining characteristic of this group of makers. They are also the sole domain of instrument making that has eluded the talents of gifted copyists. As such, they are the basis for many decisions related to their attribution. The same can be said for other

traditions of making, where the appearance of the coating is often a decisive consideration for the connoisseur in the process of authentication.

Another decisive consideration concerns the manner in which such coatings wear – that is the surface patina found on the instruments. When we look at coatings, we are also looking at their erosion and corrosion as well as at their chemical transformation over time. It is the wearing away of varnish which exposes the ground. It is the attrition of varnish which throws tools marks into relief and accentuates grain lines. It is the chipping off and scratching of varnish which demonstrates the thickness and consistency of the varnish layer and it is the absence of varnish which reveals the degree and type of use an instrument has undergone. In combination with a thorough analysis of the manner in which the coating has transformed chemically over time, irrespective of use, the information embedded in varnish wear patterns – in patina – conveys a great deal about the age and potential geographic origins of an instrument. Though it is doubtful that patina would ever be sufficient on its own to identify an individual maker, a methodical analysis of wear patterns and coatings degradation can easily yield enough information to confirm an instrument's approximate date and place of birth. Since the preparation and application of coatings are part of larger historical or regional traditions associated with particular towns or cities, it follows that patina patterns themselves must be regarded as stylistic features characteristic of these traditions of making.

This ability to identify regional traditions through patina lends credence to the connoisseurs' pronouncements. It also allows them to invoke the nostalgic criteria of continuity and the tradition of craft with greater conviction. Since their expertise cannot be challenged, connoisseur-dealers can draw attention to the visible signs of use and craft intervention as a means to support their claims of authenticity and then link these with the

values of continuity and an appreciation of craft. They can and do impose these criteria on the entire field of cultural production. This explains why most old instruments are still in active circulation notwithstanding the obvious risks involved. It explains the “aura” associated antique instruments. It explains the mystification surrounding the craft of lutherie. These are all actively promoted by connoisseur-dealers who are most likely to profit from the primacy of the criteria of continuity and the tradition of craft.

Musicians

Musicians are also central actors in the subfield of restricted cultural production. They are not only consumers but also the ultimate judges of the instrument’s sound qualities even if their deliberations are heavily influenced by extraneous factors such as authenticity, price and most importantly appearance. The vast majority of classical musicians perform in a very conservative orchestral culture replete with visual icons and a frozen ideal of blended sound. On the one hand, an antique instrument emanating a worthy venerability constitutes one of the primary visual images of this culture.²⁷ On the other, the individual timbre it produces is incidental in a symphonic environment where the commingling of myriad tones lends richness to the overall sound of the orchestra.

Musicians are obliged to invest a huge amount of time and energy from an early age in order to master their instrument. Because they are complicated to control, musical instruments are an “engaging technology.” This concept refers to objects with which people have an enduring relationship due to the skill and effort required to grasp them. Engaging objects allow for “a unity of performance and pleasure” or “flow” – something

²⁷ Karen Bijsterveld and Marten Schulp, “Breaking into a World of Perfection: Innovation in Today’s Classical Musical Instruments,” in *Social Studies of Science*, p. 669.

arrived at with repetition and actively sought after by musicians – denied other artifacts easily learned or understood.²⁸ Moreover, the quality of “engagement” is enhanced, and the enduring love of the instrument’s users secured, through the process of wear. This is because the signs of use contribute to the reservoir of private memories associated with the instrument. In the case of professional musicians, this process is invariably long and commonly arduous. Even when such signs are not the fruit of their own personal endeavours, players can empathize with the toils of their predecessors.

Although musicians are motivated by status considerations, they hide behind nostalgic appeals to lineage as a means to rationalize their actions. The acquisition of an authentic, heavily patinated classical Cremonese instrument is a veritable rite of passage for an ambitious musician seeking entrance into a major orchestra, let alone into the upper strata of soloists making the rounds of the world’s musical centres. Its possession implies not only professional accomplishment but also social acumen and an understanding of the restricted subfield since the musician will have needed to convince a prospective investor, collector or museum curator that their proficiency as a performer warrants the investment (if it has not yet been purchased) and the instrument’s subsequent loan to them. The musician will have been obliged to demonstrate the potential to garner awards and attention that will ultimately reflect well on the owner or loaning institution. Given the prices commanded by such instruments and the perceived need to play on one, most burgeoning players have little choice in the matter.

Alternately, a musician may acquire an expensive violin, viola or cello directly themselves. This implies that their musical standing is already well established and that

²⁸ Bijsterveld and Schulp, p. 669.

the revenues accrued through performing and teaching are sufficient to finance the instrument's acquisition. Typically, soloists commence their careers using a borrowed instrument. As they parlay their talents into social and cultural capital however, they may purchase one of their own. A "good" instrument is a necessary adjunct to a successful professional career from beginning to end. Aside from its financial benefits, ownership carries ancillary advantage. Through ownership, a player not only exhibits identifiable professional achievement, they are also better able to establish and maintain a connection with the instrument. This connection may grow to be so strong over time that the instrument comes to be identified exclusively, both privately and publicly, with the player. Here, the reputations of the musician and the instrument serve to reinforce each other. The musician's name is sanctified by the instrument which in turn ceases to be a "neutral good" which could be played by anybody and identified with anybody; instead, it becomes the attribute of a renowned personality.²⁹ Upon sanctification, the instrument and player will share photo opportunities – the one rarely appearing without the other. Reference to the instrument will of necessity be made in the biographies and interviews that appear in concert notes and magazine articles. Conversely, the provenance of the instrument, including its latest owner, will always be remarked upon in the scholarly and technical literature specializing in stringed instruments. In time, the violin may even come to carry the player's name – though usually posthumously (for example, the Kreisler, the Milstein). In short, playing on a certifiably important instrument validates the musician's credentials and guarantees them a place in history.

Nostalgia is an important element in this context. Though seldom commented upon, patina, as the visual representation of nostalgia, is often featured in the

²⁹ Boudieu, p. 81.

Nostalgia is an important element in this context. Though seldom commented upon, patina, as the visual representation of nostalgia, is often featured in the photographic record of the musician and instrument. Close-ups of the instrument's surface highlighting the blemishes, the wear and the damage accrued over time through use appear frequently on the covers of auction catalogues or of magazines devoted to the classical music scene. Anecdotes recounting the origins of a particular cigarette burn or deep gash on the table of a cello are repeated ad nauseam in the trade press.

The world of classical music is heavily reliant on the past for its repertoire, its rituals and its personalities. These serve to structure and ground the culture of so-called "serious music" and to confer a kind of authority denied, at least until fairly recently, other forms of music. Nostalgic recollection is fundamental to practitioner and listener alike: "It should be stressed that music not only brings the subject into relation with the collective memory, but it collectivizes the subject at the level of memory."³⁰ As a result, the accomplishments, foibles and adventures of the great protagonists from the past are constantly referred to by way of confirming the music's heritage. Composers, players, teachers, publishers, agents and conductors all live, die, interact, triumph, fail, study, write, travel, compete and fall in love. Concert halls, schools and recording studios provide the setting. Books, magazines, compact discs and television record the action. Classical music is a never-ending soap opera populated by celebrities and punctuated by extraordinary events. In this respect, it is no different than any other contemporary music form – self-perceptions aside. The violin, while a mere prop, is as central to this ongoing

³⁰ John Mowitt, "The Sound of Music in the Era of Its Electronic Reproducibility," in Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, eds., *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.182.

human drama as it is to the mythology of classical music's timelessness. The intense, complex relationship between a player and their instrument and the huge sums of money involved ensure that the violin will forever remain an integral part of the story.

The patina on an instrument acts as a sort of tableau – as a non-figurative, abstract representation of this ongoing narrative. It attests to the passage of time, it draws attention to the enduring traditions of use and craft and it connotes the natural. Of these, the musician is most likely to invoke the criterion of continuity through use because it suggests lineage; linear time peopled by successive events and personalities that saturate the object and that become inscribed on the surface of an instrument as patina.

The personalities and accomplishments of the instrument's maker and owners imbue the instrument with a nostalgic mystique which is later appropriated and exploited by successive performers. The genius inherent in the object is transferred to the performer and serves to substantiate the player's claims to artistic excellence and with it eventual membership in the pantheon of giants. The price of admission is a great instrument. Nostalgia is the currency. Patina the actual cash changing hands.

While in the larger world patina may no longer be the unforgiving arbiter of old, its role in classical music, allied as it is with the past and tradition, retains much of its standing as a status indicator. Just as the nostalgic value of musical instruments is connected to its age, the connotations of nature, craft intervention and constant use, the monetary value of instruments is similarly related to their age, condition and pedigree. For a musician, the purchase of an old, classical Cremonese instrument covered with scratches, dings and cracks is a necessity. It legitimizes their credentials.

The appeal to continuity, with patina as its physical manifestation, may find itself in conflict with the nostalgic value of the passage of time. This is because continued use

threatens the instrument's life. It heightens the risk of catastrophic accident, exposes the instrument to extremes of humidity and accelerates the rate of deterioration due to abrasion and corrosion. The criterion of continuity championed by the musician is not compatible with the long-term conservation of the instrument, the position upheld by the museum custodian invoking the passage of time. It is, however, in keeping with the priorities of most of the other actors in the restricted subfield.

Restorers

Restorers are the actors most likely to appeal to the values of craft and a reverence for nature. While they may also be expected to uphold the value of continuity since their livelihood depends on the instruments being played, restorers identify first and foremost with the tradition of fine craftsmanship. In their advertisements, makers invariably emphasize the handmade character of their instruments, and the traditional techniques and fine craftsmanship employed in their construction. Restorers do the same with regard to their restoration services.³¹ Their idols are the great luthiers from Cremona.

But restorers are also sympathetic to the calls of nature. Stringed instruments are assembled of organic materials and are used in the production of unmediated acoustic music. Dehumanizing machines are never used in their construction (at least in the subfield of restricted production) – this would render the instruments soulless. Finally, the scars on their surface attest to their confrontation with nature and mankind. Restorers see themselves as protectors or alternately as doctors engaged in the preservation of the instruments, even as they set about transforming them irrevocably through their work.

³¹ Bijsterveld and Schulp, p. 650.

Their status within the field lies in their capacity to uphold the craft tradition but also in their ability to protect the instrument from the ravages of use and the environment without seeming to do so. It resides in their skill at hiding what they do, in suggesting that craft and a reverence for nature in the service of maintaining continuity trump the pathos associated with the passage of time.

Often, the only original parts that remain of an antique musical instrument are the volute (turns of the scroll), a veneer covering the top and back plates, and ribs which have been hollowed out in the intervening years. In other words, the instrument may just be a shell. Unlike buildings, an instrument cannot be entered into physically. Accordingly, it is not important that its interior display the same signs of aging as its exterior surface. This, however, does not interfere with its function as an object evoking the past, as long as the original parts that remain on the outside are both visible and visibly old. That instruments ultimately transform into shells over time says a great deal about how important this semiotic function is. The care and preservation of the exterior is determinant.

General wear and tear, not to mention accidents, eventually obliges the owners or guardians of musical instruments to undertake some sort of restorative intervention. Tellingly, the techniques developed to correct or repair any problems inevitably focus on the exterior. Since the appearance of age is valued and must be preserved at all cost, superficial signs of aging, such as the wear of varnish, scratches, dents and dings, are left untouched or are themselves covered and therefore preserved with a protective coating of retouch varnish. Evidence of structural damage however, such as worm damage or fissures in the wood, must be scrupulously hidden. Great care is taken to ensure that cracks are cleaned, glued, retouched and reinforced in such a way as to render them invisible. Worm holes that have "broken" the surface are filled with putty and then hidden

with shavings of original wood retrieved from the interior of the instrument to better conceal the damage. Deformation of the plates or ribs is corrected with plaster casts and the replacement of wood on the inside – out of sight. In fact, hiding structural damage to the naked eye under natural if not ultraviolet light is considered a given. The ability to do so is a point of honour among restorers. What lies beyond the gaze, while far from irrelevant from a structural point of view, is of secondary concern to the restorers performing the work. In short, the instrument must appear to be in robust health even as it exhibits the passage of time on its surface as a means of confirming its status as an antique.

It might be argued that the cultivation of a visual bias is actually a fraudulent business practice undertaken by restorers in collusion with professional dealers with a vested interest in the buying and selling of instruments. Since they hold a monopoly on the knowledge and expertise required to identify and evaluate the potential risks and repercussions of structural defects, dealers and restorers (who are often one and the same person) are in a position to affect judgment. And the opportunity for abuse certainly does exist when the buyer is naïve or uninformed about the physical and financial consequences of a particular structural problem. Nevertheless, this kind of unethical behaviour is the exception rather than the rule. The fine instrument market is very small and self-contained. Relations among actors in the subfield of restricted cultural production –connoisseur-dealers, musicians, restorers, collectors, commentators and museum custodians – are simultaneously complex and constrained. A surplus of “mistakes” whereby structural damage and repairs have not been disclosed at the point of sale will spell the end of a dealer’s or restorer’s career. This applies regardless of whether the oversights are come by honestly or are motivated by avarice. Major work is typically

divulged by the vendor, easily verifiable under ultraviolet light and increasingly documented in “condition reports” accompanying individual instruments. It is not in the interests of either dealers or restorers to change the system since their legitimacy as professionals resides in their capacity to identify and ultimately correct (for a price) “important” defects. The more difficult it is to recognize a defect or the repair undertaken to hide a defect, the more indispensable the role of the expert restorer – and the more dependent the musician is on their opinion. Herein lies the unrecognized incentive for restorers to disguise serious damage as well as possible.

To argue that there exists a certain inertia in the system however, is not to say that expert dealers and restorers are the instigators of the system. On the contrary, the emergence of experts, of specialized gatekeepers, is symptomatic of something larger in our society that goes well beyond the tiny world of antique musical instruments. The growing ranks of specialized experts we see about us today were brought into being by a massive expansion of the division of labour accompanying industrialization and the expansion of the cities.³² Higher levels of population density combined with increasing per capita incomes allow for greater numbers of people to make a living by selling advice and services rather than food and consumer goods. They can be seen as individuals who acquire prestige and power because of the specialized knowledge and skills they possess and upon which we are dependent. Alternately, they can be seen as members of a class who effectively claim to have special skills and knowledge by virtue of their membership in groups that are favourably situated in society-wide systems of dominance.³³ Either

³² “Introduction,” in Thomas L. Haskell, ed., *The Authority of Experts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. xii.

³³ “Introduction to Part One: Defining the Problem,” in Haskell, p. 1.

way, the authority of antique-instrument experts, while certainly based on specialized knowledge, does not reside solely in their avowed capacity to assess the physical condition of violins, violas and cellos. Rather, their jurisdiction extends to more important questions of authenticity, of sound and of access to the marketplace. Moreover, the ability to evaluate physical condition does not explain the aesthetic preference for instruments which appear to be structurally sound, even if heavily restored, to those which are perfectly stable and whose defects are readily apparent.

The hiding of structural defects is undertaken for a reason: to please the musician. But it also reflects the cultural preferences of the larger marketplace far beyond violins. As noted above, the concern with external appearances applies to any number of objects. It suggests that the consumer, but also the expert who most probably shares the same tastes, is culturally bound to prefer objects that appear to be in good health but which display certain desirable but superficial characteristics associated with longevity – patina.

This process of maintaining an exterior facade of age is not limited to instruments. Michael Thompson notes a similar occurrence in the case of old houses undergoing renovation. Great care is taken by architects, conservators and builders to maintain an illusion of age, even in cases where most of the actual materials have been replaced. Any ornamental cues that identify the building with the past are preserved or reproduced and then highlighted as a means to further distinguish the building from surrounding modernist architecture. During the course of gentrification, entire neighbourhoods are transformed in a manner congruent with the tastes of the day – tastes that reflect an understanding of what is thought to be an appropriate “look” for buildings of a particular vintage. But this “look” is invariably contrived and frequently confined to the exterior walls if not just to the street-facing facades. Even so, these facades are cleaned and

scrubbed to ensure that more recent evidence of dirt and pollution are removed. Just as instruments are systematically cleaned and polished, the facades of buildings under renovation must be treated in a manner that either uncovers the “real” patina lying underneath or which creates a look that we associate with age – no matter how artificial – as in the case of sandblasting. Soot, dust, watermarks and residual paint must be removed since they conceal the now-porous bricks.

Usually, the interiors are completely modernized or even replaced. The exceptions are those parts of the interior infrastructure that recall the buildings’ former age and prestige (ornamentation) or alternately in the case of industrial buildings, function and functionality, such as plumbing and heating ducts, which might be saved for aesthetic reasons. In fact, these rather mundane, everyday features are oftentimes given prominence, purposely exposed and highlighted (perhaps even added as props) as if to exaggerate the humble work-a-day origins of the original structure in some distant industrial past (in marked contrast to the modern sophisticated function it has now taken on). Similarly, the interior walls are frequently stripped of their plaster in order to lay bare the underlying brick. Again, the idea is to recall a certain more primordial, but also cozy and predictable, past – the brick signifying simplicity and solidity, the ornamentation craftsmanship, in an otherwise rapidly changing, throwaway world.

The fact that we seem to privilege the visual evidence of time’s passage (as opposed to that of the other senses), shallow as that may be, implies that patina is the primary means for the average untrained individual to identify old objects. Most people do not have the background to properly assess and categorize most types of objects, let alone evaluate their condition or determine their place of origin, outside of their areas of specialization. But we are all able to extrapolate from our experiences in the broader

material world and to at least recognize visual signs of age – patina. We may not be able to analyze such signs in a very meaningful way, but we are able to discern them for what they are – scratches, corrosion, erosion, fading – the minor phenomena associated with the passage of time that are found on the surfaces of all objects. With regard to instruments, calamities – cracks, holes, broken necks, smashed ribs – generally occur in an instant. Most often, they require immediate attention if the instrument is to maintain currency. Individual accidents sustained by an instrument may be separated by centuries, but this is impossible for the layperson to distinguish. Whereas the phenomena associated with patina are too minor to warrant extensive intervention and are consciously left to accumulate, those linked to accidents are repaired immediately, and wherever possible, invisibly. Specific accidents are difficult to date with any certainty except by an initiate familiar with the history of restoration technique. Even then, dating repairs is a risky proposition since such care is taken to make them inconspicuous. Unattended small scratches and abrasions, on the other hand, fill in with foreign matter and darken. Not only are they readily apparent, they are eventually sealed with polish. Both the colour of the abrasions and the degree of filling are very useful in approximating the age of the instrument. Ironically, these abrasions are used to camouflage any traces left behind from catastrophic incidences. The application of fake patina is common practice among restorers for this very reason: it is useful for hiding evidence of structural damage and for blending in replacement parts. This aside, patina is the sole means for the uninitiated to recognize the age of something as “timeless” as a violin which has been in production for over four hundred years. That restorers profit from this situation, even actively participate in its perpetuation as a means to display their skills, prove their relevance and consolidate

their social position, does not explain the larger cultural aesthetic. The origins of this are to be found elsewhere.

Collectors

Due to the escalating prices of antique instruments, collectors are assuming an ever greater role in the subfield of restricted cultural production. Most instruments are simply too expensive for musicians to purchase themselves. It is increasingly the case that a collector may acquire an instrument of repute which may subsequently be lent out to promising players for extended periods. The buyer, who may also be a skilful amateur musician, attains social and cultural capital through the combined demonstration of business acumen and discriminating taste as well as through the display of public magnanimity. This display constitutes a commitment to the nostalgic values of continuity, just as the demonstration of superior taste through consumption suggests an appreciation for craft. Here, the collector's interests coincide completely with those of the connoisseur-dealer and are partially allied with those of the musicians who tend to see themselves as aristocrats and look down upon craftspeople as mechanical labourers. For the musician, sound quality is a definite issue. For the collector, authenticity and appearance are more important. Instruments are seen as works of art created by traditional methods and according to long-established and time-honoured designs. They must possess all of the elements of classic instruments just as fine paintings must have all of the elements of classical paintings. If an instrument does not sound good but is beautiful nonetheless, a collector may buy it.³⁴

³⁴ Bijsterveld and Schulp, p. 657.

Like connoisseurs and musicians, collectors may find themselves at odds with museum custodians, although historically collectors have proven themselves to be far more respectful of their acquisitions than musicians who are far more likely to think of them as tools of the trade.³⁵

While the connection between collector and instrument may be less intimate than that between player and instrument, the status accorded the collector is nonetheless an important consideration, notwithstanding the latter's sincere sentiments concerning the instrument's use and preservation. The evolving complex of social relations in our age creates a need for distinction. This forces individuals to cast about for authentic cultural material useful in defining themselves. In some sectors of social life, stringed instruments serve this need.³⁶ Great violins owe their status and thus their role as arbitrators of social distinction to their rarity. "This rarity is a function of the unequal distribution of the conditions underlying the acquisition of the specifically aesthetic disposition and of the codes indispensable to the deciphering of works belonging to the subfield of restricted production."³⁷

Through possession of a unique and rare object saturated with poignancy since the onset of mechanical reproduction, the collector actively participates in the process of distinction. The unique object highlights the banality of machine production just as formerly the machine once drew attention to the flaws of handmade production. Whereas in the past appreciation of an object's imperfections demonstrated a lack of sophistication, it now proclaims the collector's superior social and cultural capital.

³⁵ Florence Getreau, "Histoire des collections, histoire de la conservation: Quelle relation?," in Wilder (forthcoming).

³⁶ Spooner, p. 200.

³⁷ Bourdieu, p. 120.

Hand labour is a more wasteful method of production; hence the goods turned out by this method are more serviceable for the purpose of pecuniary reputability; hence the marks of hand labour come to be honorific, and the goods which exhibit these marks take rank as of higher grade than the corresponding machine product.³⁸

This is because, in the words of Bourdieu, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.” That is, people are categorized and judged according to the systems of classification they employ – in the distinctions they make between the good and the bad, the original and the derivative, the tasteful and the tasteless. They distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, in which their hierarchal social position is expressed or betrayed.³⁹ Objects form people at least as much as people form objects.⁴⁰

In publicizing the acquisition of rare instruments, collectors are appealing to the nostalgia invoked by craft production as a means to convert economic capital into social capital.

But collectors also ride on the coattails of the musicians they sponsor. Here, they call on the nostalgic authority bestowed by continuity. They insinuate themselves into a lineage of use – a musical family of socially capitalized patrons whose roots can be traced back centuries. Anything that gives evidence of membership in such a group has particular value for the leisure class. It buys immediate recognition even as it ensures the owner a place in family legend. It is an investment in prestige that also satisfies any nostalgic longing for a connection with the past. Sanctification of the collector, as with the musician, ultimately arrives when the instrument comes to bear their surname.

³⁸ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: The Modern Library, 1934), p. 159.

³⁹ Randal Johnson, “Introduction,” in Bourdieu, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Nicolas J. Saunders, “Memory and Conflict,” in Bulchi, p. 176.

As a marker of social standing, patina acts as visual corroboration of status claims in the stringed instrument world. In Western societies,

the surface that accumulates on objects has been given a symbolic significance and exploited to social purpose. It has been seized upon to encode a vital and unusual status message. What makes this message so unusual is that it is not, strictly speaking, concerned with claiming status. This relatively simple, even banal, message is left to other, more mundane, aspects of status symbolism. Patina has a much more important symbolic burden, that of suggesting that existing status claims are legitimate. Its function is not to claim status but to authenticate it. Patina serves as a kind of visual proof of status.⁴¹

The legitimizing function of patina is by no means new nor is it confined to the world of classical music. In fact, the patina strategy of status demonstration was a widely used means of policing status misrepresentation during the medieval and early modern periods of European history. Certainly in the last century the status symbolism associated with patina has been eclipsed by the fashion system. But it has not been entirely supplanted and remains useful in discriminating between new and old, high and low, status. The symbolism associated with patina may no longer control status representation as it did before the advent of conspicuous consumption as described by Thorstein Veblen, but patina nevertheless “remains a skilful and devoted servant in its cause.”⁴²

Whereas the possession of a rare antique object is a social act that lays bare social relations, it is the patina on its surface which actually legitimizes these relations. For patina offers proof of both taste and longevity. It evinces proficiency in the economic realm (having sufficient capital to finance the purchase of an instrument) and in the field

⁴¹ Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 41.

⁴² McCracken, p. 41.

of cultural production (acquiring something tastefully old but also useful – something suggestive of continuity through its association to the traditions of craft and playing).

Critics

Critics engaged in the subfield of restricted cultural production of stringed instruments are generally sympathetic to all four nostalgic values. At least they pay lip-service to all of them. This is because they are themselves participants in the larger field of production. Their livelihoods depend on it. Most often, critics and other commentators collaborate with musicians and dealers in an effort to impose the nostalgic values of continuity through usage and the nostalgia of craft. These two nostalgic values are the most “personal” in that they involve the most number of people and personalities, and therefore make for better reading copy and a larger, more prestigious readership. Equally, focusing on personalities furnishes commentators with power – they are in a position to make or break reputations. There is a functional homology between the critic’s position in the field of cultural production and the social position of their readership in the field of classes – they are both dominant. Readers of works devoted to classical music are also concert goers – an activity strongly correlated to high economic status.

The two major English language magazines that cater to the stringed instrument world, *Strings* and *The Strad*, are divided up into sections dealing with either celebrated instruments or the careers of famous players (and teachers). In reality, articles focusing on instruments invariably talk about players and conversely articles ostensibly concerned with playing careers usually allude to the player’s instruments. Papers or columns devoted to scientific advances are few and far between and are generally short. Within the context of a popular magazine full of general-interest pieces, technical pieces are

necessarily simplified and presented in such a way that they do not risk threatening any of the underlying, mythologizing assumptions of the nostalgic values. Often such pieces are conceived and written with the explicit aim of “explaining” a mystery. This only serves to lend credence to the mystery, to give it substance, regardless of the subsequent findings of the so-called study.

Even the nostalgic value of pathos associated with the passage of time receives sympathetic treatment in the mass media: patina, because highly photogenic, is largely responsible. Magazines, auction catalogues, web pages and calendars regularly feature close-ups of instrument surfaces which have undergone physical transformation over time – craquelure patterns, alligating, wrinkling. Those phenomena which are difficult to simulate artificially and convincingly demonstrate the passage of time, are tied to famous players in the accompanying text: the instrument legitimizes the player just as the player further sanctifies the instrument.

In short, critics never call into question any of the nostalgic values – they live by them all. Even if self-interest predisposes them to ally themselves with continuity and craft as the two most “popular” and coincidentally lucrative values, they are obliged to present and uphold, however superficially, all points of view, to act as referees in the broader field of cultural production.

Museum Custodians

In marked contrast to the other actors, museum custodians (curators and conservators) are first and foremost concerned with the instrument’s conservation. Not necessarily as a functional object but rather as a historical document, an object of study. Indeed, custodians see continued use and craft intervention as detrimental since these contribute

to the instrument's physical deterioration and transformation. They further contaminate its integrity. As such, they often find themselves isolated, bereft of allies in their attempts to conserve instruments in their original condition. They are frequently branded by the other actors as undertakers; the objects under their care are depicted as being "incarcerated"; the institutions for which they work portrayed as mausoleums full of dead artifacts. Custodians appeal to the nostalgia evoked by the passage of time – to pathos – in their confrontations with other actors in the subfield, though to little effect. Pressure is invariably brought to bear on museums to periodically lend out the instruments from their collections or at a minimum to host *soirées* featuring them in the hands of distinguished musicians. For custodians continuity is important only insofar as the recorded history associated with an instrument sheds light on its origins and provenance. Similarly they are interested in the tradition of craft as long as use patterns and construction methods are illuminated.

Custodians are at cross-purposes with the rest of the field on a second front: in their belief in a systematic, well documented, scientific approach to the study and preservation of instruments. Their approach is highly textual, with written and photographic record-taking, published papers on treatment techniques and learned treatises on regional construction traditions. Through the creation of its own terminology, ethics, standards and literature, "conservation," as this approach is now known, has become an academic discipline which has disassociated itself from the largely blue-collar, overwhelmingly oral tradition of restoration from which it developed.⁴³ In the course of raising its academic and documentary practices, conservation has distanced itself socially

⁴³ Barclay, p. 52.

from its working-class progenitor – disowning its heritage in craft while simultaneously embracing the methods and manner of higher status occupations.

Conservation as an approach is both threatening and intimidating to other actors in the field of cultural production. It threatens the authority of the connoisseur, it throws into question many of the assumptions and techniques of restorers, it lays bare much of the mythology surrounding “sound,” it asks uncomfortable questions about the mysterious substances covering instruments. In short, conservation is not seduced by all of the nostalgic values dominant in the sphere of stringed instruments and which informs much of the activity of other actors. Custodians are not beholden to continuity, craft or a return to nature. Their only concern revolves around the passage of time (and is taken as self-evident).

Despite their pariah status within the field, custodians are entrusted with conserving the symbolic significance of goods. A violin’s inclusion in a museum collection augments the instrument’s prestige (individually, but also collectively as a genus). This is particularly true if the instrument is already symbolically important – if it is old and authentic, and if it has enjoyed an illustrious career peopled with famous players and infamous owners.

For custodians, patina is useful as a public relations ploy: it provides physical proof of the antiquity of an artifact; it is a demonstration of the passage of time. In reality, a perfect, unadulterated instrument, such as the Messiah by Antonio Stradivari at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, is far more desirable as a museum artifact than an older heavily patinated wreck. It is a reliable document. Yet, because of its pristine condition (it looks new), the instrument fails to resonate with the public. This is because they have been influenced beforehand by commentators convinced by the competing nostalgic

values operating elsewhere in the subfield of restricted production. Without the historical background relating to its provenance, and more recent grumblings about its authenticity,⁴⁴ most visitors who are predisposed toward visibly older instruments fail to give it a second glance.

⁴⁴ Stewart Pollens, "Le Messie," *Journal of the Violin Society of America* 16, no. 1 (1999): pp. 77-101; John Topham and Derick McCormick, "A Dendrochronological Investigation of Stringed Instruments of the Cremonese School (1666-1757) Including 'The Messiah' Violin Attributed to Antonio Stradivari," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 27, no. 3 (March 2000): pp. 183-192; Stewart Pollens, "Messiah Redux," *Journal of the Violin Society of America* 17, no. 3 (2001): pp. 159-179; and "The Messie: A Panel Discussion," in the same journal, pp. 181-222.

Chapter 4

The Field of Mass Cultural Production: Patina Kitsch

In contrast to the restricted subfield, the subfield of large-scale cultural production is founded on what we commonly refer to as mass or popular culture. It is also sustained by a formally integrated apparatus, but one whose dominant principle of hierarchization is economic capital.¹ In this subfield, the act of production is demystified insofar as collective cultural production is never surrounded with the same charismatic aura attached to an individual creation by a master of genius. In fact, the very idea of the individual falls off: the producer is no longer an individual; there is no collector, curator or connoisseur; the commentator is more or less powerless; the instruments are not economically valuable enough to be worthy of the attentions of a restorer; and the consumer is anonymous. Here, money is the central indicator of success and status. Symbolic questions related to meaning, originality and merit that might potentially be subject to negotiation among actors are not at issue in the large-scale subfield, where sales and profits are the only values that matter. Those in the restricted subfield are quite obviously contemptuous of such mercantile behaviour, preferring instead to work out collectively through confrontation the values appropriate to the works in question.

The cultural field constitutes ... an “economic world reversed”, in that the autonomous pole, based on symbolic capital and thus subject only to internal demands, is marked positively, and the opposite pole, based on subordination to the demands of economic capital, is marked negatively.²

¹ Randal Johnson, “Introduction,” in Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 16.

² Ibid.

For handcrafted stringed instruments and other antiques, this process of “working out” refers us back to the nostalgic values established in the restricted subfield and evinced by patina.

The fact that these values are well-established, and have been for a long time, is not lost on the subfield of mass cultural production which has been exploiting them for more than 200 years. Mass cultural products are routinely enveloped in nostalgia – neither the content (in the case of film or the visual arts) nor the exterior appearance being immune. In the latter case, this implies the application of simulated patina.

Objects which have been artificially patinated are meant to provide a simulacrum of nostalgia. At the level of craft, the artisan is restricted by the utilitarian form of the object they are working on so that style and technique alone are used to arouse particular emotional responses; the content is largely predetermined by the form. The surfaces of such objects are easily worked to give the impression of age, newness, use or neglect. Though the techniques may vary from craft to craft, artificially inducing patina to imitate age is a time-honoured means of fostering feelings of nostalgia. The techniques employed vary from the rudimentary, of a sort that might be applied to reproduction wooden duck decoys in a gift shop, to the sophisticated, as one finds with certain restored objects or reproductions in museums. The objects themselves may be complete works of the imagination or they may be informed by original examples sitting on an adjacent workbench. Either way, the results will undoubtedly appear mechanical and rigid to the trained eye used to looking at genuinely old specimens. To really experience the aesthetic, specialists (particularly those devoid of identification skills) need, paradoxically, to be sure that the object of contemplation is genuine. Copies simply

cannot provide the same aesthetic experience nor fulfill the same semiotic requirements.³ The cognoscenti, contemptuous of anything that smacks of “faking,” are liable to judge attempts at artificial patination very harshly. For them, authenticity is the primary consideration and clumsy attempts at copying are nothing more than a source of derision. Ironically, where well-executed examples of patination might meet with grudging admiration from a technical perspective, excellent examples pass unnoticed.

Most authentic antique instruments are in the hands of gifted musicians or are locked away in collections whose very existence further substantiates the claims to superiority of older instruments. In this sense, artificial patina acts as a conduit to the nostalgic emotions elicited by unattainable masterpieces. The idea is adequate for the uninitiated outside of the subfield of restricted production. For them, authenticity is a secondary concern.

Patina has long been highly esteemed in the broadest sense and considered to be a part of the identity of the object. In this sense the prevailing significance of patina is as a symbol, as a sign that something is old, worthy of respect, and genuine; and as with all symbols, a general indication suffices to give the idea. As a result, an industry of patina kitsch has developed whereby these symbolic values are “glued” onto objects in the cheapest way possible.⁴

Since the mid-nineteenth century, large workshops and factories in Germany, France, Eastern Europe and more recently in China have been producing tens of thousands of commercial instruments whose surfaces have been prepared in such a way as to simulate hundreds of years of aging, exposure to the elements, wear and tear through use, and craft intervention. The patina is worked up artificially in conformity with the

³ Barclay, *The Preservation and Use of Historic Musical Instruments*, p. 209.

⁴ Ernst van de Wetering, “The Surface of Objects and Museum Style,” in Price, Talley and Vaccaro, pp. 419-420.

values of the day in an effort to appease those who esteem age value but who lack the means to realistically indulge their fantasies. This patina often appears formulaic: the needs of industry to standardize in the name of efficiency ensure that attempts at simulating age and wear verge on cliché. The extent of “patina kitsch” in violin manufacturing is a telling reflection on the conservative nature of the stringed instrument market, and by extension, the music industry niche it supplies. Although not unique to instruments, the tendency to imitate, to copy and to reproduce is particularly prevalent in the stringed instrument world where the mythology of age has been actively cultivated by actors in the restricted subfield and subsequently appropriated and simplified by those in the subfield of mass production.

It is telling that most commercial instruments are covered in a thick, hard- alcohol varnish that does not lend itself to patination. As a result, the only evidence of wear on such instruments is the fake patina applied during their manufacture. Because the finish does not wear, abrade or corrode except in exceptional circumstances, they are much harder to date than better quality instruments which are more likely to exhibit signs of aging. Ironically, the better the instrument, the quicker it is likely to shed its more fragile varnish. As Karin Bijsterveld and Marten Schulp discovered in their consultations with contemporary instrument makers, much of the traditionalism of lutherie can be attributed to the fact that finer instruments wear extremely well.⁵ Genuine patina is a hallmark of both authenticity and excellence.

In addition, quality instruments also tend to be played more regularly because they are in the hands of professionals or advanced students as opposed to amateurs or

⁵ Bijsterveld and Schulp, “Breaking into a World of Perfection: Innovation in Today’s Classical Musical Instruments,” in *Social Studies of Science*, p. 654.

beginners. This accelerates the process of patination, particularly in those areas of the instrument subjected to extreme and prolonged physical contact with the player during the course of performing advanced repertoire.

The fact that manufacturers of commercial instruments feel the need to paste patina onto the exterior surfaces of their products testifies to the importance accorded to age and aging in the world of classical music. Though the applied patina is but a caricature – too crude to be convincing – antiqued instruments validate the *idea* of patina and the resultant emotions associated with it. The existence of such emotions is recognized as being not only legitimate but also integral to a milieu grounded in the past. In conforming to visual criteria established in the antique-instrument market, the artificial patina on new violins, violas and cellos merely confirms the value conferred on genuinely old specimens. Copies, no matter how meretricious, serve to consecrate the originals. In his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin argued that the aura of an authentic work of art is contingent on its originality, and that this aura, which is the foundation of its authenticity, is threatened by modern mechanical reproductive techniques.

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of a work of art ... One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the object from the domain of tradition.⁶

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 223.

In this Benjamin is mistaken. Copies, forgeries, fakes and mass-produced instruments, which themselves often have long, distinguished histories, do not jeopardize the aura of the original but actually partake of it – augment it, perhaps even sanctify it.⁷ Through the appropriation of nostalgic values, the subfield of large-scale cultural production merely reinforces their currency in the restricted subfield. As long as large-scale cultural products do not pretend to equal status, as long as they do not threaten the identity of the originals, then their existence is more than tolerated by actors in the restricted subfield. It is actually nurtured. Formulaic, commercial copies provide physical evidence of the individuality of the originals. The aura of the original derives in large measure from the existence of reproductions. Because originality and authenticity are not reproducible, or rather should not be reproducible in a market, differentiating and grading authenticity become important functions of the trade in works of art.⁸ The ability to recognize and discriminate between originals and copies, the capacity to identify aura, is recognized as the single most important talent among actors in the restricted subfield. This applies to commercial copies but is even truer when the copies in question are artisanal forgeries made with the intention to deceive, in which case the stakes are heightened and the powers of discrimination called for more refined. In partaking of the original's aura, both commercial copies and forgeries announce the primacy of nostalgic values while tacitly acquiescing to the former's superiority. This explains why certain actors in the restricted subfield actually sell commercial violins (and perhaps forgeries) alongside the originals.

⁷ "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, pp. 44-45.

⁸ Benjamin, p. 245 (footnote 2).

While the visual appearance of instruments in the restricted subfield of cultural production has always informed the “look” of those in the commercial sector, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the reverse also holds true: that a relentless exposure to reproductions has affected our aesthetic sensibilities and our expectations of what actually constitutes patina. The artificial patina to be found on commercial violins now seems to suffuse the surfaces of many genuinely older instruments. Contemporary restoration and conservation treatments often have the unintentional effect of making the restored instrument look like a commercial one. The hiding of structural defects, invisible retouch (which may well involve some of the techniques and stratagems of the commercial sector to simulate patina) and excessive French polishing with shellac, all leave the instruments looking unnaturally well-groomed so that they comply with the style established in the subfield of large-scale cultural production. It is roughly comparable to a situation in the early twentieth century wherein the tinny tones discernible in the sound of American orchestras at that time could be traced to the similar tones typically heard on the early recordings of renowned European orchestras. These recordings represented the apogee of technology; the sound “faithfully” reproduced epitomized the ideal to which contemporary American musicians aspired.⁹ In both instances, the “products” emerging from the large-scale subfield influence those of the restricted subfield. This is not to suggest that the underlying nostalgic values are in any sense being questioned or are in any danger of being supplanted. On the contrary, they are strongly implicated and actually strengthened by the trend. It only means that the visual representation of these values is not immutable – that it can and does transform over time

⁹ Van de Wetering, p. 420.

and place. While the values themselves do not change – the passage of time, continuity through use, an appreciation of craft and a reverence for nature – their visual representation does.

Despite their differences and in defiance of the animosity which sometimes characterizes their relations, the two subfields of cultural production are mutually interdependent. In fact, the relationship is symbiotic because they gain sustenance from one another through their sharing of nostalgic values. Whereas actors in the restricted subfield are obliged to summon forth specific values in their confrontations with one another within the broader field of cultural production, those in the commercial sector must appeal to the ensemble of nostalgic values. They must do so in the knowledge that the actual connection between the instruments and nostalgic values is purely symbolic – their cultural production cannot possibly fulfill any of the criteria. Actors in the large-scale subfield are powerless to invoke the passage of time (the instruments are generally new), continuity through use (provenance is not recorded for cheaper instruments and is notoriously difficult to substantiate in instances where one is alleged), a respect for craft (the instruments are mass produced by machine or on an assembly line) or a reverence for nature (commercial violins are industrial creations, untouched by nature – the wood, admittedly natural, is coated with synthetic varnish).

Producers in the subfield of large-scale production call on nostalgic values in a broad general sense to validate their activities. The simulated patina on commercial violins calls forth the past sufficiently to appease consumers who are satisfied with something realistic as opposed to real. It does not ask them to invest huge amounts of time or money. It demands of the consumer outside of the restricted subfield to suspend judgment and to accept an industrial facsimile as being representative of an *idea*.

Umberto Eco refers to this as hyperreality wherein “to speak of things that one wants to connote as real, these things must seem real. The ‘completely real’ becomes identified with the ‘completely fake.’ Absolute unreality is offered as real presence.”¹⁰ Insofar as time is valued as a source of meaning at all, it is understood as essentially an extension of the present. This does not refer simply to the system of shared frameworks that structure collective memory, as Halbwachs suggests. Rather, the actual substance of the past is reconstructed and completely recast in terms of the present. History is made part of the present, not in the form of a mysterious inner spirit, an impenetrable *soul*, but rather as a revealed object.¹¹

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1986), p. 7.

¹¹ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 84.

Conclusion

All objects live through profound change in the course of their lives: pieces wear out or are damaged and replaced; their structures are modified in accordance with the needs of the day; and their surfaces undergo transformation in a myriad of ways. In the case of stringed instruments, four agents are responsible for this transformation and contribute to the development of patina, and each of these agents is related to a particular nostalgic emotion. The simple passage of time necessarily leads to chemical alteration. Some of these alterations are highly evocative and have the capacity to summon forth both personal and collective memories and to provisionally enshroud the present with attributes of the past. Patina is also the accumulated record of continuous use – a document of sorts that records the wear and abrasions that an instrument has sustained and that recalls the history of classical music as well as the personalities that have peopled its pages. But not just the musicians: Instrument makers and restorers also figure in the narrative of classical music. The mythology surrounding the construction, restoration and conservation of instruments that is recounted on their patinated surfaces, is an important part of musical lore. It also brings to mind a pre-industrial era characterized by fine craftsmanship. Lastly, the patina linked to environmental factors transports us back to a simpler, purer past governed by natural laws. A romanticized, pastoral past marked by a reverence for nature.

Each of these nostalgic values takes the past, as opposed to place, as its point of reference. They are values that raise important questions about historical incongruities and tensions that exist between the past and present. The nostalgic reflection triggered by patina is a shared emotion. Something we experience when two temporal moments, past

and present, come together.¹ The patina inscribed on the surfaces of stringed instruments is a kind of language, a collective memory code, understood by all members of a community that stimulates this reflection and helps us to interpret temporal progression.

Actors in the field of cultural reproduction understand this code and exploit it in their pursuit of social, cultural and economic capital. Those in the restricted subfield appeal to some or all of the four nostalgic values as a means to rationalize and justify their actions to themselves, to other actors in the field and to the larger public. Patina offers visible proof of their claims – the essential quality underpinning each of the actor's often conflicting assertions. Simultaneously it acts as a symbolic link shared between the actors by validating the very *idea* of nostalgia in a broader sense.

In the field of mass production, nostalgia is evoked by proxy. Actors cannot and do not invoke nostalgic values. The fake patina applied to new, industrially produced instruments, a patina largely impervious to any of the transforming agents of change, does not in itself elicit nostalgia. Rather, commercially simulated patina is devoid of emotion – it is a mental construct. Though it pays homage to the past and even legitimizes the nostalgic values operating in the restricted subfield, in itself, fake patina is soulless. Nonetheless, it is representative of something for which we long and therefore helps to substantiate the *idea* of nostalgia.

In the restricted subfield, antique instruments act as a vehicle for bringing forward an idealized past into the present – patina acting as an *aide-mémoire*. Here, the past is reformulated as an object. In the large-scale subfield, the present invades and corrupts the past. The fake patina calculated to recall the days of old is “pasted” onto the exterior of

¹ Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” p. 5.

commercial instruments and is in fact a caricature, a simplified impression generated in the present and applied to the past. By reducing the past to a few nicks and scratches, producers are offering admittance, perhaps cynically, perhaps sincerely, to an ersatz past – one created in the present that bears little or no relation to reality. There is no pretence of realism, historical or otherwise, as in the case of restorers who painstakingly attempt to replicate replacement parts and recreate “real” patina. Whereas restorers and other actors in the restricted field are motivated by immediate status considerations or the allure of enduring glory to keep some version of the past alive and to nurture it into the future, those in the large-scale field are driven by profit to remake the past in terms of the present. They do not accept the premise that the passage of time is attendant with a loss of understanding that can and must be resurrected through the reawakening of objects. They have no stake in a future narrative that precludes them. A narrative structured around four nostalgic values nourished by patina.

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