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Photograph by George Sakkestad

Stringed Victory: Violin-maker Scott Cao crafts faithful reproductions of world-famous instruments in his Campbell workshop.

Instrument Of History

Scott Cao of Campbell recreates one of the world's great violins

By Traci Hukill

VIOLIN-MAKER SCOTT CAO remembers the first time he saw the Heifetz Guarneri violin. He was at the San Francisco workshop of Roland Feller, a renowned restorer of violins and the sole caretaker of the prized instrument.

"He showed me the back--just the back--and I said, 'That's the Heifetz Guarneri!' He said, 'You're very good.' I had studied it for a long time."

In his Campbell workshop, Cao (pronounced "Chow") regularly makes copies of a dozen well-known violins, including the Guarneri "Cannon" played by Niccolò Paganini, but last month he finished his first replica of the instrument made famous by one of the greatest musicians ever, Jascha Heifetz. The copy was a year in the making.

"Because it was not very attractive, I didn't want to copy it," Cao admits. "Until last year, I didn't even try. It has kind of an ugly f-hole, and the scroll is very rough-cut. But the sound is very powerful, very aggressive."

The f-holes are the two graceful swoops cut into the belly of the violin. Those of the Heifetz Guarneri swell awkwardly. And the instrument bears a yellowish bruise--a thumbprint, actually--thanks to a bad habit Heifetz had of holding his violin by the body instead of the neck.

Cao copied those marks faithfully. Asked how faithfully, he smiles and says, "Everything. Even the scratches."

The Heifetz Guarneri violin, which spends most days reclining under glass in the careful lighting of a museum alcove, might as well be the rarest orchid. Coddled and temperamental (68-72 degrees Fahrenheit; 50-55 percent relative humidity), its supporting post hidden from view, the instrument could be an epiphytic sprite rooted in air, offering to the wondering world the female form to covet and admire.

Everything about the Heifetz Guarneri suggests the fading perfume of old luxury. Famous scrolled neck arched like a sea horse's, it rests on a silk box of palest turquoise, the better to complement the satiny amber lights rippling through its wood like tiger stripes.

Played only on occasion and only by virtuosi, the instrument never leaves its glass case without a bodyguard and a handler, the first to discourage any love-struck listener from spiriting it away, the second to wipe it clean after playing and whisk it back to safety.

It is one of the most famous violins in the world. Made in 1742 by Giuseppe Guarneri del Gesù (1698-1742) in the celebrated violin-making town of Cremona, Italy, its pedigree equals (and some say surpasses) that of any instrument created by the most famous of all violin makers, Antonio Stradivari (1644?-1737). In 1922, when the violin was still called the "David" in honor of a previous owner, a limpid-eyed young sensation named Jascha Heifetz bought it. By the time Heifetz died in 1987, his reputation as the greatest violinist who ever lived was sealed, and the David, rechristened the Heifetz, was more valuable than ever.

Upon Heifetz' death, the violin took up residence at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco with instructions that it only be played by "worthy talent." And so the 260-year-old violin passed into a comfortable dotage, admired and honored, escorted to parties, studied by devotees.

And imitated down to its very last foible. Unimpressed by modern gewgaws, violin makers as a group yearn for the past. Everyone agrees the best instruments were made in the Stradivari-Guarnerius heyday of the early 18th century, and they worship the old masters accordingly.

Today's luthiers (as the makers of stringed instruments used to be called) collect posters of the great old violins in the same way teenagers collect posters of rock stars. They mourn the lost art of making varnish, that final application of spirits and resins that gives instruments their beauty and preserves their tone. And when they make their own instruments, they labor slowly, producing only a half-dozen or so in a year. Collectively they are uniquely resistant to the new, the instantaneous and the disposable. They are also obsessive about their craft.

SCOTT CAO EMERGES from the back of the Campbell shop, jet-lagged and sleepy, hands shoved in the pockets of his windbreaker. He has just returned from a trip to China to oversee his rapidly growing factory, begun eight years ago with only a few employees. Now it's swelled to 150 employees, who will produce almost 10,000 instruments next year selling for $300-$900 apiece. A picture of the Scott Cao Violin Factory Basketball Team hangs on the wall, a smiling group in red uniforms with white stripes.

Here in the local shop, where violins and violas hang from wires in various stages of completion, some nude and unfinished, some rich-hued and gleaming, Cao's assistants produce about 100 instruments a year that retail for $1,200-$5,000. Those made by Cao's own hand command up to $9,000.

That's an excellent price for a good violin. Gideon Grau, conductor of the Palo Alto Philharmonic Orchestra, bought the Heifetz copy last month and is ecstatic about it.

Just as good wines need to breathe, new violins require playing--"they need to be broken in, like a horse, no?" asks Grau--and Cao's violin is deepening in complexity with each day.

"I have had the violin for only three weeks, and it has improved in a very short time already," Grau exults. "Every day, it's better. He's a very talented, an eminently talented maker."

On a sunny afternoon in October, Grau shuffles into Cao's workshop carrying two instruments: the brand-new Heifetz copy and the venerable violin he has played for 40 years. Grau has a mild case of conductor's hair--white tufts impervious to the laws of gravity--and a distracted habit of wearing the same shirt two days in a row. He is warming up on the Heifetz copy when Cao walks in to the practice room.

"That's a good fiddle," Grau declares approvingly. He plays a rippling run. "The glissando? Mmm?" As he plays, he watches Cao's face intently to gauge his response. Cao stands immobile, arms folded, eyes fixed on the violin.

Grau picks up his longtime instrument and plays a few bars. The difference between the two is undeniable; the older instrument is throatier, with a wild, untamed edge to it, Gothic and Romantic and heartbroken. "Brilliant E string," Grau remarks casually, ending a run on a searingly high note.

He takes up the Cao again. It has a different character altogether--a smooth, creamy quality, more elegant, as if already accustomed to discipline and restraint. Heifetz had a reputation for excellence that some called cold. The Cao's voice is warm, but it is unerringly precise. "This has a very good quality," Grau observes with obvious delight. "The E is not quite as bright ..."

"No, not quite as bright," Cao murmurs.

"But then it has a middle," Grau says and demonstrates the Cao's silky midrange with a few bars. "Every day, it gets more overtones. I think this particular model that you have here, it's so special. It gives the character of time."

Cao answers with a nod.

"Some violins inspire you," Grau says later over a beer. "And some you get tired of. Like a spouse who you marry. But love can last. It can die. Then you get a divorce." He laughs at his own joke.

Asked if he thinks his new love will last, Grau responds with a gleam in his eye. "I don't know. I haven't had it long enough to know if I'll get bored. But I have an instinct that I won't."

GOOD MATERIALS are essential to the making of a violin. Most violin makers, Cao included, travel to Europe to buy wood. For the belly, they go to the Italian Alps in search of slow-growing, dense-grained spruce. For the back and sides, they buy maple from Germany and Bosnia.

Then comes the arching of the two pieces of wood, accomplished by careful planing to hollow them out into particular dimensions that will shape the tone into something living or something tolerable. This is where knowledge of the masters is crucial. Of the two giants of violinmaking--Stradivari and Guarneri--Cao says Stradivari is the easier to simulate.

"Everyone knows Stradivari. He's very organized, [with] very good workmanship. When he made violins, he only changed a little bit at a time. If you want to copy a Strad, you can use the same mold and do things a little different. But Guarneri is different. ... He's not very careful, but he's talented. He's just a genius. With Guarneri you have to do a new mold."

There are some 650 Stradivarii in the world today, and perhaps 150 Guarnerii, and many violinists prefer the latter for their power. Several weeks ago a Guarneri del Gesù sold for an estimated $1.25 million above what had ever been paid for a violin, according to the Swiss dealer who sold it. Until then the record had been held by a Stradivari sold by Christie's for $1.58 million.

CAO, A NATIVE OF CHINA, came to

his career in the United States by an unusual path. “Many people ask, ‘How do you get in this business?’ I tell them it just happened. I was appointed by the government.”

In the mid-1970s, in the midst of Mao’s cultural revolution, Cao was sent to do farm work in the countryside. Hard farm work. After two years, a violin-making teacher visited the farm.

“He said, ‘We have a violin-making school in the city. Do you want to go?’ All the young people, we didn’t want to stay there on the farm. Of course we wanted to go to the city, no matter if you were making violins or shoes!”

When China’s borders opened, Cao went to the United States. Arriving in San Francisco to stay with friends until such time as he left for violin-making school in Chicago, he showed one of his violins to a dealer.

“He said, ‘You don’t need to go to violin-making school. You are already very good!’ “ Cao recalls. “He told me, ‘You should study with a violin maker and learn the skill from repairing and restoring old instruments.’ That was very wise. My eyes started to open. I began to get serious about making violins.”

After several apprenticeships, he opened Scott Cao Violins in the South Bay and the factory in China. These days, the business keeps Cao on the run. “I need to increase my production,” he says of the six violins he makes each year, “but I don’t know if I can.”

While Cao is talking, the telephone rings. It’s Mark Volkert, concertmaster of the San Francisco Symphony. He’s called to tell Cao that in the middle of a solo the other night the guest violinist, Nigel Kennedy, broke a string on his very expensive violin. Volkert loaned Kennedy his Cao violin for the duration of the solo, and he reports excitedly, “You couldn’t tell the difference.”

Cao nods, taking the news in stride.

“When I see the musicians so enjoying the musical instruments I make, it’s very encouraging,” he says after hanging up. “It gives me power to continue.

“It’s very difficult to compete with old instruments. People always tend to like the old better and they’ll turn down a new one. They say, ‘You’re making something that people will appreciate 100 years later.’ But I try to produce a new instrument that already sounds old and have them use it a day later, not 100 years later. I want people to enjoy my instruments while I’m alive!”

Words any of the old masters would probably appreciate.

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