

THE VEILS OF TIME

Jean-Philippe Echard – When I was at college in Dijon, being fourteen or fifteen years old, my latin and greek teacher wanted me to apply to the Ecole des chartes! I didn't even know what it was at the time, and the ins and outs of my time at college then at lycée left me wanting to do a bac C, a baccalaureate in maths and physics. In fact, I first trained as a chemist by doing chemical engineering then a PhD in chemistry which led me to an activity, curator of musical instruments in a national collection, where more specifically I am in charge of lutherie. It is today, thirty years after this long trajectory that has taken me from chemist to curator at the Museum of Music where I am back studying ancient texts, that I remember the intuition of this latin and Greek teacher all that time ago...

All ancient violins have been modified, some a little, some a lot, in order to adapt them to trends in playing techniques favoured by musicians and composers, and also to give greater body of sound, the capacity of violins to be heard in bigger and bigger concert halls. There are numerous modifications, of the neck, of certain components in the internal structure of the body etc, but also of the strings. For example, a violin made by Stradivarius three centuries ago is nowadays not played with the same strings as in the past. In the past, the violin had strings made mostly of gut, particularly the E string, i.e. the one with highest pitch. Well now the same violin may still be played but its high-pitched string is metal.

When I pick up an instrument from the collection, I feel as if I am receiving two relatively distinct things: first there are the intentions of the person who made it, gave it its form, assembled it, sculpted it and conceived it. And through that I also see the marks of time, call them the veils of time, that is to say that there is in some way an instrument that would have been new three or four centuries ago that is wrapped in a succession of veils. There is the effect of time on the materials, the varnish as it yellows and darkens for example. But of course there are also layers left by the actions of successive people such as musicians who during a rather energetic passage let their fingers stray and leave a trace of fingernail on the surface next to the fingerboard. Then there are the actions of the restorers and instrument makers who have kept this instrument in a playable state and who have had to change components, correct deficiencies and glue breakages etc.

Every ancient violin that is still in use today continues to be a manufactured artefact that has benefited from successive attentions and a will to keep it useful for multiple generations. An instrument from three or four centuries ago may today have a modified neck, modified strings and modified fingerboard and have been in constant use throughout the history of violin music and of

music in general; sure, many of its original components have disappeared, certainly the sound that it creates is not the same, yet even so we still call it for example a Stradivarius from 1724! And all that is the salt of my research, the curiosity perhaps, for this object, the historical violin, the ancient violin, that is ultimately a useful example in this quest for authenticity and of what we are seeking as experience of the past.

04 min 05 s