



Left: ERIC MEIER tests the thickness of the wood in a violin "belly," using a specially-designed gauge

THE CRAFT OF THE VIOLIN-MAKER

"I EARNESTLY hope that any young New Zealanders who feel interested in violin-making and repairing will be encouraged to take it up seriously. There are very few practising craftsmen here—I personally know of only one other in New Zealand who makes it a full-time commercial occupation—and the day must come when knowledge and experience will die with us unless it can be passed on in the meantime by word of mouth and practical demonstration. It is a fascinating craft. Though the fundamentals are the same as when the very earliest violins were made, there is always something new to learn. Makers and repairers can become individualists, and leave their mark in the progress of string music."

So said Eric Meier, violin-maker and repairer, when interviewed by *The Listener* in his attic workshop in Wellington the other day. Among Mr. Meier's clients are players all over New Zealand, and many members of the National Orchestra of the NZBS.

"See this; guess what it's for," he said, pointing to a dentist's mirror. And he showed how easy it was to slip the mirror through the "f" holes in a violin and study the inside. "And this"—a scraper known all too well by dentists' patients. On his bench were delicate instruments used by watch-makers, a magnifying glass which fits into the eye; calipers to measure fractions of an inch, and home-made brass planes, the largest as big as a matchbox and the smallest no bigger than a walnut—"Very handy for shaping the fronts and backs of violins when they have been taken out of the solid wood."

"How did you happen to become a violin-maker?"

"I learned the fiddle when I was eight, then I met a Mr. Stephens who, some people may remember, was closely connected with St. Paul's Pro-Cathedral in Wellington. He told me he had been a violin-maker in his younger days, and I pestered him for two years to show me how to make a fiddle. He probably thought I was too young to be taken seriously, but I made countless trips to the public library, and read all I could on the subject, including the fiddle-makers' bible (a work by Edward Heron Allen). Then in 1922 I met E. A. Burr, a retired civil servant who had taken up fiddle-making, and later turned out my first instrument in his workshop in Courtenay Place."

In Mr. Meier's workshop were violins of various makes and some in various stages of construction. Describing the materials used in violin-making, Mr. Meier said that the belly, or front, was usually of Swiss pine, called spruce in America; and the back was of maple, grown chiefly in Yugoslavia. It was claimed that Stradivarius got his wood from Turkey where it was used for manufacturing galley-oars. The nearest approach to that type of timber in New Zealand was the plane-trees growing in Levin. In Europe thousands of acres of timber were grown solely for violins, but out of a whole truck-load of the wood, there might be only one or two really resonant pieces. The expert maker could tell at the outset if a sample of wood would be totally unsuitable for the job,

but on the other hand, he had no means of forming an idea if it would turn out a superlative instrument. Apparently the great maker Guarnerius used the same log for the fronts of a number of his fiddles, for an identical stain appears on many of them. Obviously he had proved the worth of that timber.

The important job of shaping fiddle parts is exacting. They are carved out of the solid wood, though perspex has recently been used instead. Violins are of standard size, but there can be many differences in design — though these are hardly apparent to the layman. Mr. Meier has been at this work for 25 years, but his output, he says, is low, because of constant experimenting—"An awful lot of timber has gone into the rubbish bin."

There are so many "genuine Strads" in the world that their timber would almost solve New Zealand's housing problems. *The Listener* asked Mr. Meier about such fakes. Were they easy to produce?

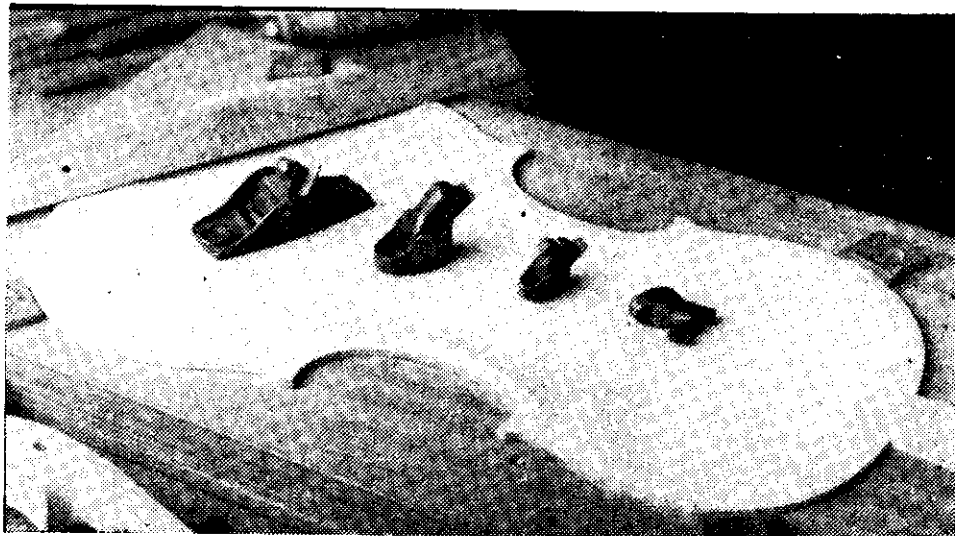
"Very easy," he said. "Even experts can be duped—temporarily—by French violins passed off as Italian. But you can no more produce a good instrument without the proper wood and the quality of work than you can make synthetic fruit. All sorts of cunning devices have been used to turn out forgeries. Tricksters have only to apply heavily-diluted sulphuric acid to the timber to achieve the lovely golden colour of a Cremona varnish. The acid can in an hour or two produce the effect of many years of ageing. All this sort of thing may fool the layman, but not the expert or the true craftsman."

An enthusiastic violin-maker spent his life seeking perfect tone, said Mr. Meier. The Italians, probably, had the finest, and there was no other quite like it. Possibly climate was partly responsible. "As we all know the Italians are famous for their voices, and I believe that the best possible voice tone should be used as a standard for the violin for, after all, the fiddler's job is to make his instrument sing like a human voice."

The Listener suggested that, as the wood was dearer to procure than it had ever been, and bridges and other components proportionately up in price, a maker would find it profitable if he could get some idea as his work proceeded, of the likely quality of the completed instrument.

"That would be impossible," said Mr. Meier. "It is my opinion that nobody can build fiddle parts, put them together and string up the instrument with the certainty that it will give a first-class tone. But you can control tone after the fiddle is built by adjusting the bridge and sound-post; you can vary the thickness of the wood from the outside with scrapers and sandpaper; a change in the apertures of the "f" holes will cause an alteration of tone. And you can make a

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TINY brass planes used in the making and repairing of violins