

# Unvarnished Instruments: Team Building

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**For luthiers, finely sourced white instruments may well be the perfect accessory – offering the double opportunity for varnishing practice and to sell less expensive models to students and those with shallower pockets. But, writes Peter Somerford, the issues of provenance and labelling are of utmost importance when marketing such instruments to the public**

A young violinist visits the workshop of a local maker after hearing good things about her instruments. He likes what he sees, and tries out a few violins, but they're beyond what he can afford. He's about to leave disappointed when the maker brings out another instrument, a violin that she recently bought in the white, and has since varnished and set up in her workshop. The violin has the same high-quality finish and professional set-up as her handmade instruments, and to the player it looks good, sounds good, and crucially is within his price range.

This scenario has the potential to end in a sale, but the player should understand exactly what he is purchasing – how much of the violin is the maker's work, and how much is the work of someone else. The maker can communicate this face to face, and back it up with clear documentation and a certificate, together with a carefully worded label that, while probably including the maker's name in a description such as 'Workshop of...' or 'Varnished by...', clearly differentiates the instrument from the maker's own instruments – to avoid confusion both immediately and in the future, when the player might sell the violin on.



Instruments from luthier Korinthia Klein's Tempo Series - white violins and violas that she buys before varnishing by hand

One of the reasons why established makers buy white instruments in the first place is to use them to experiment with varnishes and try out different varnishing techniques. That they can then set the instruments up and price them to sell quickly, and perhaps attract new customers in the process, is a nice bonus. Luthier Korinthia Klein, of Korinthian Violins in Milwaukee, has bought several white violins and violas, for between \$400 and \$500 each, and taken them along to varnish maker Joe Robson's annual varnishing workshop in Chicago. After setting them up back in her shop, she sells them for between \$2,000 and \$2,500 as her 'Tempo Series' instruments – the instruments she makes herself are closer to the \$6,000–\$7,000 mark. 'It's a win-win,' Klein says, 'because I get some varnish practice and the player gets a nicely varnished instrument at a lower price than if the instrument were also handmade. The money I make from the sale of the instruments usually covers the cost of attending the workshop.' She finds that the instruments are a good fit with her mid-range market in Milwaukee, which includes students and players looking to buy their first high-quality instrument. 'It's important for me to provide people with quality instruments that aren't so expensive,' she says. 'The Tempo instruments have been a good way to supplement that niche in our inventory.'

Jacob Simmons (right), in Lockhart, Texas, is another maker who has bought white instruments to take to Robson's varnishing workshop. He has since sold one to a friend who was looking for an upgrade, has another

varnished and waiting to be set up, and has bought two more to repeat the process. 'Because I've bought instruments to develop my varnishing skills, I haven't focused so much on high-quality workmanship,' he says. 'I want a well-made instrument, though, and I want it to look good. So far I've always bought Chinese instruments, mainly because of the price. If selling these instruments were to become a serious income stream, I would probably take a different approach, do more research, even take the instruments apart in order to transform them into top-notch instruments. But I only have so much time, and I would rather spend it making my own.'



Edgar Russ works on a handmade 'master' instrument

There is certainly a wide choice of white instruments to cater to different levels of maker commitment. A look at the catalogue of Baltimore-based wholesaler the International Violin Company shows a large range, from a Chinese-made \$60 student violin to a \$630 Guarneri-model violin made in Poland and a \$2,600 European-made cello, as well as fractional-sized violins, multiple sizes of viola, plus five-string and Baroque models. Ken Wise, the company's manager for the last 25 years, says that besides established makers, the market for white instruments includes hobbyists who want a project, and shops who want to use the instruments as a shop brand, and have the staff to customise them, varnish them and set them up. 'We sell a lot of white instruments to shops that are sending their people to varnish class or repair workshops,' he says. 'People use the cheaper violins to practise not just varnishing but also edgework, preparing surfaces properly, scroll definition and stylistic matters. With the better-quality white instruments, the workmanship aspect is already taken care of, so makers get something that they can straight away varnish up and turn a profit on.' Wise adds that he's had to change suppliers over the years because some makers of higher-quality white instruments have realised that their level of work is too good, and so have decided to switch to only selling varnished instruments.

## ***'I take a certain pleasure in producing something for a low price, made by somebody who knows how it should be done' – Edgar Russ***

Some makers bypass the wholesaler and get their white instruments direct from source. Edgar Russ in Cremona has been buying instruments from a German factory for more than 20 years. They are varnished and set up in his workshop and sold as a line of beginner instruments called 'Scala Perfetta'. 'It's become an interesting part of my company turnover,' says the Austrian-born maker. 'It's not that much work, but is an opportunity to do a lot of varnishing. I take a certain pleasure in producing something for a low price, made by somebody who knows how it should be done.' In 2006 Russ decided to source much closer to home, for a new, higher-level line he called 'Linea Macchi'. For these instruments, other makers in Cremona supply him with ribs, plates, neck and scroll, made according to his moulds. Then Russ and his workshop team use these pieces to produce handmade instruments, with the thickening, surface preparation, varnishing, bass-bar and set-up all done in-house. 'It becomes like group therapy in the workshop,' says Russ. 'Everyone takes each piece in their hands, feels the wood, and we decide together on elements such as thickening. It's a good way for the people in the workshop to increase their data, skills and experience, which in turn increases their ability to be good makers. And with 150 to 200 instruments coming out of the workshop each year, everybody gets lots of varnishing practice.'

Russ has used these two lines to create distinct tiers below his own handmade or 'master' instruments. His Scala Perfetta violins sell for €3,320, the Linea Macchi for €8,260, and his master violins for €27,275. He also offers instruments made by his apprentices, which occupy various price points between the Linea Macchi and his master violins. He explains: 'The idea is that players can start with a Scala Perfetta, and then after a few years when they need a better instrument, they can bring it back and get a Linea Macchi and just pay the difference.' He admits that not many people have taken advantage of this trade-in concept, but maintains that it plays an important role in persuading customers that each type of instrument from his workshop represents good value for money.

In Austin, Texas, violin maker Julian Cossmann Cooke (below right), who serves as vice president of the Violin Society of America board of directors, recently began working on his first bought-in white instrument. His motivation is similar to Russ's trading-up idea. 'I tend to target the lower-end market and advance students,' he says. 'If I can catch customers earlier with a "Workshop of..." instrument that's priced accordingly, then I have a chance of graduating them to my more expensive instruments as they progress in their playing and get older. So it's primarily a long-term marketing strategy for me.'

How to price the new instrument is giving him pause for thought, however, as he says he needs to consider not just how much his target market usually spends on similar instruments but also how much work and time he will have to put in away from making his own instruments. 'If, after varnishing and setting the instrument up and leaving it a month to adjust to tension, I find I have to take the top off and do some regraduating or bass-bar adjustments, that might make me want to raise the price a little. But if I price too high and can't sell, then I've defeated the whole purpose of the exercise.' He warns of another pricing consideration for individual makers: 'When you buy a violin for \$150, varnish it up and try to sell it, you're competing with the shops that don't do many high-end instruments but instead sell factory instruments, or instruments they have bought wholesale from manufacturers. You're at their price point, and the question is, can you compete with that? And if you are competing on that level, how interested are shops going to be in taking your instruments on consignment or wholesale and marketing and selling them?'



Z.Z. Ludwig varnishes a white instrument from the International Violin Company in Baltimore at his workshop in Silver Spring, Maryland, US

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***‘Labelling is such an individual choice. it’s about where you draw the line between being transparent that this is a workshop instrument, and ensuring that people make the connection to you as the source’ – Julian Cossmann Cooke***

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A further consideration for Cossmann Cooke is how to label the finished instrument. This can be a potentially tricky area for makers when the instrument is not entirely their own work. 'Labelling is such an individual choice,' says Cossmann Cooke. 'For me, it's about where you draw the line between being completely forthright and transparent about the fact that this is a workshop instrument, and at the same time ensuring that people make the connection to you as the source.' One option might be to attach a made-up name, but this strategy risks customers thinking that there might be another maker making the instruments somewhere in the world, and that you are simply the person selling them. 'On the other hand,' says Cossmann Cooke, 'if you put your own name on the label, your name becomes associated with those instruments, and unless you're absolutely comfortable that they're high-quality and tonally good instruments, there's a certain amount of reputational risk.'

Simmons has been going through the same labelling thought processes as Cossmann Cooke. While both are leaning towards a 'Workshop of...' or 'From the shop of...' style label, Simmons is also considering naming the country of origin and adding 'Varnished by...'. He says: 'I probably won't create a fake name, but will simply be more exact and particular with the description. I don't think there's anything wrong with selling instruments that are not made by you, as long as you're very clear and upfront about what that instrument is.'

Klein believes that clear, precise labelling helps avoid confusing her clients, and makes them feel comfortable about what they're buying. The label on her Tempo instruments has the shop name Korinthian Violins, the state name Wisconsin and the year that the instrument was set up. It then says 'Tempo Series', with a series number. Then by hand Klein usually writes 'Varnished by Korinthia A. Klein', perhaps adding an extra line of detail such as 'Varnished at the Chicago workshop'. She also keeps instruments distinct by using a different bridge stamp for her workshop instruments and those she makes herself. Beyond this, she finds it useful to give detailed explanations to her customers. 'I explain a lot about how instruments are priced, because that can be very confusing for people,' she says. 'I break down factory instruments versus handmade instruments, and functional value versus artistic value. I explain that I varnish a Tempo instrument in the same way I would varnish one of my own, with high-quality oil varnish. And I explain how varnishing in general is considered half the effort of building an instrument – half the process – and most customers aren't aware of this at all.' With every sale the buyer receives an appraisal form that clearly explains what the instrument is and its origins. Klein adds: 'The only trouble I've occasionally encountered is when people want a Tempo violin, in their mind, to be something I've made. I always disabuse them of that notion if I hear it, but I don't know if you can ever completely avoid confusion based on what people want to believe.'



Korinthia Klein with Joe Robson at his annual varnishing workshop in Chicago

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***'I explain how varnishing in general is considered half the effort of building an instrument. most customers aren't aware of this at all' – Korinthia Klein***

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Having a named line of instruments like Klein's and Russ's arguably helps such makers be both more flexible and more clear with their labelling. On his Linea Macchi labels, Russ adds 'made under the guidance of Edgar E. Russ, Cremona', and every label carries his signature and the year. He adds: 'The instruments come with a certificate and colour photos, and my name is always on the certificate. It's important that you are transparent, and that your name is there as the master maker taking ultimate responsibility.' Russ borrowed 'Macchi' from the name of the road where his workshop is located, but he still sometimes has customers wanting to meet Mr Macchi. While that might be amusing, he sighs when he speaks of the times he's seen people trying to sell fake Scala Perfetta violins online, or trying to pass off a Scala Perfetta as one of his master violins. But he reasons that, while a few potential buyers might be fooled, the internet makes it easy for people to contact him with any concerns, and email him instrument pictures and links.

A good-quality, well-sourced white instrument might be the ultimate accessory for makers to have in their workshop, offering at once a useful resource for varnish practice and experimentation, an additional revenue stream, and a potential route to expanding their clientele. But transparency and honesty when labelling, marketing and selling such instruments are important. As Simmons says, 'It's not helpful for any maker to pretend that something is their work when it isn't. That kind of practice is going to come back and bite you. It's not good for the maker, the buyer, or the industry.'