



Violinist Bernt Lysell compares a Stradivari and a modern violin at the 2006 blind trial in Sweden

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Italian and some modern instruments, or between any two instruments for that matter. My opinion and experience, though, is that even musically educated audiences listening in double-blind tests are repeatedly unable to conclude that old Italians are superior. One can always find some reason to invalidate any test, but at some point it seems like the preponderance of evidence might prevail.'

Perhaps the real answer, though, lies not so much in the actual sound that is produced, but more in some intangible interaction between the player and the instrument. When asked on the BBC programme why great players seek out

the top Cremonese instruments both Stern and Zukerman answered one word in unison: 'security'. Charles Beare added: 'The difference between a great instrument and a good instrument is what it does for the player.' Woodhouse agrees and suggests that any rigorous testing procedure should also include input from the player: 'There is no doubt that a blindfolded player is much better at recognising instruments than most listeners.'

But there are also some players who feel quite comfortable playing on new instruments. Christian Tetzlaff uses a modern violin by Stefan-Peter Greiner and said in an interview in *The Strad*

(July 2005): 'If I were to play a Strad and a Guarneri in a double-blind test with my Greiner, I am sure that no one could tell which was the new instrument. When I play with orchestras, if they don't know what I'm playing, they always ask if it's a Strad or Guarneri.'

As a group, new instrument makers are not noted iconoclasts — they still revere the Cremonese makers and aspire to a Cremonese sound. In fact, Peter Westerlund seemed more amazed by the Strad coming last in the Swedish test than by having his own violin finish first. Talk to violin makers and they will invariably tell you about specific old instruments they have heard that proved to be both a revelation and an ongoing inspiration in their approach to the craft.

But that doesn't mean they automatically accept that all old Cremonese instruments are universally wonderful. Burgess sums it up: 'My opinion from everything I've heard, played, and the musicians I've talked to? I won't go so far as to say that "the Emperor isn't wearing any clothes", but I do think there might be a fat man in a Speedo in this parade.'

Evaluating and judging sound need not be confined to these divisive 'new versus old' debates. There are many other interesting and useful applications that would benefit from a more rigorous and controlled testing procedure — tone judging in violin making competitions, for example, or helping players make more informed choices when buying a new instrument. With more carefully designed trials and better-trained ears it should be possible to come up with more meaningful results.

That is not to say, though, that the findings will ever be infallible. It is probably worth keeping in mind the words of Steven Spurrier, organiser of the 1976 Paris Wine Tasting, who wrote after the event: 'The results of a blind tasting cannot be predicted and will not even be reproduced the next day by the same panel tasting the same wines.' ■

