

Profile

Tom Blackburn

London Luthier

Gioachino Rossini said "Give me a laundry list and I'll put it to music".

What Rossini meant was that his knowledge of his subject was so inherent a part of him that he was able to interpret, arrange or compose anything that he was asked to do.

So it is with masters of their profession; they possess extraordinary skills and dedication, and meeting up with Tom Blackburn in his Kensington home and workshop reminded me why.



Tom Blackburn GRSM FASC ARCM & Member of the Guild of Master Craftsmen has been working as a Luthier since 1969.

His interest in stringed instruments and restoration started whilst he was still at school, and was inspired by the work of his grandfather who was a master cabinet maker. Most summer holidays were spent learning from and working with Luthiers both in Britain and the South of France.

After leaving the Royal Academy of Music in London, having studied violin, piano, organ and composition, he worked as a freelance professional violinist both in London and abroad, together with some teaching and lecture recitals touring schools in the south of England. By 1969 the decision was made to devote most of his musical energies and experience into the fascinating world of Lutherie and gradually professional playing was reduced, so that today it is a pleasurable hobby.

His company Blackburn Stringed Instruments' reputation is renowned

nationally and internationally for its integrity, dedication and service to the musical public from the youngest musician to the top professional player. The testimonials on his website www.londonviolins.co.uk provide just a small quota of praise for his work.

"My work as a professional violinist taught me that choosing or changing an instrument is very daunting for any musician. One's instrument is a bit like a marriage and if you are parted it is like a divorce and you have to look for another partner. You have to find out what the instrument can give you in order to express your musicianship, not what



you can take from it. You should never impose yourself on an instrument. Let it reveal itself to you".

"It is something quite special to be working as a Luthier in central London. Every day is different and every hour is different. One minute we can be working on a violin of great value, the next attending to the problems of a cheap Chinese instrument which has caused a young child to shed many tears.

Restoration, in all its forms is fascinating and one never stops learning or inventing alternative methods to achieve a solution. There is also a morality in restoration. Do as little as possible; don't try to alter the maker's work because you think you can improve on it. One of the things I really love doing is the 'setting-up' of instruments; that is to say creating the best possible sound for an instrument. Here again we have to be as objective as possible but again having spent many years as a professional violinist gives you that extra inner insight. I take great pride particularly on the quality of our tonal 'set-up' on stringed instruments (i.e. the fitting of the bridge, sound post, pegs and strings).

I have worked on a couple of Strads (Stradivarius - made by Antonio Stradivari, born Italy 1644), in my time and they were fascinating and wonderful instruments. I had another fine Italian violin by a man called Carlo Antonio Testore who worked in Milan in the 18th century. His work can be very rugged, but what sounds they have! The violin in question took me many hours of adjustments to the bridge and the sound post inside and I had to call in two violin friends to play the instrument and give me their opinions. It eventually worked

well and the new owner is thrilled with it. and the bow is also in two pieces that fit together. What is so interesting is that even though the violin was intended to be thrown around in a circus, it is so beautifully made! That's French making for you!



circa 1730 by CARLO ANTONIO TESTORE at Milan.

Over the years I have seen and acquired a collection of 'strange' instruments. Some that were produced by makers who wanted to experiment. There is a 'clown's violin made by a very good French maker called Jules Grandjohn approx 1860s. It is made so that it can come apart in two pieces

Expertise is another aspect of the work of a Luthier and it doesn't come from books or getting a fine arts degree! It comes from looking and remembering what you have seen. You build up a vast store house of information which you have to tap into. Sometimes it is necessary to research, but that is based on what you have seen in the first instance. You build up an instinct. It can be like looking at someone in fancy dress. Deep down you think you know who it is and with luck sometimes a lot of luck, you get it right. Over the years you build a store house of knowledge supported by years of intense observation and

experience.

If I preview an auction for instance, I never look at the catalogue to begin with. You will never learn doing it that way. You have to exercise your mind and eyes." By Kate Hawthorne.

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