

INTRODUCTION

Why are instruments varnished?

Violins were probably first varnished for the protection it afforded, but as violins moved into more rarified social circles, the beauty of the varnish became more important and admired.

Prior to the 16th century, bowed instruments were considered folk instruments, and were often played outside for dances, festivals, processions etc. Varnish provided needed protection from dust, humidity, sweat and wood decay.

Weighed against the need for protection were other practical concerns. Early lutes had unvarnished tops, even though the top of the instrument was more exposed to sweat and dust than other parts. Obviously there was a compelling reason not to varnish the top. As it happens, the belly of a lute is very thin, and the pressure of the strings often caused the top to sink just above the bridge. Thomas Mace, in 1676, described the necessity of taking off the belly of a lute at least every one or two years to renew the bars. Because no clamps could be set, a hot iron was used for regluing the top. Rather than destroying the varnish with a hot iron, the top was left unvarnished.

Old instruments, other than lutes, sometimes have tops that appear to be lighter in color or to have not been varnished at all. It is reported that a lira da braccio on display in Vienna had an unvarnished top until the 19th century. Even though the reason for lutes to remain unvarnished did not apply to other instruments, it is possible that the old makers followed the lutemakers tradition.

Does the varnish affect the sound?

A violin in the white has a typically brash and aggressive sound, which seems to be mellowed and focused by the application of varnish. So varnish does affect the sound, and seemingly for the better. However, varnish that is too thick, or too hard, or too sticky, can diminish the ability of the violin to vibrate properly, and so it does not sound well.

Therefore, a good instrument can be damaged by a bad varnish. However, a good varnish will not necessarily make a bad instrument sound better.

Many old Cremonese instruments never had varnish on the top under the fingerboard, not even a ground coat or primer. Therefore, the old Cremonese masters probably did not believe varnish to be a major contributor to sound. It also shows that the old Italians did not temporarily remove the fingerboard while doing the varnish work as is done today. They also did not varnish the inside of the pegbox.

A good varnish should not only protect the wood, it should preserve the tone characteristics of the wood, such as elasticity. It should also improve the natural beauty of the instrument; it should be transparent so as to enhance the figure of the wood, and it must not be too thick.