

Highlighting

Highlighting is shifting or removing varnish in selected areas to let the ground and undercoats show through. The purpose is to enhance the attractiveness of the instrument. Old Italian masters did not highlight or even polish the varnish after brushing it on; but to modern eyes, plain varnish without highlights appears boring. It won't sell! Customers prefer violins that have an older, highlighted look. And that, of course, is the look that old Italian instruments have today.

Highlights are created on edges and normal wear areas. Typical areas for highlighting are

- The edges, more or less all around
- The upper right hand bout, where the hand wears
- The f-hole edges
- Upper and lower rib bouts
- The scroll and volute chamfer
- The edges of the peg box and flutings

Looking at a fine old instrument with natural highlights is useful.

There is a difference between highlighting and antiquing!

The Three Ways to Highlight

Pumice and Rottenstone

Many books recommend one or two coats of transparent varnish as the final top coats, then a treatment with pumice and rottenstone to smooth, highlight and polish. The pumice (in oil) is used first, to cut and level the varnish, and the rottenstone is used for the final polishing. This is a safe and easy method for a beginner. This method is also appropriate if the humidity is high, oil varnish is used, or the varnish is spirit-based but thick. Rottenstone in oil produces a somewhat matte finish; rottenstone used with water puts a high gloss finish on oil varnishes.

Alcohol and Oil

This is the normal method for spirit varnishes. No transparent overlay coat is applied, and it is a simple matter to remove a little of the last color coats to produce the highlights. A rag dampened in denatured alcohol, and a drop or two of polishing oil, are the materials needed. With this method the highlighting can be done at the same time as the final polishing, though they are best thought of as two operations.

--If there is too much oil on the rag, the alcohol will not soften the varnish

--If there is too much alcohol on the rag, the varnish may become sticky and dissolve too quickly

The varnish must be be dry. Let the last coat dry for a few days before highlighting or polishing.

Alcohol and Varnish

As an alternative to merely removing a little color, it is possible to apply the last colored coats by polishing them on. Put some clear or colored varnish on the rag, with a drop or two of oil, and then proceed to polish the instrument in such a way as to apply varnish in some areas and remove varnish from areas that should be highlighted.