

Memoire 6 Broken violins

As a seven year old, there is a high level of trust in the received wisdom of adults, and the same goes for whatever artefact the child is entrusted with. So, to me at the start of my relationship with the violin, there was no question as to the completeness of the instrument: it came as it looked, straight out of the Renaissance, descending from heaven accompanied (in my imagination) by angels blowing golden trumpets. It never occurred to me that it was in fact seventy pieces of wood cut, carved, moulded, and stuck together by a man's hands (and in those days it was always a man). That is until the moment when, with frustration as to my speed of progress learning the instrument, I intended to smash it over the kitchen table in pedagogic tantrum. Much to my astonishment the neck came off the body before intended impact. An epiphany of dislocation. The violin belonged to the school, was cheap, and had been badly stuck together. My father, being a gifted handyman, glued the instrument back together overnight, and I arrived at school the following day with no one the wiser as to my moment of early vandalism.

This image of a violin deconstructed lodged itself in my cognition and has informed my work ever since. My suspicion, that European notions of perfection should not be taken as a given, was confirmed later when I attended an exhibition of Islamic instruments in London just after the world oil crisis in the early 1970s. The exhibition was designed to show off Islamic culture as a living entity, so many of the string instruments on display had been collected the year before from the entire diaspora - North Africa, the Middle East, and onto Indonesia. What intrigued me about the collection was its practical and spontaneous nature, where elaborately carved necks and scrolls were often attached to sound resonators consisting of Coca Cola bottles, petrol cans, cigar boxes, fruit cartons. Other instruments utilised the ancient pre-consumer resonators with dried skins stretched over gourds, coconut shells, and a variety of wood stretchers. Strings and bows could also be conjured up out of almost any materials, fishing lines and bamboo sticks being favoured. This seemingly random mix of tradition and modernity came across to me as such a lively and unresolved culture compared to the ossified offerings of European hierarchy. The idea of instrument as free association and connectivity between different epochs and cultures has also stayed with me as evidenced by the objects currently in my museum (The Rosenberg Museum). In recent years, I have concentrated more and more on using the detritus of our throwaway pathology as repurposed parts for musical instruments. Earlier on, Instruments were tested by water, fire, and gunpowder to investigate just how far the belief in instrument can go and survive.

The main instrument I play was made by Harry Vatiliotis of Sydney in 1987. Harry is arguably the most prolific luthier of quality violins in the world - approaching now a total of eight hundred instruments - plus a number of violas, cellos, double bass, and oddities such as the two tenor violins I asked him to make (one being a tenor Hardanger fiddle). I will play Harry's violin to the end of my time because in 1995 the violin underwent severe trauma - twice inside a month.

Sardinia, with a living musical tradition stretching back past the Romans, was the scene of the first disaster. An open air concert in the town square of San Paulo. Still late evening weather. Crowd relaxed. Not a care in the world, and the music is about to start ...when out of the darkness, I feel a few drops of rain. I inform the stage technician. 'No way', he shrugs; 'never rain in Sardinia'. A few seconds later, massive thunder clap, sheet lightning, all the power in the square goes out, it's pelting down with rain, the stage is flooded in minutes, it's pitch black. Having set out my entire interactive setup onstage, I'm fumbling around trying to locate it all, negotiating the stage and water by touch as I cannot see a damn thing, all the time yelling for help. I bump into a stagehand who gives me some plastic trash bags. Whatever comes to hand I stuff into the bags, including bows, fragile electronics, and violin.

As if by Italian miracle, a light goes on. On the other side of the square a pizzeria has discovered its auxiliary power supply. Not so miraculous, but very Italian, half the audience in the square heads for the tiny pizzeria. By the time I get there, it's packed, people are standing on chairs, tables, every square inch of space occupied. With help, I too climb up onto a table. Slowly I unpack one of the plastic bags, out comes the violin and as I turn it, water gushes out from the f-holes. Entropy.

Several hours later, all my instruments and gear are drying out slowly near the pizza oven, while the concert organisers and I are plied with free pizza. Ah, Italy!

With a strong sense of 'no further harm can befall me', I headed to Melbourne for a performance at the suitably named 'What is Music?' Festival. I had just finished setting up when another musician came bounding across the stage shouting 'hey, Jon' simultaneously dropping his foot down a gapping hole in the sticky carpet. By stretching his arms out to break the fall, he managed to push over a crate of beer bottles sitting next to the drum kit. They landed on my violin, causing it to spring up onto one side. Haplessly, as our musical colleague stood up, he also knocked over the high hat which landed on the upper side of the violin as a chopper lands on a log causing several cuts in descending intensity of destruction. Exercises in propulsion and gravity.

I drank gin and tonics at the bar all night (rare stiff upper lip reality checks) with absolutely no effect. The next day I rang Harry to try and explain what had happened to the violin. He asked simply, 'Are all the parts there?' And indeed they were.

The repair job was an extraordinary piece of work even by Harry's standards, all the cuts on the purfling and edges and the cracks along the belly were moulded and somehow rubbed out of existence if not memory. I think the instrument lost some of its sonic projection, but remains in my view a surviving wonder of performance hazardry.