

ALESSANDRO GAGLIANO "ROTONDO" 1710

Roger Hargrave examines a striking example
by the early 18th century maker
Alessandro Gagliano.
Photographs: Stewart Pollens

Alessandro Gagliano worked in Naples from about 1700 to 1735. He is the first recorded Neapolitan violin maker, his work is relatively rare and it is not known where he learned his trade. Whilst he was clearly an individualist, his instruments display many features which indicate a close association with the very best northern Italian traditions. Only his occasional eccentricities and his obvious lack of attention to detail prevent him from ranking alongside the finest Cremonese makers. He seems to have reserved his best efforts for his cellos, of which only a very few survive. Apart from these, the quality of his craftsmanship seldom rose to above average. Nevertheless Alessandro is a maker of great charm and also one of considerable mystery and importance.

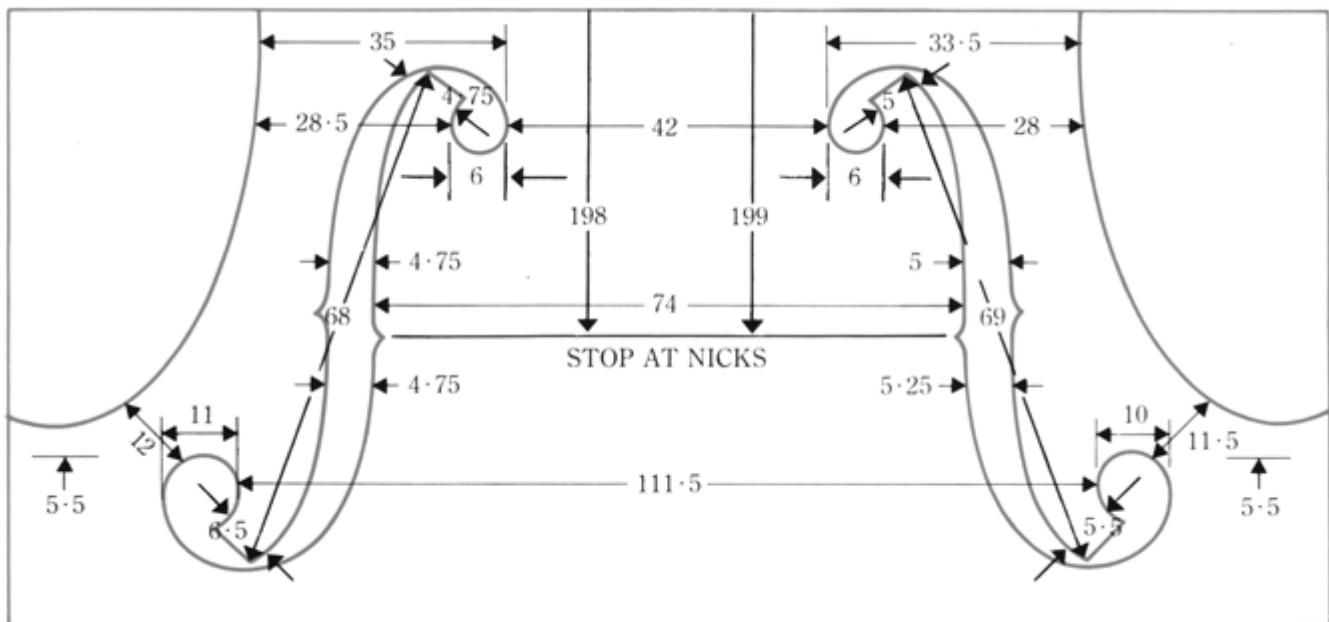
It is something of a mixed blessing that whilst Alessandro's descendants appear to have ignored some of his more endearing features, his lesser qualities were generally improved upon. So it was that his sons, Nicola and Gennaro, worked in a cleaner, more orthodox manner (usually after Stradivari or occasionally Amati) while at the same time they stopped using the beautiful varnish, which had transformed Alessandro's often mediocre works into minor masterpieces. Although Alessandro probably founded the Neapolitan school it was mainly his sons, especially Nicolo, who set the trends which the others were to follow.

The violin pictured here is called the "Rotondo". It is the finest known example of Alessandro Gagliano's work. The photographs clearly show a spectacular

piece of back wood, contrasting strangely with the finely figured ribs and wild appearance of the belly wood. The initial impression is that of a composite fiddle. However even the briefest encounter with this violin is enough to dispel any such thoughts.

It is interesting to examine more carefully the materials used by Alessandro for this violin. The one piece back is of finely grown imported wood, perfectly quarter sawn, with wide slashing flames descending from right to left - the type of piece which would be highly sought after among violin makers. As I have already pointed out however, the ribs, whilst having their own special attraction, bear no resemblance to the back wood. The flame, which runs almost vertically all around the instrument, is narrow and well defined. This type of figure taken together with the wider and more prominent year rings suggests a lowland native Italian sycamore, of the kind often used by the Guadagnini family and some of the other late classical makers. The head wood is very similar to that of the ribs, although it has a velvety appearance, being cut, more or less, on the slab.

Like the back, the belly is also made from one pieces. The year rings are very close together on the treble side becoming, for a violin, quite wide on the bass side. In spite of this increase in the distance between the rings, the winter growth remains tight and hard in appearance right across the instrument. The belly wood also has some quite attractive figuration, known as "hazel" in Britain, or "Bear Claw" in parts



of the United States. If you are dealing with German wood handlers it is called "Hazelfichte" and is often a little more expensive.

The head of this violin, as may be seen from the photographs, has a long and narrow pegbox which is topped by a rather undersized scroll. The volutes of the scroll start out fairly shallow and are relatively cleanly cut, if a little uneven. The volutes increase in depth quickly around the second turn, becoming extremely deep before making a sudden stop, almost in front of the tiny eyes and at least one quarter of a turn sooner than might normally be expected. This sudden stop creates a "comma" shaped appearance to the eyes, which in this case is more pronounced on the left hand side of the head. Although the work of the volutes appears to be clean, the deeply cut area around the eyes are filled with a heavily craquelured varnish which might be covering a multitude of sins. Relatively deep and hurriedly applied tool marks are clearly visible on the vertical surfaces of the turns, especially in the immediate vicinity of the eyes. Some slight wear to these vertical surfaces, probably the result of repeated polishing of the head, has removed varnish from the high spots and has helped to accentuate the cruder quality of Alessandro's finishing.

The flutings around the back of the pegbox and over the front of the head are well defined. Some wear to what were probably fairly fine chamfers only helps to underline how very deep these flutings must have been originally. Under the front of the head these flutings stop slightly short in the manner of some of del Gesu's work. At the chin the flutings finish rather roughly in two drooping curves. Once

again it is difficult to say how well the work was cleaned up by Alessandro because of the presence of so much thick varnish.

Viewed from behind, the whole head has a long narrow appearance, whilst from the front the pegbox itself looks pinched and almost too tight for four pegs and a set of strings. A curious feature of the pegbox are the fine flutings which run along the top of the pegbox walls. These are deep and very narrow gouge tracks, each one of which is inevitably full of thick red varnish. This kind of ornamentation was more often associated with lute and Gamba makers and may be a clue to Alessandro's place of learning.

Alessandro often ornamented his pegboxes, but, so far as I am aware, this was not a feature which he passed on to his descendants. The peculiarly long pegbox however, with its pegholes clearly arranged in tight pairs (G with E and D with A) and with a large gap separating each pair, was certainly a feature which was passed on and even exaggerated by later members of the family. For my eyes only the front view of the scroll itself, ignoring the pegbox, has a Cremonese "feel" to it. These front turns are quite bold and the eyes are not too wide and dominating like many later Gaglianos.

As is to be expected the varnish on the head is slightly darker and more heavily craquelured than that of the body. In form the crackle is soft globular and very thick. It is reminiscent of that found upon some of the redder unpolished works of Josef, filius Andrea, Guarneri.

The outline of this violin is well rounded in the

bouts and yet it has a slender and genuinely delicate quality. Here are the beginnings of the signs of a classical, perhaps even a Cremonese influence. The corners are long and elegant, trumpeting very slightly towards the end. (This is most clearly visible on the upper left hand corner of the back.) They are similar to some of the works of G. B. Ruggieri of Brescia or Andrea Amati or his grandson Nicolo. However the cut off angle is perhaps the most remarkable feature of these corners. The top back corners especially are cut almost parallel to the vertical centre line of the instrument. This feature instantly reminded me of the pure corners of the del Gesu poschet of 1735 in the Shambach collection.

The remaining edgework is cleanly finished with few if any tool marks, other than the usual knife cut chamfers on the underside edge, particularly in the centre bouts. The purfling channels are pronounced but not very deep, with the peak lying a long way outside the line of the purfling itself, perhaps even more than two thirds of the distance towards the outside edge. Like the finest classical instruments, the purfling on this and all of Alessandro's instruments has intense black of very solid appearance. Here Alessandro's heirs did not follow the better example of the old man. The thin backs of the later Gaglianos are distinguished only by their tendency to expand out of the channel, causing their inferior brittle varnishes to crack along the lines of the purfling. The inlay work of Alessandro's purfling, though adequate, was not over fussy. The purfling mitres in contrast to the longish corners (and corresponding long ribs mitres) are short, stubby and rather ungainly. In places the three pieces of purfling have overlidden each other, suggesting that they were glued together before being inserted into the channel. Furthermore there seems to be more than just a little black filler of the type referred to by Sacconi in his "Secrets of Stradivari".

Varnish for the moment aside, on this violin by Alessandro the greatest single influence of the classical school is apparent in the archings. It cannot be described as Amatese, being a little too full in the bouts and not particularly high. Dare I suggest that it has almost Stradivarian virtues, quite powerful in appearance and only lacking his quality of finish. There are nevertheless certain Amati characteristics, notably around the lower soundhole wings, where the fluting is basically an integral part of the whole arching, rather than having Stradivari's tendency towards a more pronounced separate excavation.

The soundholes are typically set rather low (see measurements). Like the head they are extremely individualistic. The top circles, very probably cut with a 5 mm. bit, measure 6 mm. across the arching. This is because the bodies of the holes curl a touch too far over the top before joining the circles, causing them to be oval on the horizontal plane. The top wings also curl up and over the circles. The bodies of the holes sweep freely down to large bottom circles. They are quite narrow. By contrast, the soundhole nicks are big, roughly cut gashes. The lower wings, with their relative position to the complete holes, their size and their fluting, are like drunken caricatures of the work of Nicolo Amati. The overall finish of the soundholes can at best be described as rather hasty: they balance each other only aesthetically and not at all geometrically. Despite their rough house quality the soundholes are cut in the classical way. The top and bottom circles do appear to have been drilled and the main bodies of the holes are more or less cut at right angles to the surface of the arching. As I have already pointed out, Alessandro could and did produce much cleaner works: I have recently seen a cello which was as remarkable for its craftsmanship as it was for its iridescent orange red varnish. Indeed what makes this particular violin so special is obviously not the craftsmanship, nor entirely Alessandro's spontaneous originality, of which there is an abundance, but its varnish. Over a golden, strongly dicroistic ground, lies an almost unbelievably fresh, soft, rich orangered varnish. Present in large amounts and laid on fairly thickly, the varnish quite simply lifts this violin and its maker Alessandro Gagliano, into the ranks of the great.

FOOTNOTES

'One piece bellies are not unusual and were quite often used by other prominent Italian makers including occasionally Stradivari. The same can also be said for hazel figured belly wood. 2Housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Label wording: Alexander Gaglianus Fecit Neap.
1710

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MEASUREMENTS

(in	millimeters)	
	<i>Back</i>	<i>Belly</i>
Length (over arch)	354.5	357
Upper bouts	164	164
Middle bouts	111	113
Lower bouts	203	204
	<i>Corners</i>	<i>Bouts</i>
Edge thickness	3.5/3.75*	3.75*
Overhang		
in C's	3.25/3.5*	
in Bout's	2.5/2.75*	
Rib heights	<i>Left</i>	<i>Right</i>
Neck Root	29	29
Upper Corners	29	29.75
Lower Corners	29	29
End Pin	28.5	28
Purling		
Distance from edge		4/4.25*
Total Width		1.6*
Width of White		.75*

Button

from outside of	<i>Purling</i>	
<i>Height</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Thickness</i>
15	17.5	3.5

asterisks denote approximate measurements









