

MILANESE MASTER

Roger Hargrave examines a 1712 viola by Giovanni Grancino

With the exception of Carlo Ferdinando Landolfi, and G.B. Guadagnini's brief period in Milan, Giovanni Grancino was probably the most important and certainly the most influential maker of that city. However in spite of his pre eminent position, details of his family, background, and training remain obscure. Lüttgendorff 1 and his plagiarist Jalovec 2 list nine Milanese makers of the Grancino family. Hart lists only four, but he waxes lyrical about the work of Paolo Grancino suggesting that he was prolific and that his style was particularly distinctive: Paolo is described as a 'favourite pupil of Nicholas Amati' and the father of Giovanni. Both Fridolin 3 and Walter 4 Hamma agree that Paolo was Giovanni's father, but there remains some confusion between them as to how many working members of the family there

were and in which order they appear. Fetis 6 writing in the mid 19th century lists Paolo Grancino (as a pupil of Nicolo Amati, who worked in Milan from 1665 to 1690) and his two sons John (1696 to 1720) and John Baptist 1690 to 1700. Probably the earliest reference to the family is that made by Cozio di Salabue 7 who says simply the Grancini f's are very like those of Nicolo Amati in their finish. Unfortunately there is no mention of specific members of the family. Biographies by other writers such as Möller 8 and Farga 9 contain much consensus, some probability and very little fact. As usual the situation is best summed up in a few sentences by the Hills 10, this time from their Violin Makers of the Guarneri Family . They refer to the census returns of Andrea Guarneri for the year 1665:



There exists one other name, Paolo Grancino, the alleged work of whom bears, so we find, relationship to Andrea. But in reality we have no absolute knowledge of this particular Grancino, have never seen an instrument with his original label, and so far have not met with any responsible expert who has done so.

We do recognize the existence of 'Grancino' instruments, both violins and violoncellos, earlier and more distinguished than those of the wellknown type bearing the label of Giovanni Grancino, and dating from about 1680 to 1730. We refer to instruments covered by a fine oil varnish, the general character of which bears analogy to that of Andrea Guarneri. They are found as a rule inscribed as the work of one or other of the Cremonese makers. We are also acquainted with the instruments made jointly by the fratelli (brothers), Giovanni and Francesco, which date from Milan about 1670-80.

To resume, we should say that if Paolo Grancino really existed, he was a pupil of Andrea and consequently must have worked at some period in Cremona.

So much for biography. What remains to be said about the legacy of the Grancinos? Surely the most infamous quote from violin literature is the Hill brothers¹¹ allusion to the 'Milanese cheap jacks'. The term is used twice in their work on the life of Stradivari and in a footnote they explain: 'We here refer to such makers as Grancino, the several makers of the Testore family and their followers.'

Whereas this round condemnation may be justified in that all of the Milanese violin makers were capable of undistinguished and even coarse work it has been demonstrated beyond any shadow of doubt that their instruments do possess exceptional tonal qualities. This is perhaps best observed in the work of Pietro Testore, possibly the most raw (not inept or incompetent) violin maker of all time.

It should be remembered that the Milanese were generally not able to command the patronage which would have allowed them to exercise their skills fully. It is therefore unfair to assume that these makers were incapable of fine craftsmanship or elegant lines. On the contrary, I can think of a beautifully worked Quintone by Carlo Giuseppe Testore from the workshop of Grancino (now housed in the Shrine to Music Museum¹²) and also many fine violins and cellos by the Testore family, Landolfi and the Grancinos. Production of violas in Milan was less common, which makes the example illustrated here particularly interesting.

Arguably the greatest gift of the Milan school lay in their prolific output. Possibly because of their em-

phasis on their presumably more affordable price range, Milanese instruments tended to reach working musicians. As a consequence they probably led a more perilous existence than the relatively secure one proffered by Cremona's wealthy clientele (a situation which has not changed very much today). The result has been that few Milanese instruments have survived unscathed. Since Grancino violas are in any case less common it is something of a rarity to find one in such remarkable condition.

Although Giovanni Grancino was working on his own account from about 1685 there are instruments labelled Francesco and Giovanni de Grancini from about 1670 onwards. The varnish of these earlier instruments (before 1700) is softer and more red in tone and far more in keeping with Cremonese varnish than the harder yellower type which we generally associate with Milan and with which this 1712 viola was finished. Neither is the so called Amati influence so apparent here.

The viola is labelled 'Giovanni Grancino in Contrada Largha di Milano al fegno della Corona 1712.' The first two letters of the date have been printed but the 6 has been partially obliterated by a number 7 which has been inked over the top. Obviously Grancino was still using up labels which had been printed before the turn of the century.

The inside work of the instrument is relatively clean, with only a minimum of scraper marks visible on the plates. (It is however possible this instrument has been reworked on the inside). The blocks and linings are of pine and they are quite substantial especially the upper and lower corner blocks which measure respectively 30 and 35 mm across. The two end blocks are half round in shape and quite roughly finished. The upper block still has 3 holes where the nails, which originally held the neck, were inserted. This top block is also made up of two pieces crudely glued together. The outside piece has the grain running in the normal direction, while the grain of the inside piece runs parallel to the ribs. I have seen this trick used by G.B. Guadagnini and Gaspar da Salo among others. It helped to reduce the possibility of the block splitting while the nails were being driven home. None of the pine linings including those of the centre bouts are let into the blocks in the Cremonese manner; they are simply butted up against them. The lining are approximately 6 to 7.5 mm deep.

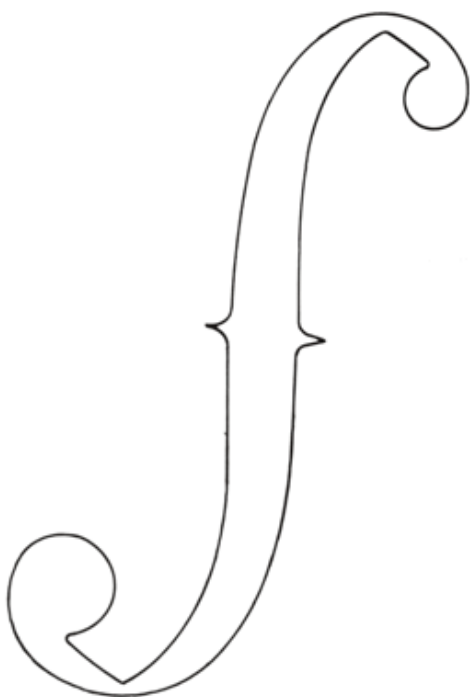
On the outside, the workmanship on this viola is generally cleaner than the solid but unfussy inside work. Few, if any, tool marks mar the outside surfaces



Detail of the inside of the 1712 Grancino viola



Original label of the 1712 Grancino viola



Left f-hole of the 1712 Grancino viola

of the body. The head is an exception. Although in style and line it balances well with the rest of the instrument, in common with all Classical Italian works (to a greater or lesser degree) it bears traces of the gouge.

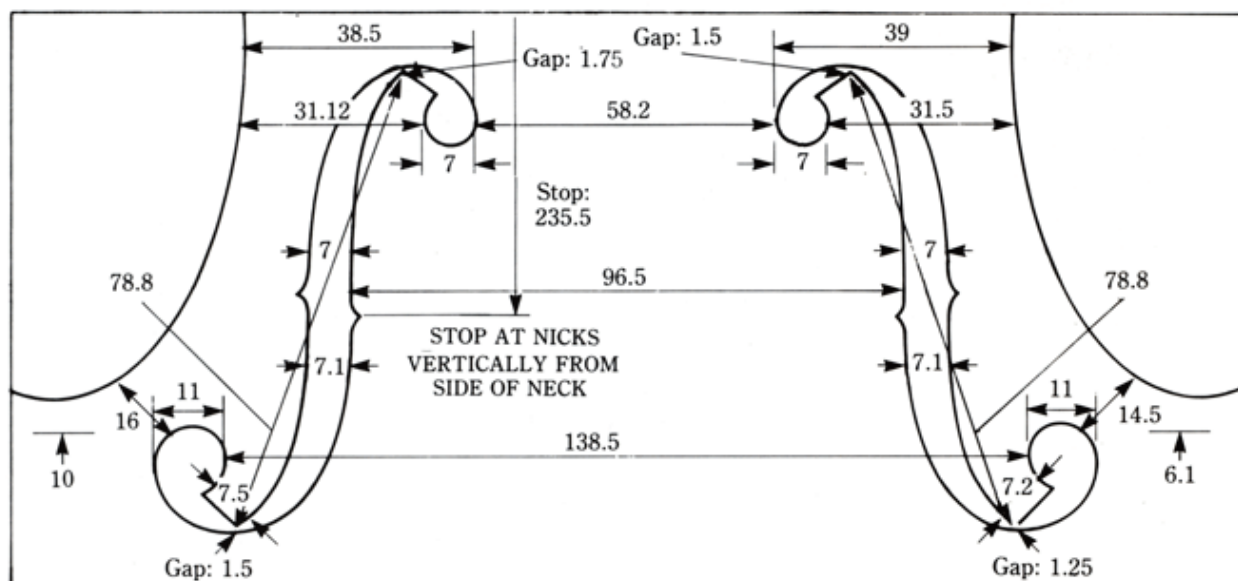
The head has a typically long, shallow, curving Milanese pegbox almost flat at the chin. It flows neatly into the scroll, opening slightly on the second turn under the eye; a common feature of Testore instruments. In spite of the clearly visible gouge marks, the surface of the turns of the volutes are cut fairly flat, becoming gradually deeper as they turn around the eye. Viewed from the front, the bosses and the eyes have a plantpot shape, characteristic of both Grancino and Testore schools. This plantpot shape is often quite extreme and is especially noticeable on cello heads, where it is accentuated by the narrow width of the scrolls.

All the surfaces of this scroll are scarred with tool marks. We can see quite clearly that Grancino's gouge had a large chip missing. The fluting along the back of the pegbox is typically very shallow, quickly increasing in depth as it curves around the top of the scroll where before the high spots were worn away they must have been extremely deep. Occasionally Grancino and the Testores did not flute the area behind the pegbox. Instead they began the flutes at the back of the scroll at the point where the flow of the grain becomes easier to work. On this viola long deep scratches probably from a rasp mark the surface of the flutes around the scroll itself. Rasp marks are often prolific on Grancino and Testore heads. The flutes under the front of the scroll are deeply worked creating thin edges and a very pointed central spine. As can be seen from the photograph of the back of the head the flutes continue to run deep into the throat. The pegbox is generous but not quite as wide as that of a comparable Cremonese box. The shoulders are small, rounded off and they slope backwards from the nut. This arrangement certainly makes this viola easier to play in the first position. The chin is ungainly and shallow with no stringing where its chamfers join the shoulders.

Grancino cello heads are often hard in appearance whereas his violin heads seem much softer. This viola head lies somewhere in between. Unlike those viola heads of Stradivari which have a tendency to appear overweight this Grancino head balances very well with the body.

The body itself is deliberately elongated especially in the upper bouts. This feature taken together with

F-hole measurements



the lower setting of the sound holes has created a somewhat difficult stop length by today's standards. In this respect it is a viola which might not suit some players, in spite of its outstanding tonal qualities. On the back the long and narrow top and bottom bouts are accentuated by a typical flattening of the outline curves as they run into the corners. The corners themselves are clean and elegant and like the edge-

work they have a fairly shallow flute. Along the underside of the edge, a knife cut chamfer neatly finishes the rounding of the edge. The back arching is strong, flat and full across the centre bouts and seems almost certainly influenced by Cremonese work. On the back there is no inlaid purfling. Instead lines have been scratched and burned or perhaps stained directly into the back in imitation of inlaid work. This

MEASUREMENTS (in millimeters)

	<i>Back</i>	<i>Belly</i>
Length (over arch)	424.5	424.5
Upper bouts	193.2	194
Middle bouts	130	134
Lower bouts	234	234

Edge thickness(back)

Corners	4.3
Centre	4.1
Bouts	3.9

Overhang (back)

Centre bouts	3
Top and bottom bouts	3.1

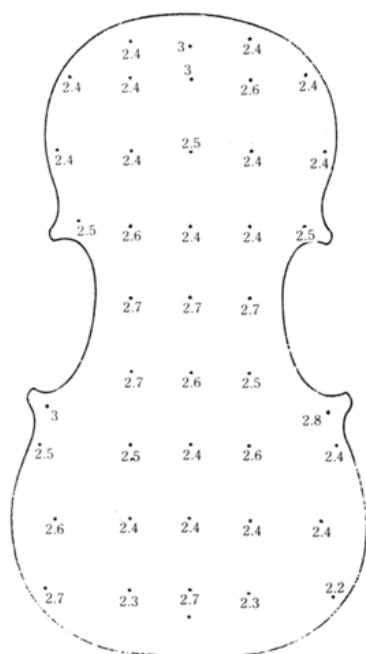
Rib heights	<i>Left</i>	<i>Right</i>
Neck root	36.5	36.5
Upper corner	37.5	36
Lower corner	38	36.5
End pin	36	36.5

Purfling

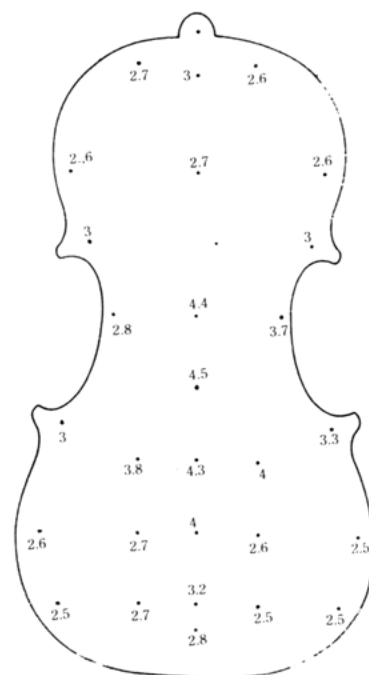
Distance from edge	4.5
Total width	1.6

Button (from outside of purfling)

<i>Height</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Thickness</i>
16.5	20	4



Belly Thicknesses

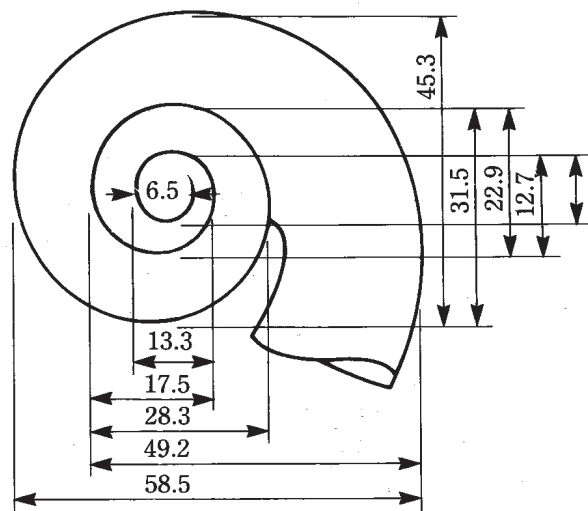
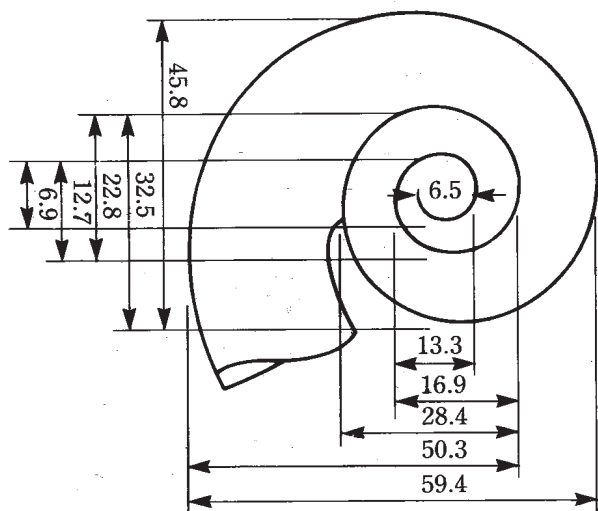


Back Thicknesses

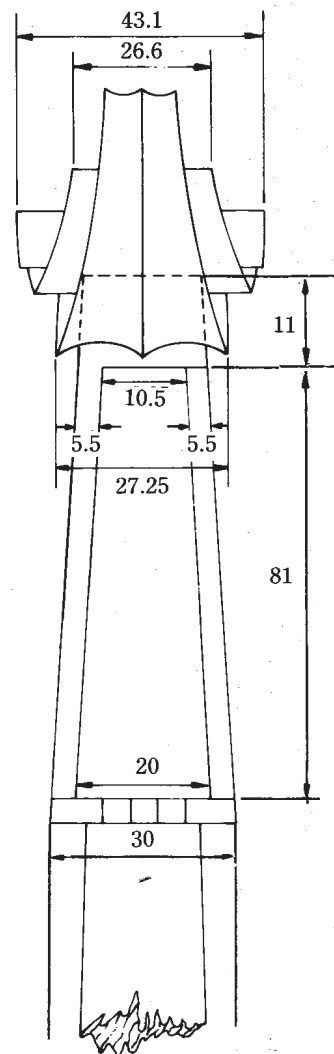
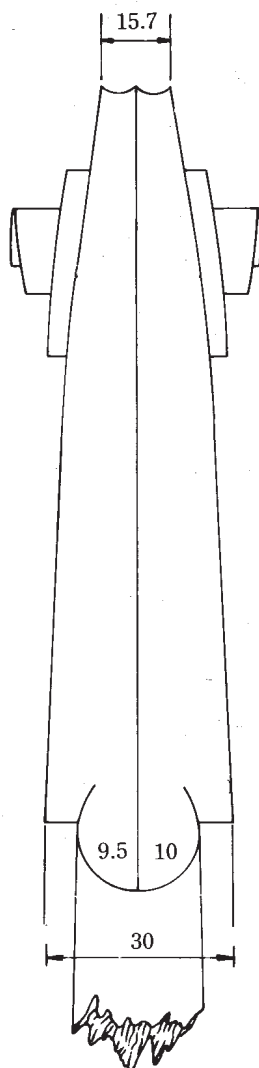
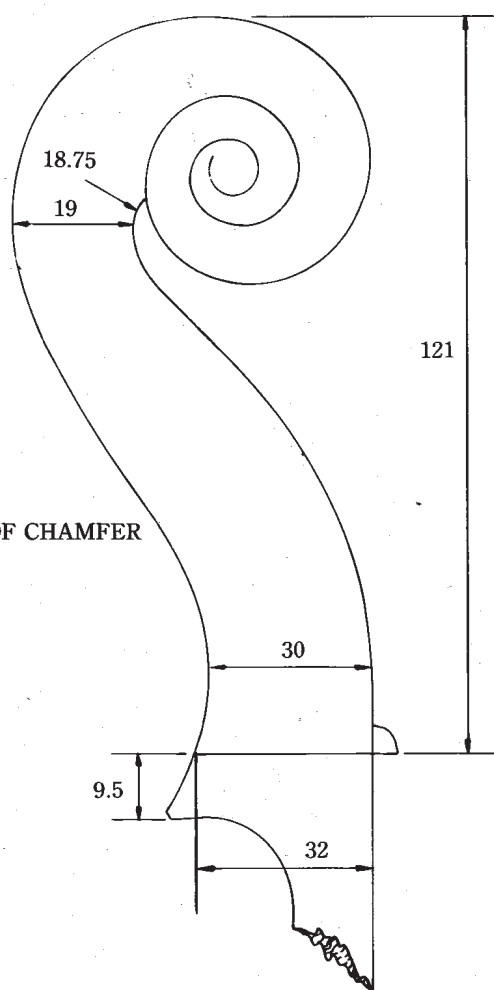
Scroll measurements

LEFT SIDE

RIGHT SIDE



WIDTH OF CHAMFER



was a common practice among Milanese makers; they do not seem to have painted on purfling in the manner of the English makers. There are clearly no locating pins in the back which might otherwise have been hiding under an inlaid purfling. The wood used for the back is of fine growth with a faint narrow figure. It is cut on the quarter. Such lightly figured wood was a frequent choice of the Milanese masters. Beautiful figured maple was for one reason or another generally beyond their reach. The ribs are of similar wood to the back. As usual, the top rib was originally made up of one continuous piece across the neck root. In contrast the head wood is of very wide growth and has no figure.

Again in common with most Milanese instruments the belly wood is of good quality with straight, well pronounced reed lines. Unlike the back the belly is purfling in the normal way. It is boldly executed with well stained blacks. As is usual on classical works the individual strips of purfling vary in width throughout.

The edgework is similar to that of the back, having shallow fluting with the highest point well out towards the edge. In the centre bouts the flute runs into the side of the soundholes but not into the wings. Again the arching is full and strong across the centre. The arching is possibly the outstanding feature of this viola, beautifully formed overall and no doubt contributing also to its wonderful acoustical qualities. The central

bouts are wide when compared to the width of the upper and lower bouts. Consequently, although the top circles of the sound holes have a wide setting, the sound holes have not had to be squeezed up against the edgework like a Bergonzi or a late Stradivari. The soundholes sit quite naturally on the arching leaning slightly inwards at the top. The four circles appear to have been drilled but the process of joining them to the main bodies of the holes has distorted them slightly. The bodies of the holes are cut almost vertically to the plates' surface. The nicks are large, slashy and typically Milanese.

I have already touched upon the varnish which is of a golden yellow colour and highly transparent. These yellow Milanese varnishes have been compared with the early Cremonese varnishes in particular those of the Amati family. However they are somewhat thinner and harder

in quality and quite different. On the belly the varnish seems slightly darker and warmer in tone and

the reed lines have a typical Milanese prominence due in part to their tendency to collect and hold dirt. On this viola the varnish is present in large amounts.

Throughout this article I have made reference to the work of the Testore family in particular. We know that Carlo Giuseppe Testore was the pupil of Giovanni Grancino and in truth (as my old friend Daniel Drayley pointed out after THE STRAD scroll quiz of July 1987) it is often extremely difficult to separate their work. Long may such problems remain to tease us!

This viola was formerly in the collection of Geigenbau Machold whose co operation is greatly appreciated.

- 1 Von Lütgendorff Die Geigen and Lauren Macher (1904)
- 2 Karel Jalovec italienische Geigenbauer (1957)
- 3 George Hart The Violin Famous Makers & their
- 4 Fridolin Hamma Meisterwerke Italienischer Geigenbaukunst (1932)
- 5 Walter Hamma Meister Italienischer Geigenbaukunst Geigenbaukunst (1965)
- 6 F. J. Fetis Anthonv Stradivari (English Ed, 1864)
- 7 Count Ignazio Alessandro Cozio Di Salabue. Technical Studies in the Arts of Musical Instrument Making.
- 8 Translated by Andrew Dipper & David Woodrow Max Moller Italiaansche Vioolbouw
- 9 Franz Farga Violins & Violinists (1950)
- 10 W.H., A.F. and A. E. Hill The Violin Makers o/ the Gurner Family (1931)
- 11 W. H., A.F and A.E. Hill Antonio Suadivari, His Life & Work (1902)
- 12 Vermillion, The Shrine to Music Museum. South Dakota.