

*Luthier in New York*: an interview with violin maker Jason Viseltear in his NYC studio

Loyal Magazine: How goes it?

JV: I gauge my interest in the subjects with which I find myself involved by the amount of time lost to them in study. So when I first set about making violin family instruments, I took it as a good sign when I would look up from my bench and be surprised to find the sun had set some time ago. Years later and I am still losing myself in this work. The hours disappear well before work which is compelling.

Loyal: What do you find compelling about it?

JV: That to make violins, one must be careful; but to make them well, one should approach the edge of catastrophe. I mean that there is an urgency to some types of created things - to the work which has brought them into the world - which can be seen in the objects themselves. When this urgency is absent, one has something which didn't come to be by the demands of necessity but at the pleasure of a soft and easy luxury. This shows itself in violins and is something that can be heard. So the instruments I am interested in and those that I am interested in making then are these: instruments which have in some way no choice but to exist - to be played by someone who can't help but to play.

Loyal: What else about violins, violas, and cellos do you find interesting?

JV: That a truly fantastic instrument made by an important maker occasions both an active inquiry into how it came to be and a pure if almost dumb wonder - a type of trembling before the fact and the impossibility of its existence. I am speaking here of what happens when one stands before any work of art or music or performance that moves and inspires. Where one - say a painter when looking at a painting - might look to line, composition, and color, another - a violin maker looking at violin - looks to the cut of a sound hole, the arch of a belly, the sculpting of a scroll in order to find the clues to a method, skill, or voice; to understand the thought left behind by the mark of a tool or the reason supporting a beautiful sound. And the more one knows about the subject, the better one can describe or appreciate what is going on.

But the part I find fascinating is this: that the story of the object at some point rejects this narration - leaves us wrestling with the poverty of our explanations no matter how well expressed, unable to give voice to that which shall for the time being remain ineffable. For if a violin could have been said in any other way, it would no longer have to be a violin, or at least not that precise violin. Great musicians show this better than I can, certainly, for now we're talking about sound and that is for us to listen to - listen to or make. Or now we're talking about music, so perhaps we should dance.

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