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The human touch: Pressenda's work examined

Remembering the genius of Stéphane Grappelli

Fauré revealed: editing the First Violin Sonata

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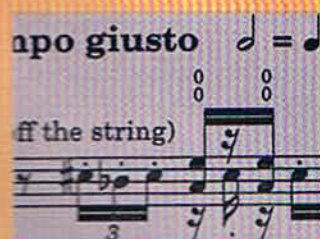
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Legacy of a late starter

Representative of 19th-century violin makers, Pressenda provided an important link between the classical Cremonese and the modern Italian makers.

Tsutomu Miyasaka traces his life and examines an 1835 violin, made during his most prolific period



As the founder of the, post-Guadagnini Turin School and the father of modern violin making, Giovanni Francesco Pressenda established an idiosyncratic style which influenced many later contemporary schools and helped establish Turin's reputation for superb violin making. Born in Lequio Berria, a small village 60km south-east of Turin in the district of Alba in the Piedmont region, on 6 January 1777, Pressenda was introduced to music by his violinist father Raffaello who taught young Giovanni to play the violin during his travels across northern Italy. Although there is no direct evidence for Lütgendorff's¹ allusion to Raffaello being active as a maker, it is probable that he was doing self-taught repair work at this time.

It seems, however, that the social situation during Pressenda's early life was not conducive to the flowering of the Pressenda family's work. In 1802 Napoleon invaded Italy and the Piedmont region came under French rule for the next 13 years. Little is known about Pressenda's life during this period. It was not until 1814, accompanying the return of Piedmontese royalty to Turin and the restoration of Italian culture, that Pressenda, now 37, was to establish his first workshop, in Alba; only a few hand-labelled Pressenda instruments have survived from this workshop. For

economic reasons, however, he could not concentrate solely on violin making and also worked as a cabinet maker and jeweller. By c.1816 he was living in Carmagnola (near Turin) and also, it has been presumed, in Marseilles, as was referred to by William Henley,² although some research now disputes this. In c.1820 Pressenda settled in Turin, where he opened his second workshop, and he remained there until his death in 1854. Although his marriage to Maria Coccia of Alba has been documented, it is unknown whether he had any children or relatives who could assist with his work.

Assuming that Pressenda spent the 'unknown period' (until age 37) doing repair work, one wonders how he gained his professional violin making skills and why his output began so late. It is difficult to accept that his skills were self-taught, but unfortunately only limited information exists regarding his working life. In 1873, at the Vienna World Exposition, Benedetto Gioffredo Rinaldi (1850–88), the short-lived Piedmontese maker and a great admirer of Pressenda, exhibited his large Pressenda collection. In a pamphlet Rinaldi published at the time³ he writes that Pressenda left home at twelve and, supporting himself by playing from village to village, reached Cremona where he studied under Lorenzo Storioni (1751–c.1801), one of the last great Cremonese successors. There is, however, no record in Cremona of Pressenda having ever resided there.

More significantly, Pressenda's work apparently reflects little of the influence one would expect from a tutelage under Storioni who, although talented in tonal development and renowned for the quality of his varnish, was a somewhat rough craftsman who frequently switched among various models. Contrarily, Pressenda was an assiduous maker, carefully completing instruments using an established style that is dissimilar to Storioni's.

There are, however, other strong candidates in the Turin area, such as G.B. Guadagnini's son Gaetano I (c.1745–1831) to whom Pressenda could

have been apprenticed. When their father died in 1786 Gaetano I and his brothers took over the workshop. Although they are better known as skilled repairers and guitar makers, much of their father's work and instructions would undoubtedly have remained in the workshop, providing Pressenda with at least indirect access to an important body of knowledge.

Both Gaetano I and his son Carlo were skilled violin makers,⁴ having inherited this from G.B. Guadagnini.

A comparison of the framework of these instruments, including the body length, proportion and broad, flat arching, reveals an unmistakable

While adopting a flat model, the front and back are chiselled with full archings that give the body a massive appearance.

similarity between the work of G.B. Guadagnini and Pressenda, suggesting that he was the inspiration for the Pressenda-founded Turin School. Bearing in mind the near impossibility of the young Pressenda having been directly tutored by G.B. Guadagnini (Pressenda was eleven when he died), the influence of the Guadagnini dynasty is certainly significant in any discussion of the origin of Pressenda's professional training. Pressenda, however, credits his father Raffaello as being the key contributor, as is always stated on his labels by the designation 'q. Raphael'. Regarding Pressenda's late debut as a maker, I suggest that

before devoting himself to violin making he was active as a local player, and that his labels point to his father being a violinist rather than a maker.

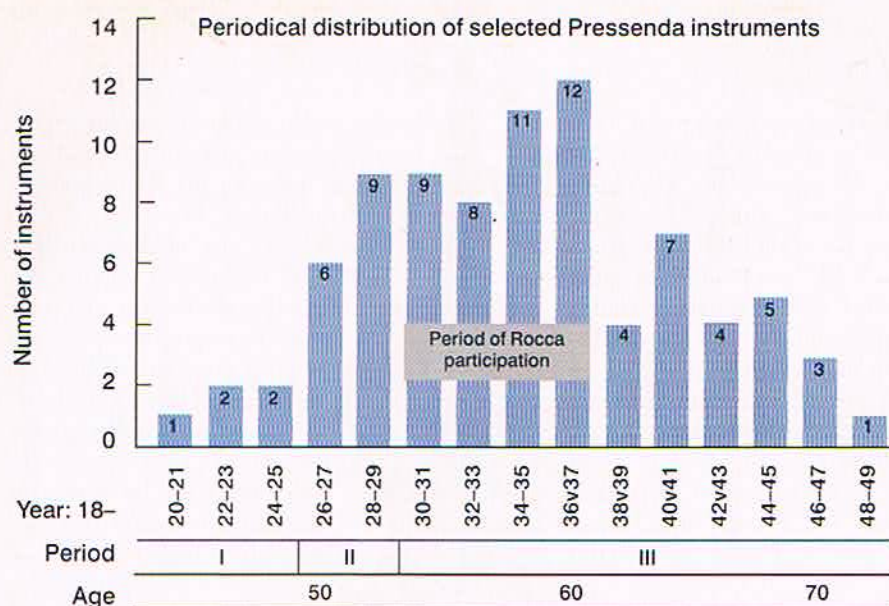
Pressenda's fame would not have been nearly so widespread without the support of the violinist and composer Giambattista Polledro, a pupil of Pugnani, who became the leader of the Royal Chapel Orchestra in Turin in 1824. He recognised Pressenda's rare skill and, with his successor Ghebart, introduced a number of his violins into their orchestras, thereby boosting the sales and circulation of Pressenda violins. The celebrated dealer Luigi Tarisio (c.1795–1854) also bought a number of his instruments and sold them outside Italy, many of which were acquired by the then London-based violinist August Wilhelmj (1845–1908).⁵

Critics claim that the overall appearance of Pressenda's instruments show the influence of French violin making, attributable to the 13-year period of French domination in Italy. In fact, based on a primarily Stradivarian outline, the instruments have been designed with some geometrical perfection, being covered with a rich reddish varnish on an amber-yellow ground and completed by marking the bevelling of the scroll with black paint, while his rule of body size, qualities of varnish and tonal merit eventually distinguished his work from those of the French schools. Pressenda rarely worked with a body length exceeding the standard 14" (35.7cm). While adopting a flat model, the front and back are chiselled with full archings that give the body a massive appearance. He used an original soft oil varnish, which is superior in quality to that used by the top French makers.

As is characteristic of those makers who are particularly concerned with the artistic appearance of the instrument, Pressenda preferred to use a one-piece

Pressenda was at his most prolific during his third period, working with his ultimate model: a kind of Stradivarian and 'del Gesù' blend. Opposite: modelled on Stradivari, his 1835 violin shows less mixing of 'del Gesù' characters. Above, top: this 1847 violin retains its original neck, attached in the modern style which had just begun to be used in the mid-19th century. Above, left: violin made in 1842





back of choice maple with handsomely figured flame. His backs often exhibit a spectacular overlapping flame through his reddish amber varnish, which reminds one of the beauty of Honduran mahogany. This style was passed down to his prominent pupil, Giuseppe Rocca, who also applied choice one-piece backs in most of his instruments. In view of the fact that Pressenda worked as a cabinet maker, it is supposed that his aim in constructing instruments of one piece of nicely figured wood was aesthetic rather than acoustic.

Pressenda's violin making is divided into three periods. The first, from his establishment in Turin in 1820 until 1825, was spent refining his style through the study of old Cremonese masters. Specimens from this time are rare and mostly follow Amatese-Stradivarian models with soundholes inclining towards the centre. Some even show the influence of G.B. Guadagnini in the cutting of the soundholes. The backs are mostly of two piece quarter-cut maple with a relatively narrow curl.

The second period (1826-29) shows a clear plateau in Pressenda's work, within the context that he settled on his prototype model using a back that was invariably cut from the same lot of maple. The decided modelling of the Stradivarian outline exhibits a personal stamp with a square shaped C-bout which is an exaggerated model in the Stradivari style and is less in harmony with the rest of the body's outline. Instruments from this period are recognisable by their backs, which bear a

distinctive sap mark vertically running across the regular narrow curl.⁶ The soundholes are Amatese-Stradivarian and Pressenda's characteristic round shoulder and broad, flat arching were established during this period.

Having worked out this prototype, around 1830 Pressenda performed a quick change in regard to the body outline and the cutting of the soundhole, turning from the Stradivarian influences to a more Guarneri 'del Gesù' form. During his third period (1831 until his death in 1854) Pressenda was at his most prolific and continued working with this model; I agree with Henley's notion⁷ that the maker established his ideal form in 1831. Throughout the third period there is little deviation from this model, which is a kind of Stradivarian and 'del Gesù' blend. A 'del Gesù' severity is added to the shape of the *f*-holes, and the square C-bout was replaced with a smoother outline that is in harmony with the round shoulders, forming a well-proportioned body outline. Constructed with relatively wide upper and middle bouts, the overall appearance gives a massive, robust impression, although the instruments never look heavy. Beyond 1848, however, little of his genuine work appeared and by c.1850 he seems to have ceased working.

Periodical distribution of the number of instruments more concisely


demonstrates Pressenda's activities. The graph shown (see above) compares the number of Pressenda instruments when collected by division of periods of two years beginning from 1820. Here I selected 84 authentic instruments, including a couple of violas and cellos, on the basis of their labels being positively identified. This spectrum shows that Pressenda's output forms a broad peak between 1826 and 1837. The period between 1831 and 1837 corresponds to the generally accepted golden age of the maker that is associated with many excellent instruments constructed with first-class maple. Looking at this data it is interesting to note that the drop in output begins in 1838, the year, it is said, when Rocca left the workshop. Knowing that Rocca's earliest Turin-labelled work appears c.1830, Rocca might have been apprenticed to Pressenda from c.1830 to 1838 and could have helped to make the

master's instruments, as shown by the increase of output. By examining the *f*-holes I detected a unique habit in the asymmetry in the cutting of *f*-hole notches which is attributable to Rocca's hand. This invariably exists on all Pressenda violins dated from 1831 to 1837 but disappears in his later work. In the right *f*-hole a couple of notches are set fairly separate from each other in a vertical direction, but in the left *f*-hole they are set in a closely parallel position. The same feature is also found in many of Rocca's violins dated up to c.1850. Following Rocca's departure Pressenda's instruments gradually shift to a more 'del Gesù' style.

Pressenda made approximately 300 instruments, including a limited number of violas and cellos, maintaining a high standard of craftsmanship throughout. He labelled all his genuine instruments with large handwritten dates, and relatively few Pressenda-brand pupil-created instruments emerged from his workshop, implying that he was not interested in extending his workshop to harvest earnings. Pressenda's idiosyncrasy in this regard is also found in the content of his last will and testament, recently



Above: 1854 Rocca violin, with the characteristic one-piece back he inherited from his teacher Pressenda



The outline of the back of the 1835 violin is characteristically framed with a round flange whose rise starts immediately at the edge of the purfling. Opposite; Pressenda typically used a short stop length which pulled up the soundhole position

The scroll's incisively cut spirals, in beautiful symmetry, surround a large eye, extending out towards wide edges.

discovered by Duane Rosengard in the State Archives of Turin. In it he offered no property to speak of and his only relatives, two nephews, inherited nothing more than his two exposition medals and a few books.* Evidently he was a humble but industrious maker in the city, devoting his energy to his own making rather than distributing branded instruments.

The Pressenda violin illustrated here demonstrates a high level of craftsmanship. The original label dated 1835 places the violin in the maker's most prolific period; there is a twin to this model, dated 1835, at one time owned by the late Alfred Campoli. Modelled on Stradivari, the outline shows less mixing of 'del Gesù' characters. Compared to the maker's early Stradivarian models, the C-bout has been refined without moving to the square exaggeration. The one-piece back of quarter-cut maple has an attractive irregular curl in the upper bout. The wood used is of the best quality, comprising dense grains with strong fibres. The outline of the back is characteristically framed with a round flange whose rise starts immediately at the edge of the purfling. While this flange is as thick as 5mm, the distribution of thickness over the back plate falls in a narrow range between 3mm (in the corners) and 4mm (in the centre), flatter in thickness than the classical standard. Pressenda followed the classic Cremonese tradition in locating the back by drilling holes into the end blocks which were later filled up by relatively thick pins.

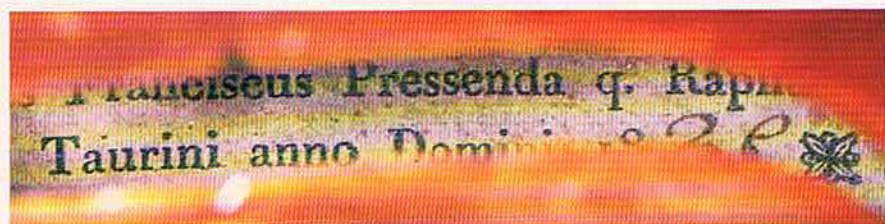
The *f*-holes are slender but strong looking, with Pressenda's distinctive hollowing in the lower wing flowing into the arching of the table in good harmony. The notch position shows the asymmetric styling, possibly assisted by Rocca. The position of the *f*-holes creates a broad, flat arching in the area between them; this is similar to some of the work of G.B. Guadagnini. In this violin the lower eyes of the *f*-holes are close to the lower edges of the corners. This situation is also brought about by the characteristically short stop length (19.2cm), which pulled up the soundhole position. Pressenda generally adopted short stop lengths, between 19.1 and 19.4cm, and rarely exceeded 19.5cm. The short stop length, as well as the broad arching, clearly contributes to the formation of the Pressenda sound.

The purflings are uniform and neatly chiselled, with a fairly thin black strip



relative to the white strip. In some Pressenda instruments, including this violin, the stained black pear strip which was chosen is wider in the front than in the back, due to working with a much softer pine wood than the maple of the back. The working of the corner purfling of the C-bout takes the 'open point' style, in which the direction of the point where the two purflings meet goes towards the centre of the border; this is also the case in G.B. Guadagnini's instruments. Some violins show a type of edgework in which the outer black strip elongates towards the centre of the C-bout. The edges outside the purflings are wide and particularly broad at the corners of the front table, implying that Pressenda, having seen the result of old played violins, foresaw the future wear that his instruments would suffer. Purfling is also found at the end pin where two rib woods are jointed, a manner common to Pressenda. This, together with his preference for using one-piece backs, would indicate that it was for aesthetic reasons, thereby avoiding a jointed appearance.

The scroll's incisively cut spirals, in beautiful symmetry, surround a large eye, extending out towards wide edges. Fusing strong cutting and beautiful curvilinear work, the scroll is one of the most beautiful and personal aspects of Pressenda's work. The scrolls he used in his earlier work lack the aesthetic balance of their extremely large eye, which is placed in a narrowly convoluted spiral. The shape of the spiral, when carefully viewed from the side, appears slightly oval in parallel with the line of the peg box, reflecting a combination of delicate, sophisticated skill and artistic expression. The bevelled edges were outlined with black paint, which, over the years, has largely worn away. Pressenda used a vividly flamed wood for the scroll, along with his selected back, rather than allotting a plainer one. The lower end of the back of the scroll is well-grooved with full curvature. Through the full length of the head a gauge mark (line) is clearly visible at the central bevelling; despite chiselling with perfect care, Pressenda



DIMENSIONS

Length of back	35.4cm
Width of top bouts	16.7cm
Width of middle bouts	11.3cm
Width of lower bouts	20.8cm
Stop length	19.2cm

prefers to leave a human touch in his work, as the classical makers did.

Although most of the elements of Pressenda's violin show consistent craftsmanship, his varnish tends to vary in quality. Pressenda conducted extensive experimentation in search of the ideal varnish, even during his most prolific period.⁹ His varnish is soft, lustrous and apparently of high oil content, exhibiting craquelure where it gathers. The varnish used after 1830 is mostly dark red to reddish brown, if occasionally shading to an amber orange tint. However, when he changed his recipe some of the results appeared as an extremely dark surface which tends to be rejected by collectors. The black surface can be the result of later separation of varnish substances, which took too long to dry. In this respect, it is difficult to compare the quality of Pressenda's varnish with that of the top Cremonese masters. Interestingly, it is recognised that Pressenda used only small amounts of or no preliminary sizing in the varnishing process. This allowed the coloured varnish to soak through a thin undercoat into the soft pine wood. As a result, in the front the tint often became darker than the back and a unique inverse grain pattern emerged in which the soft summer grain (the wider part of the grain) is stained darker than the tight winter grain, exhibiting a pattern of lighter stripes.

Quite a few instruments with facsimiled Pressenda labels are in circulation, including some by Pierre Pacherele and Alessandro D'Espine, who both worked in Pressenda's workshop, but a genuine Pressenda instrument presents a unique, independent personality that is immediately discernible to the experienced eye. Evident is a delicate human touch that accompanies mechanical skilfulness based on consistent craftsmanship. Even cleverly reproduced replicas of Pressenda, frequently found in the early work of Fagnola, cannot successfully project that peculiar massive and masculine image of an instrument that is actually never large in dimension. The nature of the varnish reinforces the idiosyncrasies of his work, not only in terms of its visual appearance but probably also its acoustic character.

There are endless disputes with regard to the tonal characteristics of Pressenda's instruments which constitute the fruition of his many idiosyncrasies. The Pressenda sound is generally accepted to be powerful and suited for concert use. But the timbre of an average Pressenda violin is often underwhelming to the ear of those who have played 18th-century Italians or who have grown accustomed to the instant response of modern Italians;

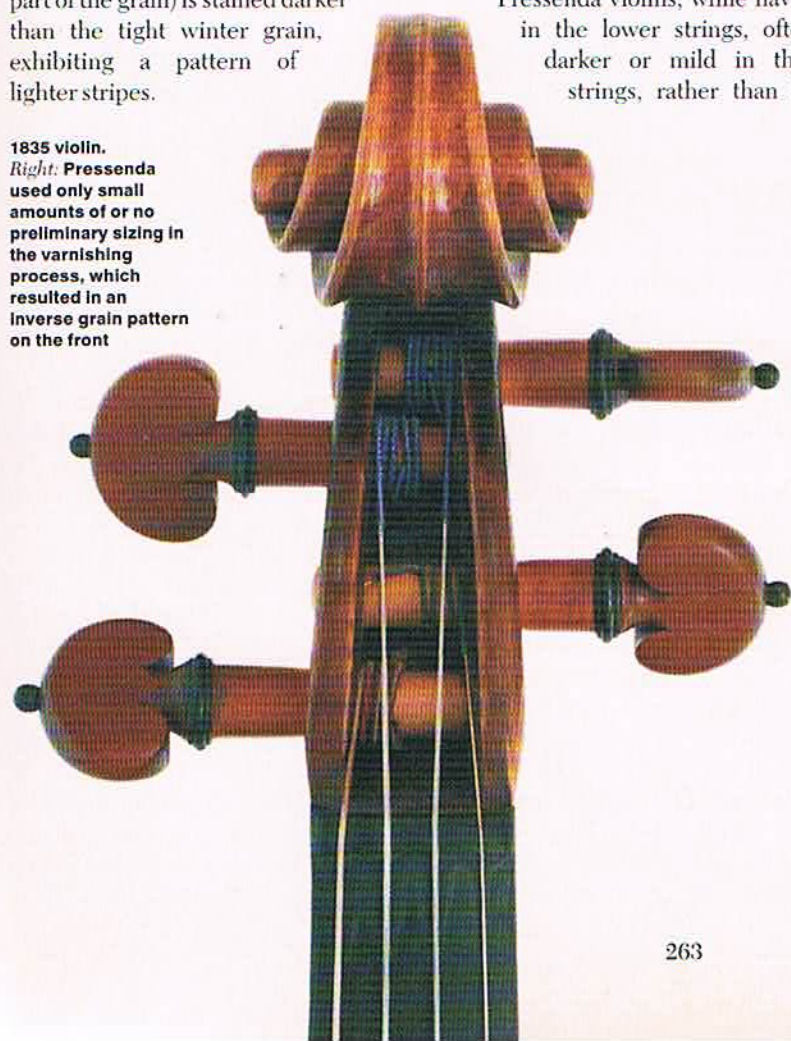
Pressenda violins, while having depth in the lower strings, often sound darker or mild in the higher strings, rather than brilliantly

robust under the ear. Nevertheless, they have excellent carrying power and are full of overtones enabling audiences to hear the silvery power of the sound. In short, the Pressenda sound tends to take an energetic focus (not physically but more sensuously) in a space far distant from the musician's immediate surroundings. It is important to note that Pressenda's Turin workshop was located near the city theatre and it is possible that Pressenda often played – and checked – his brand new instruments in this venue, thereby working out an understanding of what aspects of violin making are essential to creating an instrument that is above all distinctive in its carrying power. □

NOTES

1. *Die Geigen und Lauten Macher*, W. Lütgendorff, Frankfurt am Main, 1904.
2. *Universal Dictionary of Violin and Bow Makers*, W. Henley, Amati Publishing, 1973.
3. *Classia Fabbricazione di Violini in Piedmont*, B.G. Rinaldi, Florenus Edizioni Bologna, Turin, 1873.
4. *The Guadagnini Family of Violin Makers*, E.N. Doring, William Lewis & Son, 1949.
5. August Wilhelmj – German Paganini, T. Potter, *The Strad*, October 1995, pp.1040–45.
6. *Meister Italienischer Geigenbaukunst*, W. Hamma, Schuler 9, Germany, 1987.
8. Duane Rosengard, *Strings*, Jan/Feb 1996, pp.84–5.
9. *The Violin – Famous Makers and Their Imitators*, G. Hart, Dulau & Co., 1885, pp.150–3.

1835 violin.
Right: Pressenda used only small amounts of or no preliminary sizing in the varnishing process, which resulted in an inverse grain pattern on the front



Photos: T. Maroska