

Breaking the mould

This 1797 violin by Caspar Strnad, with its flatter arching and longer corners, illustrates his departure from Stainer's model. By **Jan Špidlen**

By the end of the 18th century the illustrious Czech kingdom had long since passed and the nation lived under Habsburg rule until the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. Its violin making craft, along with many other aspects of Bohemian life, was imported from Germany. After a long line of German immigrants, the first native Czech makers to appear were Thomas Andreas Hulínzky (1731–88) and Caspar Strnad (1752–1823).

These German influences were echoed in the character of the workmanship. Instruments were constructed according to

Stainer's model, with high-arched plates, a deep channel and a fine, narrow edge. The ribs were constructed on an inside mould, as in the Tyrol,



with corner-blocks shaped short towards the middle bouts and long towards the upper and lower bouts. The linings were set into the blocks with pointed ends. This style gradually changed in the second half of the 18th century, as the violin making community in Prague was influenced by the flat-arched instruments of the Italian makers; and here Strnad was the noteworthy innovator.

A pupil of Hulínzky, Strnad was a talented chamber musician who played the violin and viola. The standard of his work is impressive and shows his painstaking and methodical approach.

This 1797 violin is a fine example of the Italian influence on the Prague school. Strnad has lowered the arching, giving the instrument a full, barrel-type form, and enlarged the fine, rounded f-holes, bringing them closer to the Stradivari model. The edges are narrow and rounded, and the corners are longer than Stainer's, bearing more resemblance to those of Amati. The squareish head, however, does not differ much from Stainer's model – the pegbox retains its typical Z-shape and the small scroll above the broad throat is furled into a little eye.

The varnish is typical of Prague. A dark ruby colour, it is cracked in its thicker layers and almost black in less exposed areas, where it has absorbed dirt and dust. As is the case with classic Italian varnish, it chips and easily wipes off the oily base coat, indicating a similarity between the two varnishing processes. The Prague varnish corrodes with water, so it evidently contains some kind of water-soluble gum or glue.

According to later documentation, the ground was traditionally made with linseed oil, confirmed here by the reddened wood in the most worn areas, underneath the player's chin and left hand. ■

LEFT The idiosyncratic Prague varnish, with its tawny-coloured linseed ground, can be seen clearly in this earlier Strnad violin from 1793



DIMENSIONS

| | |
|--------------|-------|
| Back length | 356mm |
| Stop length | 196mm |
| Upper bouts | 168mm |
| Middle bouts | 110mm |
| Lower bouts | 201mm |

