

MEET *your* MAKER

Violinist and teacher **LELAND CHEN** and luthier **GLEN COLLINS** recall how Yehudi Menuhin influenced the creation of a Guarneri 'del Gesù' copy

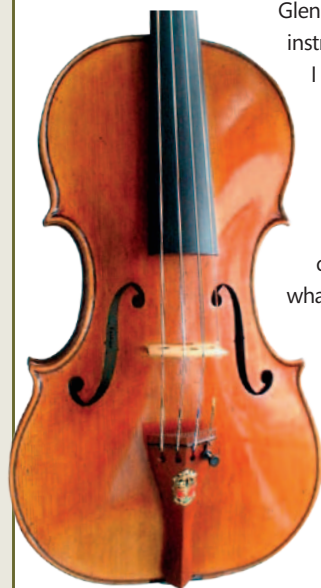
LELAND CHEN

Glen has made two instruments for me. At the end of the 80s Menuhin was about to take delivery of his first Glen Collins violin, a copy of the 'd'Egville' Guarneri 'del Gesù' of 1735. He asked me whether I would collect it for him and give it a try. So I played it, and within two weeks I ordered my own.

Menuhin later ordered another 'del Gesù' model from Glen, this time the 1742 'Lord Wilton'. I never saw it but my wife, Clare MacFarlane, ordered a violin in 1990 and chose the 'Lord Wilton' model too. When she got it, I realised it had something else that was very nice about it – a deeper core to the sound.

At one point my violin was being serviced so I borrowed hers for a couple of weeks, and I realised I wanted more of it. I spoke to Glen about it, probably in around 1998, and he said, 'Well, why don't we do another one?' And so we did.

▼ Chen's 'Lord Wilton' copy



As a player, I didn't have any specific requirements for the new instrument apart from it having the best sound Glen could give me. I didn't need an instrument that looked too fancy and I felt I should leave him to work without any hassle from me.

WHEN I FIRST PICKED IT UP, I found that I could take it in any direction I wanted. Glen makes what I call 'open' instruments – of course you still have to play them in, but their resonance and vibrations work well from the very beginning. They're instruments that you can't hide behind, though. Everything is exposed in the way you play and practise on them. That's not



▲ Leland Chen first came across Collins' work when collecting Menuhin's 'd'Egville' 'del Gesù' copy

for everybody, but most people who have experienced them really like them.

One of the hardest things about playing the violin is that you're always looking for a powerful instrument that also has a high-quality sound. The 'd'Egville' model's sound is very pure and it cuts through an orchestra. With the 'Lord Wilton' model there's a lot more force, although the sound doesn't suffer as a result. I'd almost say that I can outdo an orchestral string section with it. So you can actually play down, rather

than playing up to be heard over them: instead of projecting, you can coax people in with the way you play. That's a real luxury.

For all the years I was using the 'd'Egville' model, I tried on and off to play without a shoulder rest. It was one of the aims I'd had since my student years. But I could never do it comfortably for a concert – I could only do it in practice. Within a month of taking delivery of the 'Lord Wilton' model, though, I played in a concert without a shoulder rest for the first time. I've never had to use one since. It's partly because there's so much easy resonance and sound in the violin, so it makes me loose rather than tight, and it stops me having to work hard. Different qualities come into my sound more easily, without my trying so hard. It's released me as a player.

I probably see Glen at least once a year now, but usually more often than that. More recently it's been about four or five times a year. I still practise a lot, and I love playing my violins, so I wear them out a bit! In fact, Glen has replaced the fingerboards on both of them. I've always kept in touch with him; he has so much knowledge and it's nice to learn from that.

I use just the 'Lord Wilton' now. I've given the 'd'Egville' model to my eldest son to use, and he loves it. I do play on it every so often, and it reminds me of its wonderful singing qualities as well.

GLEN COLLINS

To say the 1742 'Lord Wilton' Guarneri 'del Gesù' is my favourite instrument would be an understatement.

Menuhin owned it for the latter part of his life, and I have such fond memories of meetings at his London home. I would think that, like most of the violins by 'del Gesù', it was made quite quickly, probably for a local client. To any violin enthusiast, the immediately recognisable scroll is a true gem. He didn't waste time in the meticulous cleaning of tool marks. Nor was exact symmetry necessary – after all, who would be looking at it in 250 years' time? But the violin shows the hand of a good craftsman using a freedom that violin makers of today cannot allow themselves.

The varnish, although not as red as some, still has that rich, sparkling lustre, which is actually in part due to the aged wood underneath. What a pity 'del Gesù' isn't around now – I'm sure he would welcome all the compliments he would receive.

I had some wood that I acquired from a bass maker. It was maple, and more suited to violins or violas. With Leland's new 'Lord Wilton' copy, I felt it was the right time to use it. It would not have made good ribs as the figure



▲ Glen Collins has copied the 'Lord Wilton' Guarneri 'del Gesù' over 40 times

was too broad, so I chose other strips of maple and bent them around an inside mould. I glued these to the finished back, and took the final outline for the front. When the box was together, I aligned and fitted the head, neck and finished fingerboard. I varnished it in the manner of a reproduction, with a recipe from Cremona that used seedlac and natural plant root colours.

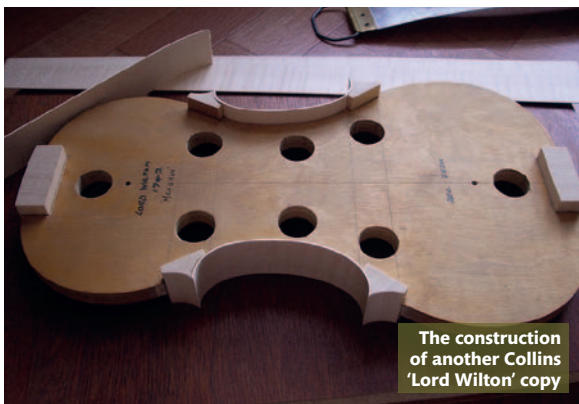
I have copied the 'Lord Wilton' over 40 times, and I'm convinced that I know it better than 'del Gesù', who only made it once!

Leland didn't want it too dark, or with excessive markings, but apart from that he left everything to me. He said, 'Do what you would like to do, and I shall be getting the best from you.' When it was ready we met up at a service station, where I presented him with his new violin.

It's exciting when a new violin is first played. And of course, it's only when sounds and vibrations start running through it that it really begins its life as a musical instrument. Leland was absolutely delighted and could not wait to try it. In the first few weeks I had several phone calls to tell me of its progress, and how well it was sounding. I admire Leland's tremendous energy, and as a player, he has a relentless drive for perfection. I'm honoured that he's using one of my violins. ■

INTERVIEWS BY DAVID KETTLE

▼ One of Collins' copied scrolls in the white



The construction of another Collins 'Lord Wilton' copy



Tracing the f-holes