

READING PASSAGE 2

A Question of Tone

Why the supremacy of the old Italian violin has proved so hard to demonstrate

A For three centuries, the violins built in the northern Italian town of Cremona have been regarded as the finest ever made. The instruments of Antonio Stradivari and of his younger contemporary Giuseppe Guarneri, known as “del Gesù”, are spoken of with a reverence accorded to few other manufactured objects; the best examples change hands for several million pounds, and generations of players have insisted that their sound possesses a warmth, a carrying power and an expressive range that no later maker has been able to equal. The conviction that these instruments are not merely very good but uniquely and irreproducibly excellent has hardened, over time, into something close to an article of faith.

B Naturally, such a belief has invited explanation. If the old Cremonese violins really do sound better than anything made since, then something about how they were made, or what they were made from, must account for it — and a long line of investigators has set out to find that something. Some have pointed to the varnish, suspecting a lost recipe whose ingredients shaped the vibration of the wood. Others have looked to the timber itself. One widely discussed proposal held that the spruce used for the soundboards grew during an unusually cold spell in European history, a stretch of long winters and cool summers that would have slowed the trees’ growth and produced wood that was exceptionally dense and even-grained. A different line of enquiry suggested that the makers had treated the wood with mineral salts or other chemicals, leaving a fingerprint that modern instruments lack.

C None of these explanations, however, addressed a prior and more awkward question: whether the celebrated superiority was real in the first place. The difficulty is that almost everyone who plays or hears these instruments already knows what they are. A violinist handed a Stradivari worth millions, in front of an expectant audience, is hardly a neutral judge of its tone; the knowledge of what the instrument is, and what it is worth, can scarcely fail to colour the impression it makes. To test the belief properly, that knowledge would somehow have to be removed.

D In 2012 a team led by an acoustics researcher and a violin maker set out to do exactly that. At an international competition they assembled a group of skilled violinists and asked them to play a selection of instruments — some old and Italian, some newly built — under conditions designed to keep the players in the dark, quite literally: the room was dimly lit, and each musician wore modified goggles that prevented them from seeing which violin they were holding. Asked to judge the instruments and to say which they would most like to take home, the players showed no consistent preference for the old over the new. On average the instrument they rated most highly was a modern one, and the violin they liked least was a Stradivari. When asked to guess whether a given instrument was old or new, they did no better than chance.

E A larger study followed two years later, conducted near Paris with a group of accomplished soloists who were given far longer with the instruments — hours rather than minutes — and the chance to play them both in a rehearsal room and in a concert hall. Each soloist compared six old Italian violins, several of them by Stradivari, with six fine new ones. The outcome echoed the earlier experiment: the soloists, on the whole, preferred a new violin to the old favourites, and

once again could not reliably tell which instruments were antique. A subsequent test moved the question to the audience, asking listeners seated in concert halls to compare old and new instruments played from the stage; they, too, tended to favour the newer violins, and could not dependably distinguish them from the old.

F The findings were not received quietly. Critics argued that the experiments, whatever their ingenuity, could not capture everything that mattered. The number of instruments and of players involved was small; the particular violins chosen might not have been representative; and a brief comparison under test conditions, they suggested, was a poor substitute for the years a great soloist spends learning to draw the full range of sound from a fine instrument. Some maintained that the qualities setting the old instruments apart reveal themselves only across a long acquaintance, or only in the hands of the very greatest players, and that no blind trial of this kind could be expected to expose them. The researchers, for their part, did not claim that the old violins were bad — several were plainly excellent — only that no evidence had emerged that they were systematically better than the best of their modern rivals.

G What the episode unsettled was not the quality of the Cremonese instruments but the assumption that their superiority was beyond question and beyond explanation. If listeners and players alike, deprived of the knowledge of what they are hearing, cannot pick out the old masters from well-made modern violins, then at least part of the instruments' fabled supremacy may lie not in the wood or the varnish but in their reputation, and in the expectations that reputation creates. The makers of Cremona were undoubtedly among the greatest craftsmen of their age; whether their finest instruments truly sound better than anything achievable today is a claim that, for all its long history, has yet to survive a fair test.

True / False / Not Given

Questions 1-5. Do the following statements agree with the information given in Reading Passage 2? Tick (✓) one box for each statement.

1 The most valuable of the old Cremonese violins now sell for several million pounds.

TRUE

FALSE

NOT GIVEN

2 The proposal about the spruce suggested that warm growing conditions had produced denser wood.

TRUE

FALSE

NOT GIVEN

3 Stradivari deliberately kept the details of his varnish recipe secret.

TRUE

FALSE

NOT GIVEN

4 In the 2012 experiment, the players wore goggles that stopped them seeing which violin they held.

TRUE

FALSE

NOT GIVEN

5 In the later study near Paris, the soloists were given only a few minutes with each instrument.

TRUE

FALSE

NOT GIVEN

Multiple Choice

Questions 6-9. Choose the correct letter, A, B, C or D.

- 6 According to paragraph C, why is a player or listener an unreliable judge of one of these violins' tone?
- A They usually lack the training needed to assess sound quality.
 - B Knowing the instrument's identity and value is bound to colour their impression.
 - C The instruments are too valuable to be played in front of an audience.
 - D Modern violins are consistently louder than older ones.
- 7 What happened when the players in the 2012 experiment were asked to identify the instruments?
- A They correctly identified most of the old Italian violins.
 - B They preferred every old instrument to every new one.
 - C They could tell old from new no better than chance.
 - D They refused to give a judgement without seeing the violins.
- 8 In what way did the study conducted near Paris differ from the 2012 experiment?
- A It no longer required the players to wear goggles.
 - B It gave the players much more time with the instruments.
 - C It tested members of the audience instead of players.
 - D It compared modern violins only with one another.
- 9 What did the researchers themselves claim about the old violins?
- A That the old violins were of poor quality.
 - B That a modern violin is always superior to an old one.
 - C That no evidence had shown them to be systematically better than the best modern violins.
 - D That their experiments had settled the question for good.

Sentence Completion

Questions 10–11. Complete the sentences below. Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the passage for each answer.

- 10 Some investigators pointed to the violins' _____, suspecting that a lost recipe had shaped the way the wood vibrated.
- 11 In a later test, _____ seated in concert halls compared old and new violins played from the stage.

Matching Information

Questions 12–14. The reading passage has seven paragraphs, A–G. Which paragraph contains the following information? Write the correct letter, A–G.

- 12 A suggestion that the wood used for the violins was shaped by the climate of the period. A B C D E F G
- 13 A reason why someone hearing one of these instruments cannot judge its sound impartially. A B C D E F G
- 14 Objections that the tests were too limited to capture what makes the old instruments special. A B C D E F G

Answer Key

For teacher / self-study use. Fold or detach before distributing to students.

Q	Answer	Para	Explanation
1	TRUE	A	The best examples “change hands for several million pounds”.
2	FALSE	B	It was an unusually <i>cold</i> spell that slowed growth and produced dense wood; the statement reverses cold to warm.
3	NOT GIVEN	B	A “lost recipe” is mentioned, but the passage never says Stradivari deliberately kept it secret. (A prior-knowledge trap.)
4	TRUE	D	Each musician wore modified goggles preventing them from seeing the instrument.
5	FALSE	E	They were given “hours rather than minutes”; the statement says only a few minutes.
6	B	C	Knowing what the instrument is and what it is worth colours the impression it makes.
7	C	D	They guessed old vs new no better than chance. A and B contradict the text.
8	B	E	The Paris soloists had hours, not minutes. C describes the later audience test, not this study — the tempting distractor.
9	C	F	Researchers claimed only that no evidence showed the old violins to be systematically better. A and D are contradicted; D is also undercut by G.
10	varnish	B	“Some have pointed to the varnish, suspecting a lost recipe...”
11	listeners	E	“asking listeners seated in concert halls”. Accept ‘listeners’; ‘the audience’ is also acceptable.
12	B	B	The cold-period spruce, described as exceptionally dense and even-grained.
13	C	C	Knowledge of the instrument’s identity and value colours the judge’s impression.
14	F	F	Small samples, possibly unrepresentative instruments, and a brief comparison under test conditions.

Approximate IELTS Band Equivalence (14 questions)

Score	14	13	12	11	10–9	8–7	6–5	≤4
Band	9.0	8.5	8.0	7.5	7.0–6.5	6.0–5.5	5.0	<5.0