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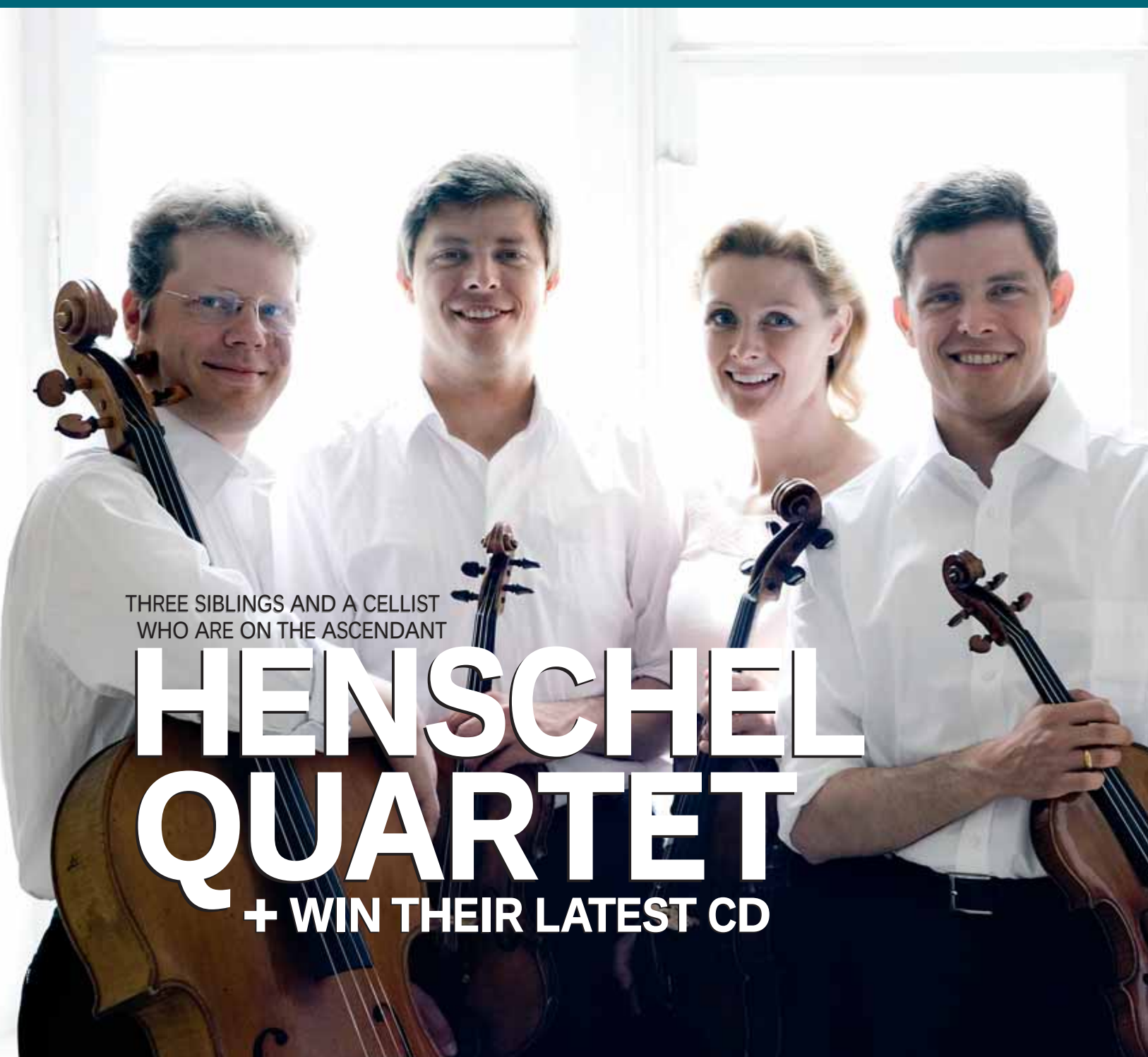

THREE SIBLINGS AND A CELLIST
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RACING DEMON

In his youth, Wolfgang Schnabl rebelled against his family's lutherie tradition, but now he produces hot-shot instruments for the stars. He shares some of his secrets with LAURINEL OWEN

Natalia Gutman commissioned a five-string cello from him. Raphael Wallfisch has owned several of the four-string variety. Boris Pergamenschikow asked him for a copy of his famous Montagnana cello of 1735 — and this copy has been used since Pergamenschikow's death in 2004 by rising star Danjulo Ishizaka. The maker of these instruments, Wolfgang Schnabl, clearly has a great gift, so I visited the little German village of Bubenreuth, an hour north of Nuremburg, to learn more about the man and his making techniques.

Bubenreuth is located in a region saturated with families of violin makers, many of whom have been employed for generations by workshops such as Höfner, Paesold, Klier, Semmlinger and Roth. It was in this environment that Schnabl grew up. 'Dad moved here in 1949, when the village was established, and became an apprentice violin maker,' Schnabl says in his soft tenor voice. 'He worked for both Höfner and Paesold but always had a little workshop at home. In fact, when customers came over he made me stop playing and leave the room. I hated that and built up a negative image of the business. But when I was a boy it was expected that I would follow my father's profession. When I got my first violin at the age of six I just wasn't interested and was never a good student. Therefore, I had no success. Frankly, I didn't try because I had no intention of going into lutherie.'

Schnabl's rebellion continued after graduation and he announced that he was going to train at the industrial conglomerate Siemens in nearby Erlangen. He started as a basic apprentice learning how to use lathes and milling machines. 'It really wasn't all bad,' he admits. 'I learnt to keep my bench and tools in order. It taught me organisational skills and how to work correctly with tools. I liked the work, but ultimately it wasn't satisfying. So in 1982 I took the entrance exam at the violin making school in Mittenwald. I did my obligatory 15 months of military service then began training in September 1984.

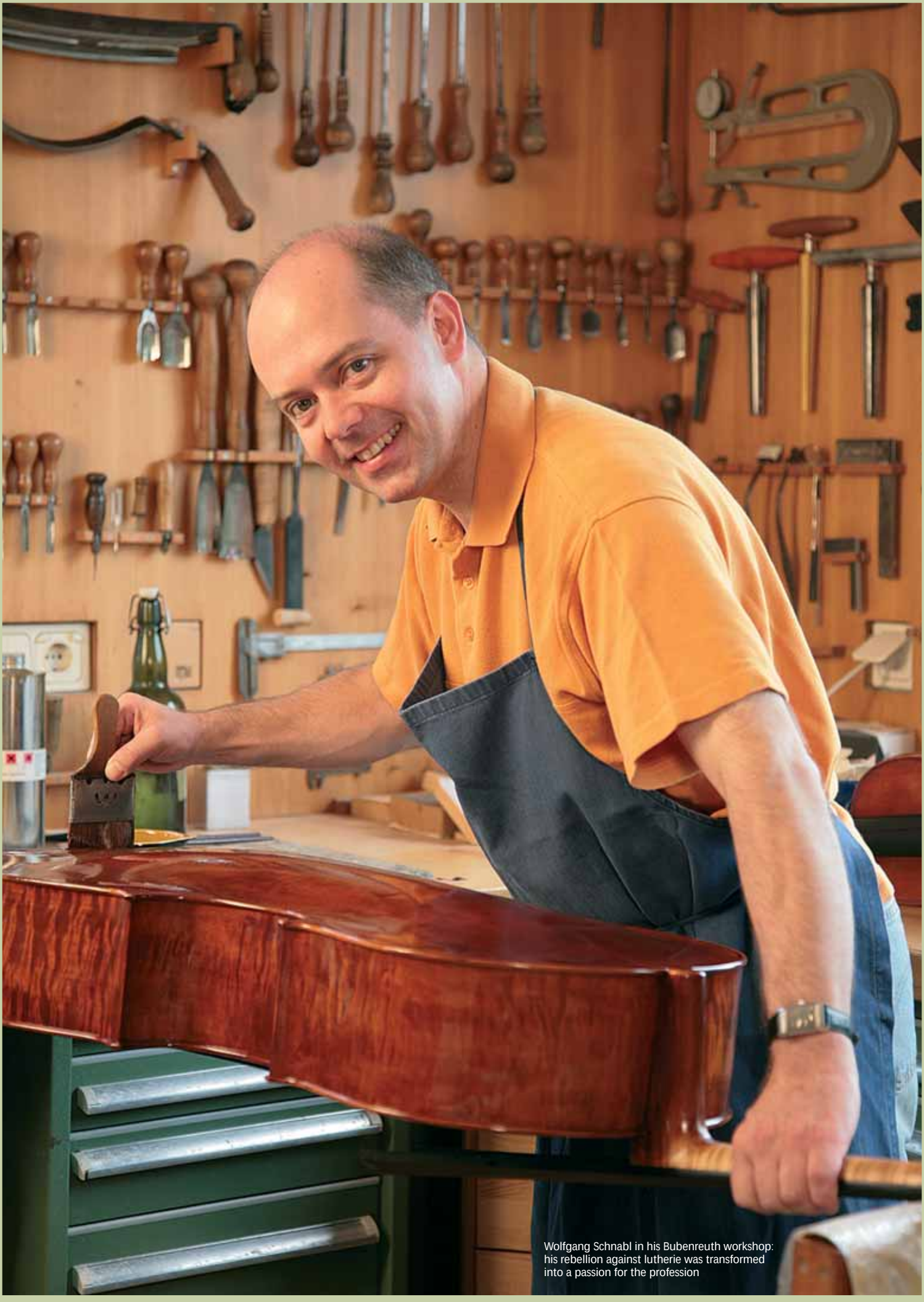
'It was fortuitous that during my years in Mittenwald I sat next to Jan Špidlen,' he continues. 'His father, Přemysl, was Czechoslovakia's best-known maker. We were able to arrange it so that while Jan went to Beare's in London I went to Prague to work with his father. I feel lucky to have been afforded the opportunity to work with this master. It was so inspiring to see his instruments and the violins, like Josef Suk's Stradivari, that came into the shop.

'It wasn't the craft as much as the art and spirit of making that I learnt. For example, his arching spoke to me with heart and soul. His violins are special in looks and sound — which, I believe, has to do with the warmth and beauty of the varnish — and his scrolls have so much character. It was then that I realised that there is art in this profession.'

One day, the Czech–Canadian violin and bow maker Joseph Kun, inventor of the Kun shoulder rest, came to the Špidlen shop, saw Schnabl's work, and invited him to Ottawa. 'This was fascinating because Kun was the complete opposite to Špidlen — he was a real "worker" and even made all his own tools. I picked up lots of great tips on how to use the proper tools. For example, we'd be working, he'd leave the room, bring back a hand drill and demonstrate how to drill pegholes exactly parallel. He invented ingenious scrapers that, once you have seen them, are obvious. He also had tricks such as how to apply parchment to the top of a bridge using Super Glue. If you stick the parchment to the bridge with your thumb and forefinger, they'll get stuck themselves. But if you put the parchment first on to Scotch tape, then apply glue to the parchment, you can easily wrap the tape over the bridge — and as the glue doesn't stick to tape, you just peel the tape off leaving the parchment stuck to the bridge. Joe was always thinking, "How can I make my life easier?"'

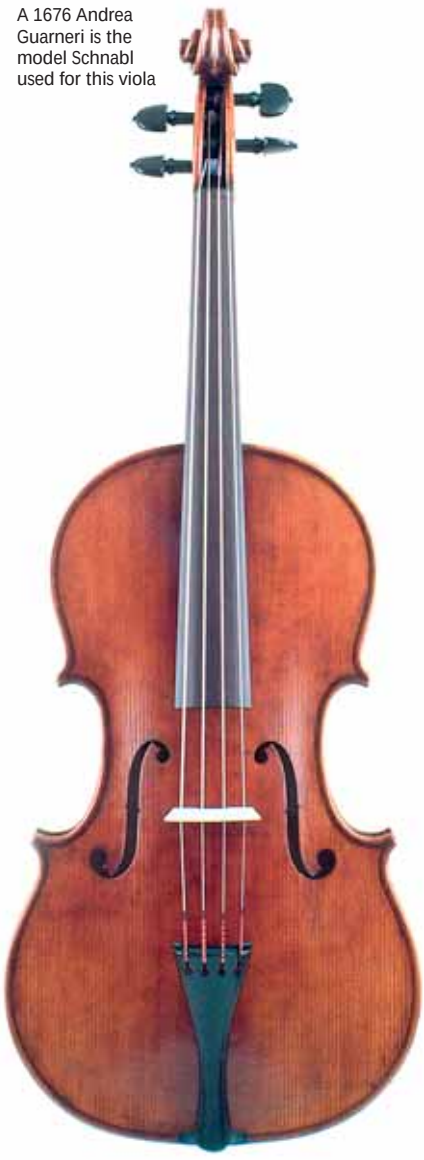
After working with two such contrasting makers, Schnabl returned to Germany, took his Master's degree test in Nuremburg (which involved fitting a bass-bar, purfling a violin top and making a neck graft), and became qualified to open his own shop. At that point he decided that competitions might be a way of getting recognition for his work. The first was in Paris in 1991 where he won fifth place with his first cello. 'In all I entered more than ten competitions,' he admits, 'including the Violin Society of America, Manchester, Mittenwald, Cremona, Prague and Paris. I learnt lots of details, especially from Roger Hargrave, who gave open criticism to participants. Listening to him identifying others' mistakes I picked up many details on how to make the instrument comfortable and player-friendly — like neck thickness. If you use the measurements you learn at school you make a truck — I want a sports car, so the player can race. This requires careful adjustment and attention to the fine detail.'

Early in his career, on the recommendation of a musician, Schnabl began using a violin from Stradivari's golden period as a model: the 'Alard' of 1715. 'I have no special reason for using this one and haven't even thought about it much — the violin is so beautiful that I am happy to follow it. Many makers design their own model, but I never have felt that need. For me, Stradivari's models are perfect as they are. This violin was made in the same year as my hero, "Il Cremonese", which I have seen many times in Cremona's Town Hall. ▸



Wolfgang Schnabl in his Bubenreuth workshop: his rebellion against lutherie was transformed into a passion for the profession

GERD SCHEIDEL



A 1676 Andrea Guarneri is the model Schnabl used for this viola

COURTESY WOLFGANG SCHNABL

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>
> WOLFGANG SCHNABL

I also use the 1733 "Kreisler" by Guarneri "del Gesù". Both models I copied from a book with life-size pictures. I have never seen either in person – we don't see many great instruments here in Bubenreuth.'

A 1676 Andrea Guarneri is his choice for viola. 'Violas shouldn't be too long, but need a certain internal volume. This one is 41.5cm or 16.25 inches, which is a comfortable size for most players. A viola is always a compromise, but for sound I believe that body length is more important than width. If it is too easy for the player – in other words, small – then the C string won't have enough power and depth.'

Originally Schnabl's choice of cello model was the 'Paganini' Stradivari of 1736. 'This is a small cello,' he says. 'The ribs are very deep, but the bouts are small and the length is short. However, after I had made three cellos using that pattern, I fell in love with the 1700 "Cristiani", in dimensions close to the so-called B form, though a bit larger. With a body-stop of 41.7cm, it was too big for my taste. So I went to the copy shop and started enlarging the photo to life-size, then I redesigned the outline to make it smaller, reducing the length to 40cm. I still use this model, which I call "Cristiani", and get consistent results.'

In 1997 Schnabl met Boris Pergamenschikow after a performance of the Elgar Cello Concerto in Nuremburg. After trying a cello that was only two weeks old, the virtuoso asked Schnabl to copy his Montagnana. 'It wasn't a commission, just an experiment. During the process I showed it to him at different stages and he was always positive. Usually I fully varnish an instrument without antiqueing, but Boris wanted the appearance to be more or less an exact copy, which I had never tried before. This is why it took so long. I worked only from photos and never got to keep his cello, except for one night in a hotel room when I worked through the night. I had the Montagnana and mine next to each other to compare. I'll never forget the pressure – one night to copy all the marks from 300 years! Fortunately, he didn't want the deformations, and the scroll had varnish problems and considerable craquelure – he said, "No, that isn't nice, don't copy it" – but from a distance he didn't want people to see he was playing a new cello.' Finally, two years after the initial contact, Schnabl took the finished cello to Berlin, where Pergamenschikow lived, and after a couple of weeks' trial, the cellist bought it.

That instrument has become a favourite model of Schnabl's and he has made over 20 cellos using the outline. 'In general it is said that Montagnanas have a darker tone while Stradivaris are more focused and brilliant,' comments Schnabl. 'Many times I have found the opposite and have concluded that the model is secondary – it is the wood that defines the tone colours and quality. I spend a lot of time talking to musicians, asking what they are looking for. Mostly it is the same: balance between the strings, lots of resistance so they can dig into the strings, fast response, and an open and free sound. When selecting wood I'm not looking for the hardest maple, which I suppose is a subjective decision. I judge the weight and try to twist the piece – impossible with solid or massive pieces of wood, but I get a feeling. I knock the wood, listening to pitch. Makers usually prefer high pitch, which means fast vibrations – low pitch might indicate harder wood with a slower response. My first concern is not the grain or beauty, and blemishes don't worry me. I am looking for the individual qualities of each piece and even when selecting spruce I feel grain is secondary. More important is the way the wood dealers have followed the natural split when they cut the wood. Luckily, I have enough stock for the rest of my life, because of my father's purchases over the years, but I still invest and buy only what I really like: carefully looking at the split, weight and strength.'

Like most modern makers, Schnabl uses power tools for all the preparation work, claiming that machines are faster and the result is better than by hand: a planing machine for the top and back centre joints, and circular and band saws for rough shaping. Interestingly, he does not use templates for arching. Recently he constructed a cello with poplar and because of the wood's soft and light structure he made the back 30–40 per cent thicker than he would if he were using maple. In order to keep the inside volume normal the arching was increased on the outside. Diligently keeping notes ▸

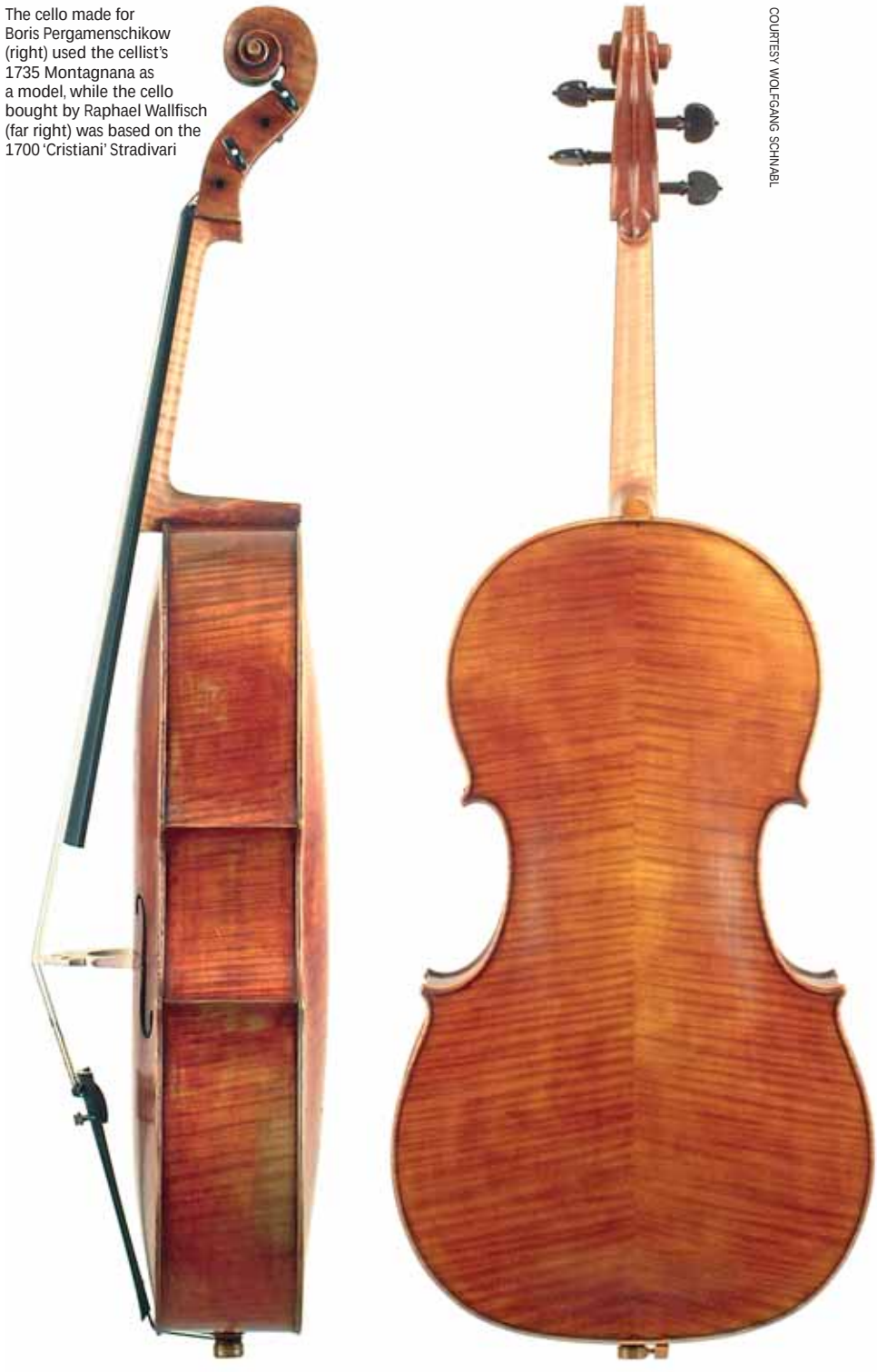
on the weight of each piece, he was surprised to discover that the final weight of the back, ribs, lining and blocks of the poplar was exactly the same as maple — 1,270g — even though maple is so much more dense.

For varnish, Schnabl is a fan of Imprimatura Dorata Primer 2, a stain from the Dutch company Magister, because of its beautiful golden–yellow colour. His recipe for the varnish is linseed oil combined with several types of resin: dammar, Manilla copal, kauri copal and gamboges. He makes his own pigments from madder root, which gives a nice reddish colour, and adds a tiny bit of chrome green to give a hint of brown.

The number of coats depends on the desired overall colour of the finished instrument — on average there are six to eight coats but darker colours require more. These are applied using sable-hair brushes purchased in Bechhofen, a small country town known in Germany as a centre of brush making. 'This is simply the best hair available, and I can only recommend that. It's quite an investment, but it pays back.'

Schnabl feels strongly about set-up. 'It is essential that the pegs, as an example, fit as perfectly as possible. So often I hear musicians complaining about the pegs. As we all know, pegs touch both walls of the pegbox. Since I cannot see if the fit is perfect I use my lips, which are extremely sensitive to change of temperature. I simply turn each peg a few times — without strings — to create heat caused by friction. Taking the peg out of the hole and touching the peg with my lips I compare the heat of the surfaces. It is surprising how big a difference there can be. Then a file, scraper or sandpaper can be used to adjust the surfaces until the same heat and temperature is achieved. The pegs will hold perfectly and turn easily. For me it is very important to make the set-up musician-friendly.'

Hanging from a string in front of the window are hundreds of bridges. 'I have my bridges custom made,' Schnabl explains. 'We have two bridge makers here in Bubenreuth, Josef Teller and Roland Schuster, who make bridges to individual specifications and have clients all over the world. Roland and I recently bought a log of maple specifically for bridges.



The cello made for Boris Pergamenschikow (right) used the cellist's 1735 Montagnana as a model, while the cello bought by Raphael Wallfisch (far right) was based on the 1700 'Cristiani' Stradivari

COURTESY WOLFGANG SCHNABL

I kept a third of it for myself, which means I got nearly 600 cello bridges and more than 2,000 violin or viola bridges. For cello bridges I ask for parallel legs with a foot-to-foot measurement of 92mm. I usually prefer the French style to the Belgian because it seems to bring out more colours and has a broader, richer sound — I want more than a trumpet! I think it is a myth that the Belgian bridge is more powerful and has more projection.'

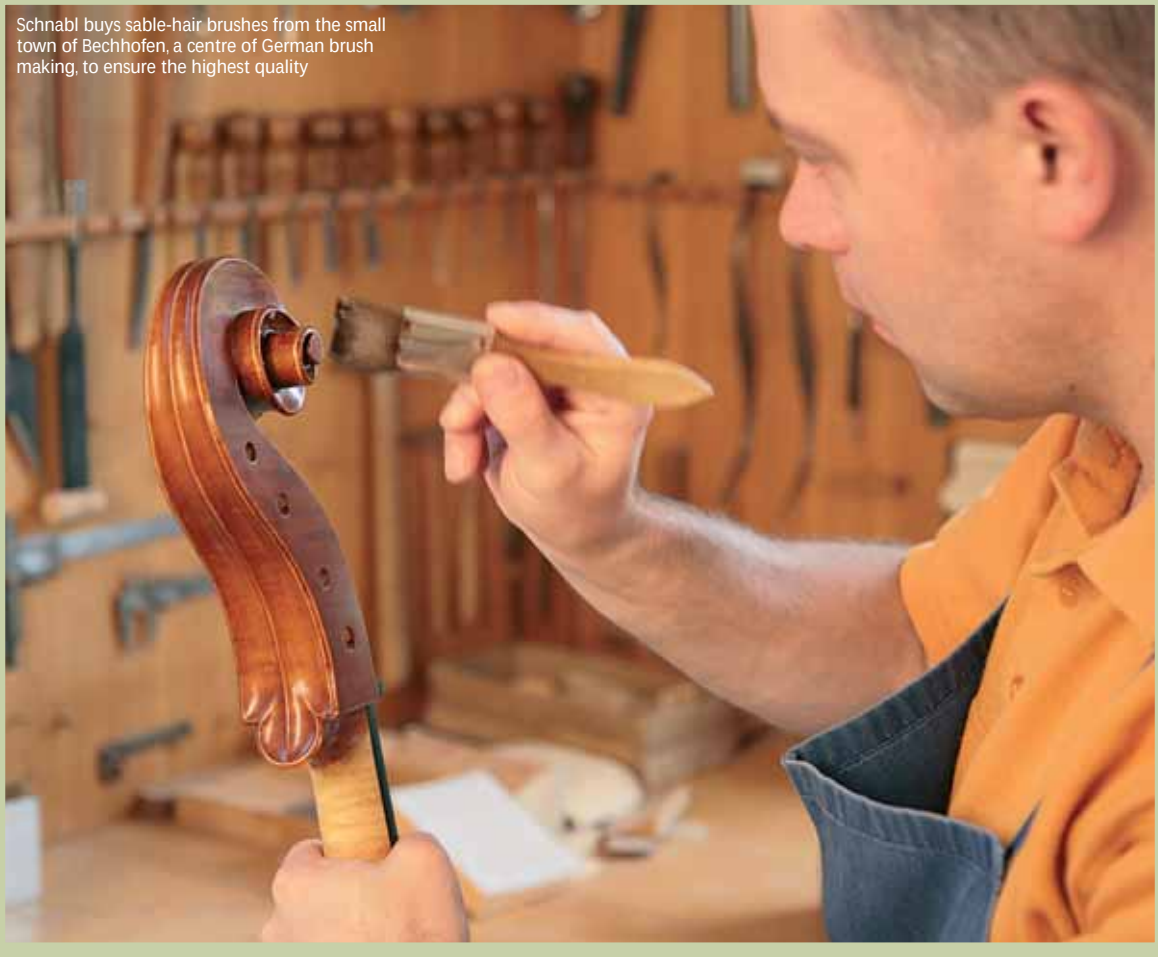
Although Schnabl continues to make violins and violas, he is best known for his cellos. 'When Raphael Wallfisch was a judge at the 1994 cello making competition in Manchester,' he explains,

> I worked only from photos and never got to keep his cello, except for one night in a hotel room when I worked through the night
>
> WOLFGANG SCHNABL

'he liked my cello so much that he bought it. This opened so many doors that all of a sudden I was only making cellos.' Attention to detail and an ability to make great-sounding instruments that suit the client have garnered Schnabl enthusiastic reviews. Tanya Prochazka, artist-in-residence at the University of Alberta in Canada, has owned one of his cellos since 1999, a Montagnana model based on Pergamenschikow's cello. 'Wolfgang is a meticulous maker and has the personality and playing needs of each player well in mind for each of the cellos he makes,' she says. 'He is a maker with the utmost integrity and skill, with a highly refined sense of tone, and a total awareness of the resonant potential of each instrument. He takes no shortcuts and each instrument is as masterfully built as its brother. All models are of the highest quality, and can sound from very mellow to bright and powerful. He gets a feel for the personality of each player and makes accordingly.'

Danjulo Ishizaka uses the cello made for Pergamenschikow, which is on loan from the Kronberg Academy. He says: 'This cello is a copy of the "Konstantin Romanov" Montagnana and is close to the original in terms of sound and character, having its own complexity that I have had to adjust to, which has proved challenging to really get to know. Its tone is warm and rich with an amazing variety of colours, yet at the same time it projects very well and doesn't set limits for me. I feel that it is a perfect fit for any kind of music.'

As we wrap up the interview I ask if we have left anything out. Schnabl ponders and responds: 'There is no one secret. I realise more and more that violin making has too many complex aspects – it is every little step that counts in the end.' ■



Schnabl buys sable-hair brushes from the small town of Bechhofen, a centre of German brush making, to ensure the highest quality

GERD SCHEIDEL