



## Old vs. New

Do blindfold tests really work?

BY DANA BOURGEOIS

**Q** *I've read about blind tests in which professional violinists attempted to identify contemporary instruments from valuable older ones. The headlines suggest that players preferred modern instruments to violins made by Stradivari and Guarneri. Do you think there's any validity to these results, and what outcome would you expect if guitars were tested under similar conditions?"*

**Eric Nadel**

Provo, Utah

**A** Over the years, a number of blindfold tests have been conducted, including a pair of widely reported tests administered by a trio of researchers in 2010 and 2012. In the first experiment, 21 contestants from the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis were asked to rate six violins: two Stradivaris, a Guarneri del Gesu, and three violins made by highly regarded contemporary luthiers. The experiment was conducted in a hotel room, with one violinist at a time. Players used their own bows and wore welding glasses to prevent instruments from being visually identified. Instruments were presented in pairs, one old and one new; violinists were asked to play each for a minute, then rate both in a variety of categories.

Players were then given an opportunity to compare all six and select the one they would most like to own.

The results were as you report: players chose modern violins 62 percent of the time. The single most preferred instrument was a new violin, and the one most frequently rejected was a Stradivari. After results of the experiment were published in 2012, in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, numerous criticisms surfaced: that a hotel room is a less than ideal acoustical testing environment; that players were not given enough time for proper evaluation; that the contemporary instruments may have been cherry-picked, while the Italian instruments were the only ones researchers could get their hands on, and so on.

The same researchers then ran a second experiment, this time in two Parisian concert halls. Ten professional concert soloists were presented 12 violins—six old and six new—and each musician was given 50 minutes to play the instruments in any order and as many times as they liked, again wearing welding glasses and using their own bows. Players were asked to compare each instrument to their own personal concert instruments (seven of the ten played old rare Italian instruments), then rate their four favorites.

After ratings were tallied, results resembled the initial experiment: the performers preferred newer instruments more often than older instruments; the two most frequently preferred instruments were modern violins; the least preferred was a Stradivari. The results were published in the same journal in 2014.

From these tests it seems safe to conclude, at a minimum, that some professional violinists prefer certain modern instruments to certain vintage instruments. Consistency of results over two different experiments, the second designed to address criticisms of the first, lends credibility to the researchers' methodologies and conclusions.

I doubt, however, that similar experiments on guitars would yield much definitive information. Old and new violins can be directly compared precisely because they are so alike. For 300 years, makers of new violins have attempted, with great purpose, to recreate the sound, feel, and look of old Italian violins. The latest violin innovations to gain widespread popularity—longer scale lengths and the introduction of steel strings—date back to the 19th century.

The universe of guitars, and guitarists, is considerably more diverse. Can you imagine presenting Phil Keaggy with a '37 advanced jumbo and a Rick Turner Compass Rose and then asking him to pick a favorite? And, by the way, here's a pair of welding glasses to insure that you can't figure anything out about the guitar you're playing and therefore won't be biased.

Though both are outstanding instruments, and Keaggy might have a strong preference, neither is significantly similar to guitars Keaggy typically performs with. What significance, then, can you assign to his preference? Multiply this thought-experiment by ten random high-level guitarists and 20 different vintage and contemporary guitars and welding glasses still wouldn't make a difference!

I'd expect the results to be highly entertaining, though, and would love to be a fly on the wall throughout the proceedings.

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Dana Bourgeois

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