Stepner's Graceful Bow to the Past, and Present

Stepner is a master of violins both old and new. He plays his Kloz on his critically acclaimed two-CD recording of Bach’s Sonatas, Partitas and Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, released by Centaur last summer. The album also features Stepner playing two other spectacular baroque instruments — a 1641 violin made by Nicolo Amati owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and a 1693 violin made by Antonio Stradivari owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Strad, worth millions of dollars and sent to the recording session at the MFA with a police escort, was modernized before the Met transformed it back into its period authenticity. Out of the 500-plus Strads that survive, it is thought to be — incredibly — the only one currently configured in baroque form.

Violin making is not a forgotten trade, Stepner reports. “I own two violins by a living maker in Vermont that I like very much,” he says. “And there are some good instruments coming from China these days.”

Yet, for most serious musicians, the Stradivarius remains the ne plus ultra of violins. To try to explain its unique tone, some experts point to the volcanic ash used in the varnish. Others note the way a Strad’s back is carefully graduated in thickness, creating “an incredibly efficient woofer,” Stepner says, “which can project quality of sound over a long distance.”

When he’s playing early music, Stepner prefers to use a period violin. “The Bach Sonatas and Partitas, the most challenging music I know,” he says, “are physically less punishing to play on a baroque violin, because you don’t have to press as hard to get a good sound.”

For music by Beethoven and later composers, he uses a modern violin, as he did on the Lydian Quartet’s recently released three-CD recording of Beethoven’s late quartets; his upcoming CD showcasing solo-violin music by 20th-century masters, which will be released in February; and another CD containing violin works by Brandeis composers, to be released this spring.

“People ask me if it’s hard to switch back and forth between a period and a modern violin, to deal with the differences in pitch and pressure,” Stepner says with a smile. “And I say, no, that’s the easy part. It’s just that playing either one feels impossibly challenging at times.”