

Wood you believe it?

After a few pieces of 90-year-old maple sold for a staggeringly high price in a recent New York auction, **David Kettle** asks why some luthiers go out of their way to source vintage tonewood

THERE WERE MORE THAN A FEW raised eyebrows after the sale of one particular item in a March auction at Tarisio. In the sale of pieces from the René Morel collection, lot 240 was described as 'Two maple cello backs, c.1920', with an estimated price of \$250–\$400. It made an astonishing \$21,000 (not including the buyer's premium), provoking lengthy online debate and speculation as to who the buyer was, and why it had achieved such a high price.

The buyer, in fact, was New York-based maker and dealer Christophe Landon, and he offers a simple explanation for his costly purchase: 'I put all the money I can into buying great wood because I want to make the greatest instruments possible.' And using vintage wood is nothing new to Landon: he cites the example of a Montagnana cello copy he recently finished that has a 300-year-old piece of wood as its top.

But his latest purchase raises wider questions about the value of good-quality vintage tonewood, both in musical and financial terms – and also as to whether it's the qualities inherent in the wood itself or its provenance and reputation that contribute most to its perceived value.

Landon feels strongly that the high price of good, vintage tonewood lies entirely in its lutherie possibilities. 'It's all in the sound. You have wood that's completely dry and seasoned, and it has the look and characteristics that simply wouldn't be there in more recent wood. The chemical structure of old wood is completely different.'

Fellow New York luthier Sam Zygmontowicz also bid in the Morel collection auction, but feels that in this case things may have gone too far. 'I was interested in the cello backs, but the price was out of touch with the reality,' he says. Nevertheless, he accepts that older wood can have advantages in terms of making. 'Really old wood, 50 years old or more, is fully seasoned, and the colour is a bit darker, which helps in varnishing,' he explains. 'And it may be a bit crisper, which is good for the sound.'



Fully seasoned old wood, such as these pieces from René Morel's collection, has a special look and sonic character, say some makers

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SAM ZYGMUNTOWICZ

Ethan Ladd, Tarisio New York's executive manager, believes that both the provenance and the nature of the wood can contribute to its value, especially in this case. 'The quality of the wood goes hand in hand with the reputation of the man who assembled it. We weren't surprised to find that René had assembled a collection of this calibre,' he says.

HOW MUCH good-quality vintage tonewood is still available? Landon explains its rising value with a succinct response: 'There's almost nothing left.' Yet Zygmontowicz warns that just because old tonewood is rare, it doesn't mean it's necessarily high-quality: some older wood that's still unused may simply have been passed over by earlier makers because there were problems with it. 'Just like with violins,' he explains, 'good new is better than mediocre old.'

But are the high prices that historic tonewood can achieve a reason for today's makers to buy good-quality wood now as an investment for the future? Landon thinks so, admitting to spending significant sums on adding to his extensive wood stock every year. But Zygmontowicz sounds a note of caution: 'When old wood comes up for sale, either it is leftovers or because a career ended too early. It is not a practical way to build a proper wood store.'

The Morel collection sale was the third successful wood-specific auction that Tarisio has held, and although Ladd sees potential for growth in the market, he's realistic about the extent of its possible expansion. 'The results show a robust market for fine wood, with 30 bids or more for the best lots. But scarcity will prevent the development of an ongoing, active market for vintage tonewood. The product is also consumable – like wine, for example. Of course, this is good for players and the trade. Once a maker uses it, it's no longer available as tonewood, but it becomes a musical instrument.' ■