



POWERFUL, SWEET, NASTY & GRITTY

Mark O'Connor's 2002 Cooper fiddle is a "remarkable collaborator"

Player Specializing in American music, fiddler, composer, pedagogue, and multiple Grammy-Award winner **Mark O'Connor** topped many fiddle contests as a child, before embarking on a wide-ranging career. He's a prolific composer and performer and has released his own violin method, based on his ideals of teaching creativity as an essential part of music making. His latest CD is *MOC4* [OMAC], an eclectic collection of songs arranged by O'Connor to accompany Book IV of his violin method and covering fiddle music from old-time to swing jazz to Bach.

Instrument 2002 Jonathan Cooper violin with D'Addario Zyex and Helicore strings

Bows Two 1930s Hoyer bows

How does this violin compare to your previous primary instrument?

Prior to my Cooper, I had an 1830 J.B. Vuillaume. They are very similar in sound. The Vuillaume was much more susceptible to weather changes and it would have its good days and bad days. It didn't like dry weather at all and I seemed to be always chasing buzzes and wolf tones around, trying to tame them out of the old instrument. The Cooper is much more reliable day-in and day-out, plus it has just as good a sound as the Vuillaume—or better.

And I can use a pickup much more easily with it as well. That is how I started using it as my primary instrument a couple of years ago, to premiere *The Improvised Violin Concerto*. I wanted to use the Cooper as an acoustic instrument in Boston's Symphony Hall, but with a flip of a switch, take it into overdrive using pedals for distortion,

analog delay, and so on. The flexibility of the modern acoustic instrument for various applications is proving extremely worthwhile. I recommend it!

What gift does this violin bring to your playing that cannot be found in any other instrument?

The Cooper's flexibility in sound is a major gift for me. I'm a unique player and composer in that I am working in so many idioms. I'm one of those players who really doesn't like to change instruments. I'd rather stick with a single instrument, get used to it, and play it on everything.

I need an instrument with a pristine high-end, so I can blend with orchestral strings when I want to or thump out bluegrass music and a Texas fiddle tune when I want to. I need it to be powerful for my concertos, sweet for my tributes to Stéphane Grappelli, but nasty and gritty for the blues. I really want a violin that can follow me through my musical and stylistic paces. Once I've found that violin, I usually stay with it for a long time. In a 40-year career, I've played four fiddles.

Tell me about its history.

I had the most awful mishap with the Cooper violin this year. I pulled it off a countertop about five minutes before I was to take the stage to perform *The Improvised Violin Concerto* with a symphony orchestra.

The concert was going to be broadcast on public radio in South Dakota and I had a small lavalier mic clipped on to the strings behind the bridge, with a cord connecting it to the battery pack in my pocket. I turned around to see who was at my dressing room door and the violin was pulled out of its case on the countertop.

The fall to the floor caused a length-long crack, and it was gaping. The end of the violin, near the chinrest, was broken apart. I was aghast and buried my hands into my eyes in disbelief that I caused such a thing. I was worried that the sound that I played into it for the previous 12 years was going to be lost.

I sent the violin in my case over night to Jonathan Cooper to repair. He had seen the photos and felt that he could repair it well, make the crack disappear, and have it sound just as good and maybe even better.

After a week in the shop, Jon reported

that it sounded great and that my sound was still in the wood of the violin because it is a different instrument than what he had sold me 12 years before. When Jon brought the repaired violin to my performance in Connecticut, I was astonished at how great it looked and sounded.

It had the same tone as before, but even louder and hotter. It was more like an old Italian violin that needed to be tamed somewhat in order play it well. It had a new zing to it and a roar that I love about great violins. I had been borrowing my old teacher Benny Thomasson's fiddle from its owner. It's a great fiddle, but I carried the Cooper onstage with me that evening. The violin was similar to how it was before, but now it is on twelve!

How did you come into possession of this instrument?

Cooper set up a table of his violins at my string camp in San Diego. I came by and I played one that the varnish was still drying on, and I immediately felt it was a friend. I asked him to hold it for me and I bought it the following day.

I couldn't imagine replacing my Vuillaume with it at that time though, so I carried the Cooper in a double-violin case with the Vuillaume, most often using the Cooper for cross-tuning pieces like "Bonaparte's Retreat."

The first recording I did on it was for Renée Fleming when I created a new cross tuning for "Amazing Grace." It was back in 2007 and it was just a glorious sound. You can hear the track on my CD *An Appalachian Christmas* [OMAC]. I prepared *The Improvised Violin Concerto* premiere and the CD on the [Cooper] violin in 2011, and since then the Vuillaume has been hanging on my wall.

What are its strengths and limitations?

I don't think the Cooper has limitations. It's loud and can project acoustically in a hall. I've had string players ask me if I was amplified in a concert when I was not! But at the same time, the Cooper records well when it's close-mic'd in the studio. The tone, and the variety of tone, I was able to get on my new CD [MOC4] is really quite something. The violin's sound can follow me through Bach to bluegrass to blues to "La Bamba." It's quite remarkable to have a collaborator in a fiddle like that!



Maker Jonathan Cooper took photos before (top) and during the repair.

JONATHAN COOPER

What are your instrument's likes and dislikes?

My Cooper violin really likes my wife Maggie's violin, which was made by Lukas Wronski. We play violin duos and the instruments seem to really like each other and have a lot in common! The Wronski was made around the same time as the Cooper, both made in the Northeast, and each had to have its top removed during repairs last spring.

When we play together, our sounds blend unusually well and it was like that from the moment we first played together, even when Maggie was borrowing a violin for our very first concert. They just hum along together when we play, in a symbiotic sense, which is very cool. Maggie and I play together so effortlessly, too. I sense a closeness these two new violins feel though, like how Maggie and I love to play together. Maybe this is the violin's version of this!

When and how did you truly learn who the Cooper violin is, the soul of the instrument? I feel that a human being plays the soul of an

instrument into it. The wood of the violin retains the soul of the player and, for me, my Vuillaume had some demons in there from past lives!

I did just about everything I could do to tame the beast, but it was also the instrument that allowed me to fully blend my tone with Yo-Yo Ma for the first time. It allowed me to play onstage with him, without a microphone, and keep up with the tone god that is Mr. Ma.

But with the Cooper, I don't have to work as hard or worry as much. I just need enough rosin on my bow to engage the string and I'm usually good to go.

Now that I've played my new violin for a few years, I feel my own soul is in it, exclusively, because no one else has played it for longer than a few minutes.

If given the ability, what would your instrument say to you if the two of you sat down for tea?

"If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times—I am *not* a percussion instrument!" ■



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