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Number 18

# Bassist

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In his Bavarian workshop,  
Horst Grünert treats some fragile  
patients of a different kind.

James Koenig visits the maker  
and restorer

# Voices from the past

**H**ORST GRÜNERT IS A RENAISSANCE MAN IN A MODERN world, making and restoring double basses and cellos, as well as gambas and violones, with techniques from a centuries-old tradition. At times, however, the activities in the Grünert workshop resemble that of a rescue team in an emergency room, or that of a surgeon carefully restoring function to a limb while leaving a minimum of scarring or nerve damage – only in this case the patient might be a few hundred years old, sporting a name like Guarneri, Palotta or Panormo.

Most of the repair work and instrument building takes place in the workshop in Penzberg, Germany, just south of Munich, though Grünert and his assistant, Wolfgang Suldinger, also make 'house calls', which require setting up shop backstage in major concert halls or even in a hotel room.

Arriving at the site, one immediately notices the wood barn with neatly stacked timber for new double basses and cellos. As the wood will need 10 to 15 years drying time before it can be used, the stock is Grünert's investment in the future. Prime samples of maple, ash, pear, poplar, larch, spruce and pine that are almost ready to be used are stacked in the cellar like bottles of fine wine. Grünert taps several pieces of wood to demonstrate the difference in sound.

Grünert was born in 1946 in Dietramszell, Bavaria and learned instrument making from his father Erich, who is from the Vogtland region of the former East Germany, an area known for

its stringed-instrument making tradition. There is a collection of instruments from that region on display at the Grünert workshop as if they were actual portraits of the 'old friends' who made them. Grünert complimented his apprenticeship by studying wood technology in Rosenheim.

Apart from his sons, Thomas and Alexander, who are pursuing their own ways as violin makers, Grünert has trained only Suldinger (the two have worked together for nearly 30 years) and the solo bassist-turned-luthier Thomas Martin, who now has his own workshop in the UK [see *Double Bassist* no.15, Winter 2000].

Grünert also learned a great deal from studying fine old instruments and the work of the great masters, particularly the Italian makers, and he uses instruments such as a 1714 Testore bass (a twin of Bottesini's famed 1716 Testore), a 1845 instrument by Gabriel Lemböck, Vienna, a Gasparo da Salò and a Vincenzo Panormo bass as models. Grünert has a special relationship with Panormo, as he has done restorative work on nearly all of the surviving basses of the 18th-century master.

It takes a lot of faith to place a rare instrument in the hands of a luthier for restoration, and some of the old instruments had to survive harmful restoration work. Grünert and Suldinger have seen it all and shake their heads as they tell tales of basses having been mistreated with automotive filler, nails, screws, huge wooden patches or white glue that fills the pores and dampens the sound.





Before work on an old instrument begins, the already immaculate floor is vacuumed so that not even the smallest chip of the rare bass is unnecessarily lost when the table is removed. The bottom line is to keep as much of the original bass intact as possible, and as these instruments can be very fragile, the work is painstaking and delicate. 'I check Wolfgang [Suldinger]'s work and he checks mine,' says Grünert. 'It's absolutely necessary.'

The oldest instruments Grünert has worked on date from c.1600 and were mostly violones or viola da gambas. The old German bass currently on the 'operating table' and open for inspection was made in 1773 in Füssen, Bavaria. It is a Joseph Anton Stoss double bass in cello form with a one-piece back.

'The upper ribs [of this instrument] are made like those on a cello, which makes the double bass very difficult to play because it is not easy to reach the higher positions,' Grünert explains. 'Therefore a number of smaller cello-form double basses have been enlarged.'

Pictures of a rare Palotta bass from 1828 show a patchwork of old repairs and it looks like roofing tiles were glued to the inside back of the instrument. There are patches everywhere and an extra soundpost patch by the bass-bar. After Grünert has restored the bass, one can see much more of the original instrument, fewer patches, the sides are lined with linen

(the only material that doesn't adversely affect sound) for stability, and there are no more 'tiles'.

Then comes the sound test and the instrument's owner, Michael Rieber, one of the two solo bassists of the Munich State Opera Orchestra, is pleased. The long process of revarnishing follows. Unfortunately in this case, not enough of the original varnish was left to preserve it.

On the subject of varnishes one expects to be taken only as far as a heavily secured vault in the recesses of the wood cellar, but Grünert is quite forthcoming about his varnishing process – in fact just short of handing out a recipe card. Grünert says he finally arrived at the varnish formula that he's satisfied with about 10 years ago through studying the varnishes of the old Italian masters. He smiles modestly: 'It's no big secret, if you know what you're doing.'

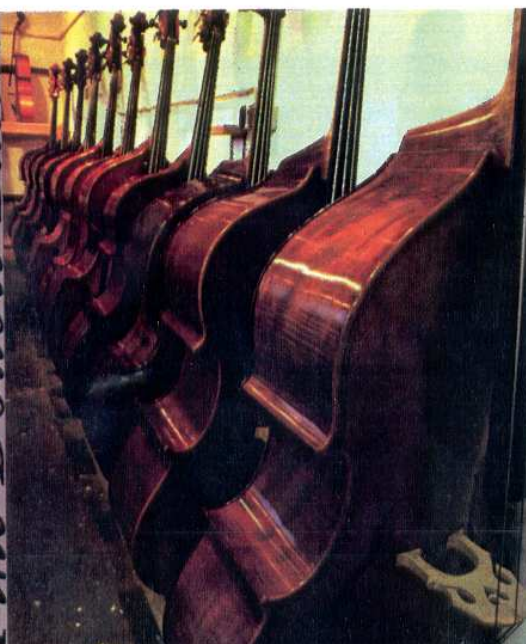
Another trick he learned from the master makers is that of applying waterglass (a type of potassium-silicate, made from dissolved trester, silicate and coal) to the inside of the instrument to open up the pores before the polish – a recipe that can be found in *I segreti di Stradivari* by Simone F. Sacconi.

Grünert seems to have a talent for choosing the right wood for his instruments. One of his best finds was a magnificent pear tree that was growing in Bavaria. 'The old Italian masters loved

**Top:** Horst Grünert attaches the strings to a bass



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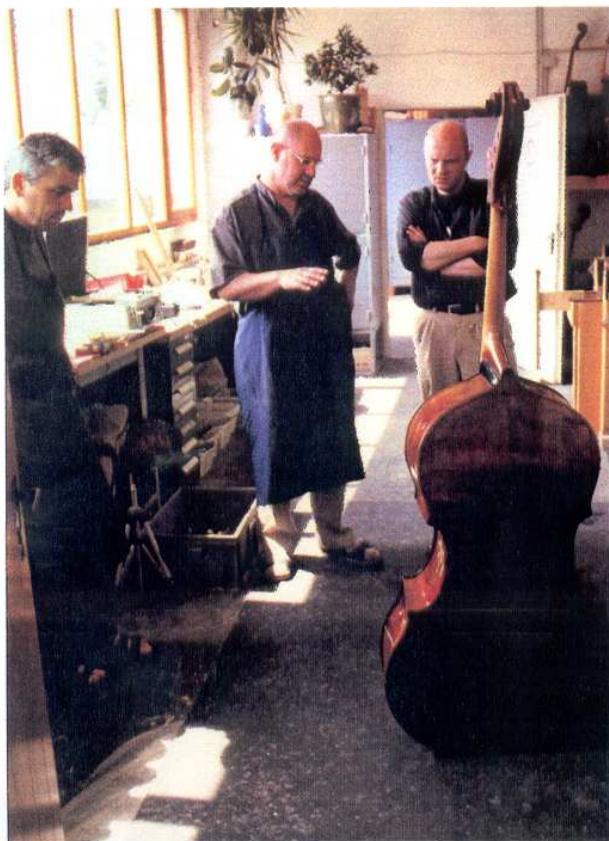
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pear wood,' he explains. 'It is especially hard and yields a strong but mellow tone.' A bass Grünert made from ash, which one violin maker proclaimed to be unsuitable wood, was awarded the first prize in the 1999 German Musical Instrument Award for Double Bass.

At auction, chief competitors for fine woods are veneer makers who can get a lot of mileage out of paper thin layers of veneer for fine furniture. Trees are cut during a brief period from mid-January to early February, and after up to 15 years of drying, patience still doesn't always yield a reward: a neck with an exquisite scroll, carved from a seemingly beautiful piece of aged wood is taken apart to reveal a dark knot that makes it worthless. 'An expensive piece of firewood!' says Suldinger, laughing.

There are times when the life of a luthier affords opportunity for sleuthing into the realms of criminology. One time, Grünert discovered that two fine old instruments were actually one bass that had been reworked into two, so that these could be sold as two rare instruments instead of just one.

'When we were restoring a Testore we found out that the back, three sides and the neck had been replaced,' Grünert says. 'Half a year later another Testore came into the workshop and had the original back, three sides and the neck which were missing from the first one. One instrument had been made into two "old" instruments!'

By seeing many old instruments pass through his shop, Grünert has accumulated extensive experience regarding the work of the old masters, and he is now frequently consulted to authenticate basses attributed to one or the other master makers.

A list of double bass players who either play Grünert instruments or basses that were in Grünert's care reads like a *Who's Who* of today's top players. Classical as well as jazz soloists depend on the Bavarian master, and his work is represented in nearly every major orchestra in the world. Thomas Jauch and Michael Rieber, the two solo bassists of the Munich State Opera Orchestra, are on the 'Grünert list', as are James Krummenacher

Above: Suldinger works on an instrument's neck  
Top left: Michael Rieber (r) checks the new varnish on his Palotta  
Top right: Grünert and Suldinger glue a bass back together

of the Pittsburgh Symphony, co-principal Thomas Lederer and Dwight Shambley of the Dallas Symphony, and solo bassist Josef Niederhammer. Jazz and classical soloist and pedagogue Wayne Darling plays a pear-wood Grünert.

Double bass soloist and composer Árni Egilsson recalls: 'In 1988 at a double bass convention, solo bassist François Rabbath said to me, "You have to meet this man [Grünert]. He is simply the best!"' Egilsson now has his own instrument by the Bavarian maker and recorded a recent jazz album [*The Foreign Legion*, JAP0078-2] on a pear-wood Grünert.

'Grünert is a real expert who can be trusted in every detail, no matter which instrument,' says Herbert Mayr, solo bassist with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. 'My Lemböck-copy by Grünert is easily playable with just the kind of sound I like.'

One of the main secrets of his success is that Grünert gets to know each individual player's needs and preferences, and makes adjustments accordingly. 'He doesn't make any difference between a student or a renowned player,' Mayr says. 'Everybody gets the same kind of respect as a customer, which makes him all the more trustworthy.'

Through his work, Grünert spans hundreds of years, and the results of his endeavours could be summed up with an inscription that was once made by an Austrian double bassist inside an old, well-weathered instrument: 'When I still lived in the woods, I was silent. Now that I am dead, I sing!' **DB**

Photographs courtesy of Horst Grünert