



Brescian-style purfling, part 2: decorative patterns on the back

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BRESCIAN INSTRUMENTS are often decorated with elaborate purfling designs on the back, probably a feature carried over from the ornate viols that would still have been in use when these instruments were made. Making the purfling with three separate strips – ebony for the black and boxwood for the white – enables the modern maker to reproduce these patterns in the spirit of the original. There may be mismatched joints and a lack of symmetry, but the lines always flow, giving a result that is full of vigour and freshness. This article should be read in conjunction with my earlier article (June 2010), which describes the procedure for preparing the purfling strips and making the mitre joints.

► A viola by Helen Michetschläger with fleur-de-lis purfling pattern



[1] I base the designs I use for the patterns on photographs and rubbings from original instruments. For this viola I have chosen a simple fleur-de-lis design at the top and bottom of the back. I prepare my drawing on tracing paper, folded in the middle to give a centre line. When I'm happy with one side of the drawing, I trace through on the other side to give a mirror image.

The back is at the stage where the arching is planed but not yet scraped, and the outer line of purfling has been fitted.

I have traced the line of the second channel of purfling on the back, making sure that I leave only a faint mark from the purfling tool at the top and bottom of the instrument – this design breaks away from the line of purfling, so I need to avoid deep cuts that will be visible on the finished instrument. Then I line up the tracing paper pattern with the marked channel and the centre line of the back.



[2] I mark out the pattern through the tracing-paper template on to the back, using a needle set in a wooden handle. I prick the outer line of the design only, making sure that I have pinpricks at all the points and intersections of the design.



[3] I now join the dots with a knife so that the design is clearly marked out, but not yet cut to final depth.



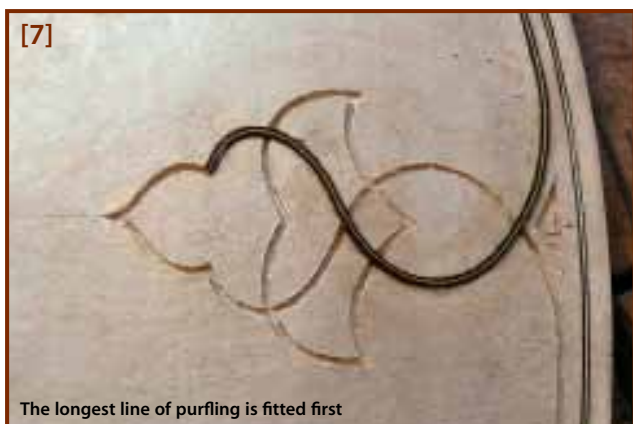
[4] I mark out the inner line of the purfling channel using dividers set to the width of the finished purfling. I put one leg of the dividers in the line I've already cut, and then scratch the second line with the point of the dividers. When this is done, I go over the scratched line with a knife to make sure that it is clear.



[5] With my usual purfling knife, I deepen the lines that I've marked. For this purfling, the channel need only be about 1mm deep – it's important to take into consideration that the final thickness of the back at the inner edge of the pattern will only be around 2.5mm. As there is some very short grain in the corners of the design, I take special care when cutting, turning the wood so that I am always working away from these vulnerable areas.



[6] By this stage I've cleaned the channel with a purfling pick, taking particular care not to chip off the short-grain corners. Before I start fitting the purfling, I size the wood with weak glue so that the channel does not swell again when I come to glue in the purfling. Once the size is dry, I check over the design, widening any narrow places and tidying any areas where the curve is not clean. ▶



[7]

The longest line of purfling is fitted first

[7] It makes sense to fit the longest line of purfling first – that way you get the most flowing curves, and have fewer short pieces to fit.

I start inlaying the purfling from the point on the left-hand side of the picture. The first curve is so tight that even the springy ebony could split before it bends dry to the shape, so I don't risk testing it before I put glue in the channel. The hot glue is usually enough to soften the veneers sufficiently for them to bend into place, but to make doubly sure, I dip the ends of the strips into hot water first. Holding the three strips together carefully with tweezers, I ease the wood gently into the glue-filled channel, making sure that I'm bending just a little at a time, and keeping the wood well supported. It will then bend easily to fit the channel.

You can see from the picture that at this stage, there is no attempt at a mitre on the corner – the three strips are glued in with the ends level, butting against the side of the purfling channel. This helps the strips to go in as tightly as possible, maintaining the curve into the corner. I'll cut the mitre on this strip of purfling once I'm ready to join it to the corresponding strip.



[8]

Fitting the leaf part of the design

[8] Now that this first long line is fitted, I can fit the purfling on the leaf part of the design. I need to bear in mind the way the purfling strips appear to weave under and over at the intersections, and plan the joints accordingly. I cut through the strip I've already fitted to make the intersections with the leaf run over it. I work as above, fitting the first line of purfling blunt into the corner, and then trimming the mitre in situ. To complete the mitre, I cut and check the joint dry on the second line before it is glued into place.



[9]

The final strip of the leaf design is put in place

[9] This picture shows the final strip of the leaf going into place. I mitre the first end of the strip dry, and then glue the purfling in as far as it will go – about two-thirds of the length of the strip. Lining it up into the corner, I cut the strip carefully to length along the line of the mitre that I have already cut into the strip it will join, and then glue it into place.

[10] With the patterns finished, I still have to fit the second row of purfling around the edge. When this is done and the glue has dried, I plane and scrape the wood to finalise the arching. It's lovely to see the architecture of the stylised purfling design against the irregular figure of the wood. ■



[10]

Once the glue dries, the wood can be planed and scraped

Download the first part of Helen Michetschläger's article on purfling from *The Strad* archive at www.thestrad.com



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