

FAITH



or it was claimed that the competing French wines must have suffered in their journey across the ocean.

Then in 1976 a wine merchant organised a tasting in Paris as a marketing exercise to promote US wines. This time the French had the home-ground advantage and it was the Americans who had to send their wines overseas. Nine French wine experts acted as judges in a blind tasting. The first shock came when the best white was found to be Californian (in fact the Americans took three of the top four places). But a greater humiliation was to follow: the premier red was also from

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California's Napa Valley; it outscored the likes of Château Mouton-Rothschild, Château Haut-Brion, Château Montrose and Château Léoville-Las Cases. The results stunned the wine community.

Although similar blind listening tests of violins and cellos are carried out with some regularity, their progress invariably follows a well-trodden and predictable course. The trial compares new against old, ideally including some famous and highly priced classical instruments (the inclusion of a Strad will usually mean mainstream media coverage). The results show that new instruments stand up very well and often outscore their older, more expensive counterparts. The test is then discredited and dismissed as meaningless by the experts.

A typical example is the recent trial in Sweden, which was reported and discussed in *The Strad* (News, June 2006; Soundpost, July 2006). In this case, violins made by three modern Swedish makers

The ultimate pleasure apparently comes with sipping a French wine while listening to the silky tones of an Italian violin

were compared to a Stradivari, a Gagliano and a Guadagnini. All six instruments were played by two professional players and the sound judged and scored by an audience mostly comprising members of the European String Teachers Association. A modern violin by Peter Westerlund obtained the highest score.

A common criticism of such tests is that they are unscientific and rely on flawed methodology — most notably, they are rarely conducted in the widely preferred double-blind format. Double-blind testing means that neither the subjects (the panel of judges) nor the person carrying out

the experiment (in this case the player) knows the identity of the violins that are being evaluated. The Swedish trial was only single-blind — the performers knew what they were playing and may have introduced some sort of unconscious bias.

One trial that was double-blind was organised by Robert Cauer at the Fourth American Cello Congress in 1990. This time an audience of about 140 musicians judged the sound of 12 cellos, six new and six old (a Gagliano, two Gofrillers, a Montagnana, a Stradivari and a Tecchler). The player was blindfolded and a linen screen used to hide the cellos from the audience. Instruments were only identified as new or old and the top-scoring cello was found to be old with the second, third, fourth and fifth places going to new cellos. As a group, the modern cellos earned higher scores than the older ones.

But there is another objection that can be raised about both of these tests: the quality of the judging panel. Organisers of wine shows don't select their judges from the front bar of the local pub, simply because they look like they might enjoy a drink. Similarly, asking the average music lover or even player to take part in a complex listening test could be seen as equally meaningless. To quote pianist

James Boyk, any such test might just be a case of 'the double-blind leading the double-deaf'.

And there can be no doubt that judging sound is a very difficult and complex task. According to violin maker Joseph Curtin: 'The simple truth is that it's difficult to evaluate violin sound even in the best of circumstances. I think this is in large part because we are not trained at it. Some people do this >

