

BLIND



What's in a label? Would a Strad sound as sweet by any other name? Blind tastings, popular in the wine world, offer a method of objective evaluation, but the string world doesn't believe in such tests. ALAN COGGINS wonders why

Reputations can be made and challenged at wine-tasting events, but blind listening tests of violins have not undermined the status of great Italian instruments

The appreciation of fine violins is often likened to that of great wines. Both have the ability to stimulate and please our senses.

Experts, connoisseurs and enthusiasts enjoy sampling and discussing their respective merits — a great Bordeaux vintage is treated with as much reverence as a golden-period Stradivari. The common wisdom is that both wines and violins improve with age. As John Townsend Trowbridge wrote:

With years a richer life begins,
The spirit mellows:
Ripe age gives tone to violins,
Wine, and good fellows.

There is even a national superiority associated with each product, so that the ultimate pleasure apparently comes with sipping a French wine while listening to the silky tones of an Italian violin.

However, there is one area where the comparison between violins and wines breaks down. Centuries ago, the wine industry realised that perception and objectivity could easily be influenced by expectation. The slightest glimpse of a label, even a cork or capsule, would be enough to bias judgement unconsciously. In order to compare and rank their products impartially,

wine makers developed a strict methodology based on the need for complete anonymity: blind tastings. The violin world has yet to embrace this concept fully.

Of course, the big danger with blind trials is that they can occasionally produce embarrassing results. One well-known example occurred at the 1976 Paris Wine Tasting. In the preceding years, California had begun producing some impressive wines that were achieving favourable scores in local wine tastings, although the results were widely discredited. Suggestions of biased judges were made,