Luthiers loosen up at the Oberlin Violin Making Workshop

BY PATRICK SULLIVAN

Secrets, lies, and high-stakes competition: If popular mythology is even half right, the history of violin making has a lot in common with a James Bond movie. One thinks of luthiers jealously guarding their occult varnish formulas, of legendary German maker Jacob Stainer collecting his own wood in the mountains because he trusted no one else to do it right, of Stradivari becoming the toast of Italy while Giuseppe Guarneri labored in obscurity just down the street, of the terrible blow suffered by the craft in Brescia when Giovanni Paolo Maggini died during the plague of 1632 before he found the time or inclination to train a successor.

In short, violin makers don't sound like the sort of people who would suddenly quit their lonely studios to assemble in the back of an art museum in Oberlin, Ohio, and spill the most intimate secrets of their craft to a room full of distinguished competitors.

But that's exactly what happens every summer at the Oberlin Violin Making Workshop. "We have leading makers from all over the world coming together and sharing insights," explains Christopher Germain, 45, the workshop's founder and director. "Everyone shares, and everyone learns. It's the best of the best working together."
Indeed, this five-year-old workshop, which is cosponsored by Oberlin College and the Violin Society of America (VSA), has attracted some of the biggest names in contemporary violin making. Luthiers from nine countries have attended, including John Dilworth of England and Frank Ravatin of France, as well as such top American makers as Gregg Alf, Thomas Croen, Joseph Grubaugh, and Samuel Zygmuntowicz. The makers workshop is modeled after the long-running Oberlin Stringed Instrument Restoration Workshop directed by Vahakn Nigogosian.

At the violin-making workshop, internationally recognized talents mingle with less-well-known luthiers for two weeks of work and discussion in the sculpture studio at the Allen Art Museum at Oberlin College. As student bagpipers from the Ohio Scottish Arts School wail away outside—a bagpiping summer camp coincides with the lutherie workshop—inside the museum words and woodchips fly as a couple dozen luthiers huddle for demonstrations and lectures about everything from innovations in tool making and varnish to the latest advances in acoustics testing and computer-aided design.

CAPTIVE AUDIENCE: Frank Ravatin demonstrates the “trois brin” method of purfling inlay.

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—Chris Germain

That's not to say that every member of the violin-making community has embraced this Oberlin openness. Germain recalls meeting skepticism in the first year from a few luthiers reluctant to share their secrets.

But a more common reaction was excitement, he says. That enthusiasm reflects what Germain and other makers describe as a growing openness in the craft. "For centuries, the violin world has operated under a shroud of secrecy where makers worked in isolation and didn't share their ideas," Germain says. "I think many have now realized that by open communication you don't lose anything, but everyone gains quite a lot."

Among those standing to gain the most are musicians, who are coming to understand that great violins do not always bear the talismanic names of old Cremona. "[Players] are finding that modern instruments are often quite wonderful," Germain says. "I feel like our whole craft is really at a high-water mark. I don't want to claim responsibility for that, but I think in our little world at Oberlin we've certainly contributed."

Dilworth agrees. He thinks Oberlin is part of a process of demythologizing, of creating a greater openness in the craft that will allow it to better serve musicians. "[Oberlin] is a research lab in some ways: a hothouse of ideas, and these ideas will inevitably travel through the violin-making world," he notes. "You can't make a violin without input from the players, and if I might get a bit pompous, what's happening at places like Oberlin... is in no small way affecting the development of the violin in the future."
sharpening scrapes using a modified sanding bit, she saw luthiers show how to lighten a cello form without compromising its stability, and she displayed her own mobile acoustics lab. “You could go around and see how different people from all around the world solve similar problems,” she says. “It’s very intense because you’re working so many hours. You’re living and breathing violin making.”

Other accomplished makers agree that their craft has benefited from Oberlin. Jonathan Cooper, whose clients include fiddlers Darol Anger and Michael Doucet, has attended three times, using his Suburban to tow a trailer full of materials from his workshop in rural Maine down to Ohio. “[The workshop] really moved my making ahead in a big way,” he says. “I noticed a tremendous difference in the way my instruments sounded and looked. It was a quantum leap for me.”

Extravagant praise occasionally seems to make Germain a little nervous. He points out that violin making is a matter of subtle refinements rather than dramatic advances.

CUSTOM TOOLS: Benjamin Ruth uses a modified construction system.

“It’s not like we’re discovering a cure for cancer,” he says with a laugh. “But in our own way we’ve altered the attitudes toward change and growth in the field of violin making. Slowly we’re changing some minds, and contributing to the advancement and raising the bar for the quality of violin makers.

“Just through example we’re making a difference.”

Participants in the Oberlin Violin Making Workshop are selected on the basis of their experience in the trade and their ability to demonstrate or teach at the workshop. The cost for the two-week program is $1,000, plus room and board. The 2003 workshop is filled and has a waiting list. For details, contact Anna Hoffmann at the Office of Outreach Programs at Oberlin’s Conservatory of Music. Call (440) 775-8044.