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Stringed Instruments *The Lure of the Modern*

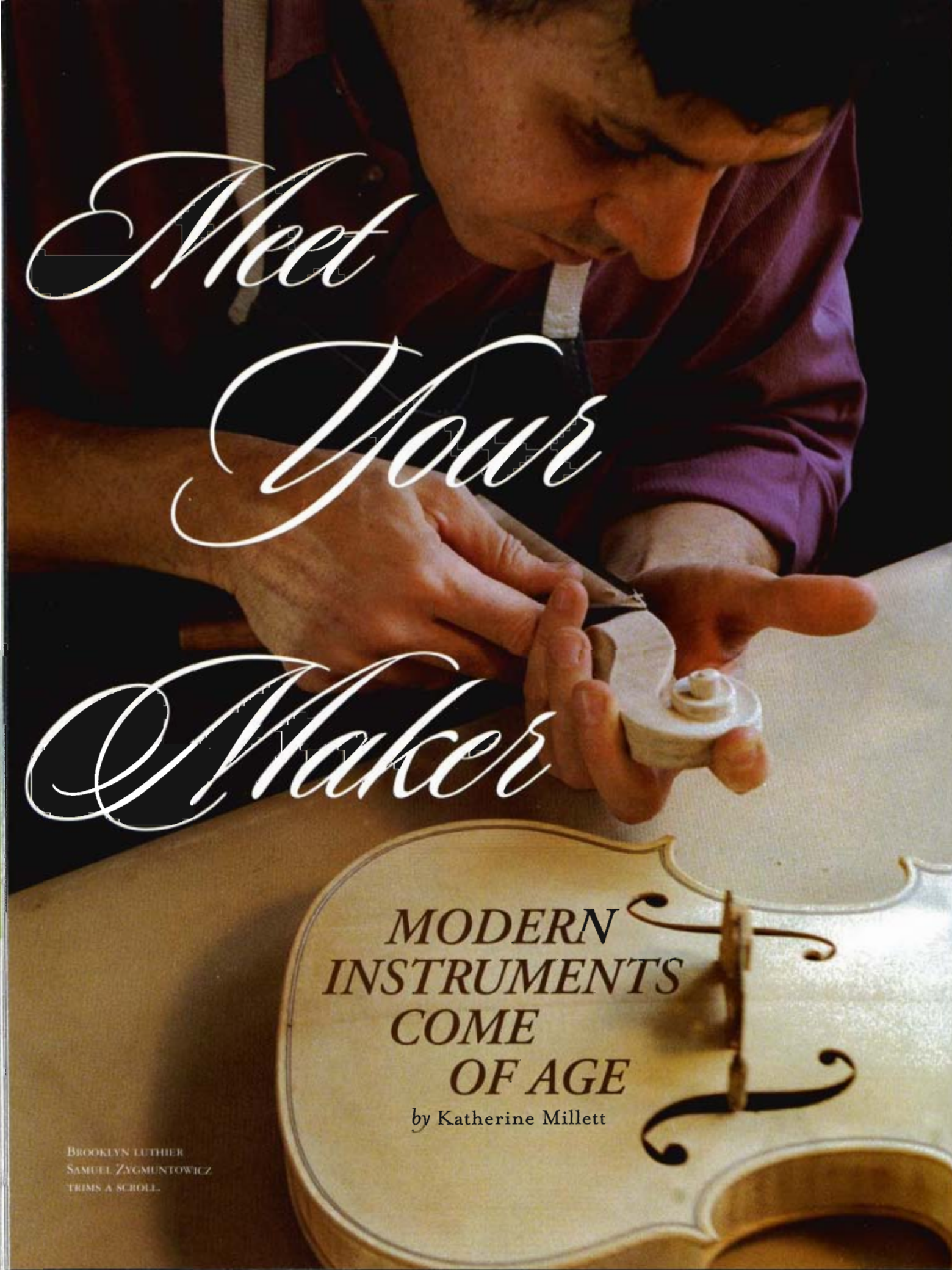
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*Meet
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Maker*

**MODERN
INSTRUMENTS
COME
OF AGE**

by Katherine Millett

BROOKLYN LUTHIER
SAMUEL ZYGMUNTOWICZ
TRIMS A SCROLL.

Price isn't the only attraction. Many of today's performers choose modern violins, violas and cellos simply because of their quality. *Chamber Music* takes a look at the modern-instrument phenomenon.



KIM KASHKASHIAN WITH
HER GREINER VIOLA

To the persistent idea that a new violin, viola, or cello cannot sound as good, look as beautiful, or behave as reliably as an old one, violist Kim Kashkashian offers a contrary view. Maybe, she suggests, one needs to play an old instrument in order to prepare for the greater range of a new one. These days, Kashkashian plays exclusively the viola Stefan-Peter Greiner made for her in 1995, when she was living in Germany. Since last summer, she has left her 1617 Amati in the closet, taking the Greiner to both the concert hall and the recording studio.

"I switched back and forth for years," she says, "but the tipping point for me was playing the Berio concerto. The Amati always sounded like the Amati, but the Greiner was willing to sound like other things—a bull or a flute or a singer in the backwoods. The Greiner has more focus, and I found I could use it to make the special sounds of Berio with conviction. The Amati sounded too beautiful all the time."

Her years with the Amati taught her to refine the subtle shades of color an old instrument produces so generously, but now that she has those sounds in

mind, she says she can find them in her new instrument. She raises the intriguing possibility that old Italian instruments may not remain the ultimate prizes for soloists, as new instruments keep getting better.

An international renaissance in stringed-instrument making began in the 1970s, as the growing number of excellent players outstripped the supply of fine, old instruments. Prices for classic instruments rose precipitously, beyond the reach of almost

anyone who makes music for a living, raising the tickets on lesser old instruments as well. Meanwhile, the 1960s had spawned a renewed interest in arts and crafts.

Schools for stringed instrument making opened across the country. Peter Prier, a graduate of the Mittenwald violin-making school in Germany, started the first of them with three students because, he says, "I wanted to upgrade the violin world in the United States." Prier established the Violin Making School of America in Salt Lake City in 1972. Next came the Chicago School of Violin Making in Chicago in 1975, followed by the North Bennet Street School of Violin Making in Boston in 1984. New makers are solving problems of projection to help players fill large halls and meet the varied timbral demands of contemporary music. While some makers now dedicate themselves to copying old instruments, others develop new designs based on acoustical experiments. The classic box modeled by Stradivari or Guarneri del Gesu remains the Platonic ideal, but modern luthiers are learning new ways to influence sound with setup. As techniques improve, affordable instruments are gaining respect.

“Makers of modern instruments solve problems of projection, helping performers to fill large halls with sound and to meet the varied timbral demands of contemporary music.”

BUYING NEW

A musician suddenly elevated to a new job may find the search for a contemporary instrument urgent and daunting. At the threshold, most dealers who sell fine antiques won't even discuss new makers, according to Eugenia Choi, a violinist who researched the sales history of Stradivari violins for her 2007 doctoral dissertation at The Juilliard School.

“Knowledgeable and respectable violin specialists are so scarce that only a few people control the entire industry,” she wrote. “Therefore, any mention of a maker's name by someone like Charles Beare would immediately influence the market and pricing. Dealers have a ‘house rule’ not to mention any names.”

Not surprisingly, dealers who specialize in old instruments, and have nothing to gain from sales of new ones, are reluctant to help the market for new instruments develop. Modern makers aren't household names. Samuel Zygmuntowicz (zig-mun-TOH-vich) of Brooklyn, New York, might be, if he had an easier name, but instrument makers tend to be solitary, dedicated individuals who advertise little.

A good starting point for finding a luthier is the online directory of the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers, (www.afvbm.com) or, for European makers, the Entente Internationale des Luthiers et Archetiers, (www.eila.org). Violinist.com maintains a forum to discuss instruments and makers, and most younger luthiers have websites.

Electronic means offer only an introduction, however. Finding the right instru-

ment takes time and research—or pure luck. Full-time makers turn out seven to ten instruments a year, fewer if some are cellos. Most are spoken for before they are finished, made for players on a waiting list. Some shops sell new instruments made by luthiers they employ for repair and restoration work. Others sell instruments by outside makers, on consignment. Because shops typically buy wholesale at 50 percent or take commissions of 25 percent for selling consigned instruments, most makers prefer to work directly with players.

Marilyn Wallin adopts an unusual business pattern. She makes all of her instruments in her home workshop but sells them through shops in Boston and Baltimore. A former teacher at the North Bennet Street School in Boston and now based in Concord, she prefers to spend all of her working time making instruments, even if it means earning less money.

“My colleagues spend two to three days a month adjusting instruments and doing insurance appraisals,” she says, “and I don't want to do that. I prefer to work with an agent.”

But Wallin is atypical. Most makers, unless they have exclusive arrangements with dealers, work directly with players.

So why not start with the local luthier? When Joshua Gindele, cellist of the Miró Quartet, decided to commission a new instrument, he went to Phillip Injeian, a Pittsburgh-based craftsman who had been adjusting Gindele's old French cello for years. Gindele had tried out dozens of instruments by better-known makers, but he trusted Injeian's skill and taste; and over time, the two have developed a common understanding of sound.

“I proposed having Phillip build me a new cello modeled on this beautiful Tononi I knew in Canada,” Gindele says. “He liked the idea, but he convinced me to move up the food chain and use a Montagnana model instead. I absolutely struck gold. I love the cello. It's gigantic but easy to play, free of wolfs. He made the perfect cello for me, and my colleagues still say how lucky I am.”



IRISH FIDDLER LIZ CARROLL
BOUGHT HER INSTRUMENT
FROM CANADA'S
RAYMOND SHRYER.

THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

The search often begins with a teacher or a stand partner. Teachers, being accustomed to students on tight budgets and intimately familiar with each student's style and level of playing, can steer their students well. Some receive a commission from the maker or the dealer. The ethics of this practice have been debated, with some saying teachers should not profit from their students in this way, and others saying expertise and effort should be rewarded. The key is disclosure. Teachers should be willing to reveal their commission arrangements.

If the sound of an instrument appeals during a rehearsal or at a concert, find out who made it.

"My instruments seem to blossom in certain places," says Roger Hargrave, an English maker living in Bremen, Germany. "The first violist buys one, and then everyone in the section wants one." Hargrave says he has never advertised, and he has no website or email address. Word of mouth is his only publicity.

Liz Carroll of Chicago, a leading Irish fiddler and composer of tunes, found her new instrument through the fiddle grapevine. While touring in Canada, where Pierre Schryer is a popular player in the French-Canadian style, she dropped by an instrument-maker's convention. There she met Raymond Schryer, Pierre's brother.

Carroll was looking for a new fiddle. Her French violin worked fine in concerts, where she plays with amplification, but she wanted more power in sessions—the informal tune-swaps that Irish musicians relish.

"I couldn't be heard," she says. "I'd play some quirky notes for someone across the room, and then I'd look up to see the old gleam in the eye, but I wouldn't see it. They weren't hearing me, was the thing."

Schryer had only violas and cellos at the show, so Carroll didn't try anything. But a





MARILYN WALLIN
VARNISHES ONE
OF HER VIOLAS

COMPETITION WINNERS

Competitions, both national and international, bring recognition to emerging makers. (Major competitions include the Violin Society of America, or VSA, Competition; Cremona's "Antonio Stradivari" Competition; the International Violin and Bow Making Competition in Mittenwald, Germany; the Paris International Violin Making Competition; the Louis Spohr International Violin Making Competition in Kassel, Germany; and the Strad International Cello and Bow Making Competition in Manchester, England.)

Eric Chapman, who started the VSA competition in 1975, says, "My motivation was that I saw American makers getting short shrift. To get them a fair shake in the international-prejudice game, I invited the Europeans to come over here and prove they were better. And they couldn't do it!"

The prejudices may work both ways, or perhaps the 200-plus luthiers of Cremona isolate themselves, but they tend to be underrepresented at events in the U.S. Roman Barnas, who teaches at the North Bennet Street School says, "There are a lot of good guys in Cremona, but they have a different style. They sell a lot to Japan and other countries, but not so much in the States."

Perusing lists of past competition winners may lead to promising makers—but with two caveats. The first caveat is that recent winners are likely to be talented, but relatively inexperienced. Established makers agree that it takes about twenty years to master the craft. Even the most skilled graduates of violin-making schools typically spend several years in shops doing repair and restoration work before offering their own instruments for sale. Competitions

few months later, he sent her a violin on approval.

"I tried it in the kitchen," she recalls about applying the classic Irish sound test, "and it sounded good. I think I'd just seen *The Red Violin*, and it was very red! It needed some setup, so I took it to [venerable Chicago luthier] Carl Becker, and he really liked it. I bought it. For what I can afford, I love it. It's still not as loud as what I'm finding in sessions, but compared to the French fiddle, there's a little more oomph."

For a maker, word of mouth might begin on a boat. It did for Zygmuntowicz, currently the highest-price contemporary maker of stringed instruments. He

bought a ticket for a concert at New York City's Bargemusic in 1984, when he was a 28-year-old shop worker for René Morel and Jacques Français. Floating in New York harbor that night, he heard a group that included Theodore Arm, Ani Kavafian, and Fred Sherry. He chatted with the players afterward, and they asked him to bring one of his violins to their next Barge appearance. Zygmuntowicz did, and made his first private sale to Arm, the group's violinist.

"After five years in the shop, where I had zero contact with musicians," says Zygmuntowicz, "I fell into the right place. Once I got one instrument into that world, it just spread."

OLD INSTRUMENTS: IS THE PRICE RIGHT?

There may still be ways to acquire a great Italian stringed instrument—a Stradivari, del Gesu, Amati, or Goffriller—short of qualifying for a multimillion-dollar loan. Young players may borrow from wealthy individuals, or from investment groups that have grown weary of owning racehorses. But after taking into account insurance and maintenance costs, and the uncertain length of a loan—not to mention command performances of various kinds—the total burden may exceed what a player is willing to bear.

The high valuation of old instruments is, moreover, a moving target. To know what an instrument is worth, one needs to know, at least, what it *is*. Few people have examined enough fine antiques—and fakes—to issue opinions that can credibly support million-dollar sales. A true expert must be able to distinguish the real from the fraudulent and also to identify vital organs that make up “Frankenstein” violins, their parts transplanted from works of Stradivari or Montagnana into copies.

The late Robert Bein, of the Chicago firm Bein & Fushi, was reportedly able to identify old instruments at sight, by maker and, often, by year. The loss of his expertise has been keenly felt since his death in 2007. Jacques Français, whose letters of authenticity continue to support sales, died in 2004. Instruments that change hands in “high-end sales” (loosely defined as more than a million dollars) may be identified by letters of provenance issued by W.E. Hill and Sons or Rembert Wurlitzer dating back to the first half of the 20th century. Among living experts, Charles Beare of London is generally acknowledged to be the trade’s leading authority.

The New Jersey Symphony wrestled for four years with the appraised value of Herbert Axelrod’s “Golden Age Collection.” According to reports published in the *Newark Star-Ledger* and *The New York Times*, from 2003, when Axelrod offered his Stradivari, del Gesu, and other fine instruments to the orchestra, until the orchestra bought them for \$17 million and then sold them in 2007 to investors led by twin brothers Brook and Seth Taube for \$20 million, appraisers pegged the collection’s value as high as \$49 million and as low as \$15.3 million.

Still, old instruments in general seem like solid investments. Violinist Eugenia Choi, who studied the pricing history of Stradivarius violins for her 2007 doctoral dissertation, looked at 314 private sales of these classic instruments between 1955 and 2005. She found that, based on how much their value increased between sales, they returned an average of 8.2 percent annually, after deducting brokerage commissions, insurance, and maintenance fees. This is higher than the returns she cites for 30-year U.S. treasury bonds (6.7 percent) and gold (5.2 percent), but considerably lower than for stocks listed in the Standard and Poor 500 Index (11.9 percent) during the same time period.

As for the future of the old-instrument market, Choi predicts a “slow but steady upward trend. There are fewer and fewer old instruments in perfect condition,” she says. Stradivari made about 1,200 violins, of which about 600 remain. “Things happen,” she says, “like the fellow in London who fell on his Strad in February.”

implicitly impose an age and experience limit by excluding makers who have already won a certain number of awards.

The second caveat is that competitions sometimes emphasize workmanship over sound. “We’ve picked makers with beautiful workmanship who don’t go anywhere because the instruments don’t sound good,” says Gregg Alf, a maker in Ann Arbor, Michigan, who has judged many competitions. The VSA addresses this concern by judging all instruments for both tone and workmanship and by awarding gold medals only to instruments that win high honors in both categories.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to judge tone objectively. “Talking about sound is like talking about wine,” says Joseph Grubaugh, of Petaluma, California, who makes instruments in collaboration with his wife, Sigrun Seifert. “Is a good sound dark or bright? Sweet and salty? Nasal or open?”

One of the best opportunities for trying instruments is Players Meet Makers, part of the biennial convention of the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers, scheduled this year on April 20 in Seattle. Players have four hours to try out dozens of new instruments and talk to their makers. Almost all instruments and bows are for sale, and makers also take orders.

To try modern instruments from Cremona without traveling to Italy, players may visit one of the U.S. dealers who host an annual traveling show. It’s organized by Dominik Musafia, brother of Dimitri Musafia, the maker of fine violin and viola cases. Launched in 1998, the exhibit imports about one hundred instruments from Cremona, shows thirty to forty of them in each of several cities, and sells about half on each tour, according to Musafia.

“Violin-maker Stefan-Peter Greiner has a five-year waiting list and can fulfill only one-quarter of the orders he receives. He asks

prospective clients to describe their artistic qualifications and state why a new instrument is important for their development.”

SETUP

Sound depends not only on the box, but also on its setup. There is an art and science to choosing, shaping, and positioning the added or moving parts of an instrument—bass bar, sound post, bridge, tail piece, and strings—to produce optimal sound.

“Setup is essential, and we can’t teach that in school,” says Rebecca Elliott of the Chicago School of Violin Making. “Learning all the ins and outs of sound adjustment can take a lifetime. You have to cut multiple bridges for one instrument to learn how to cut a great bridge. The best violin makers are not always the best at setup. Some people have an extra-sensory ability to make things sound good. They can’t always explain how they do it. The best adjusters factor in the technique of the player—how they use their bow.”

At the Oberlin Workshops for violin makers, started in 1985 by the VSA, makers have traditionally spent a week together discussing problems and solutions with respect to either violin or bow making. As interest in setup and acoustical research has grown, sessions have been

added to address each of those lines of inquiry. The event is noted for its openness and collegiality but, to preserve the workshop’s non-commercial character, players are not invited to try out instruments.

“Oberlin is one of the best things that’s ever happened to violin making,” says William Scott, a maker in Minneapolis, Minnesota. “Never before have competitors sat down and exposed their way of working. It used to be a secret craft.”

COLLABORATING

After choosing a maker, the player is ready to address the challenges of collaborating.

Zygmuntowicz says, “I have a lot of colleagues who don’t really like musicians. They think they’re fickle and temperamental. But I’ve learned a lot from my clients. I’ve rebuilt several instruments over

time, and I’ve made a succession of instruments for the same players. The unique thing about buying a modern instrument is working with the maker, influencing what’s being made for you and shaping it after it’s made.”

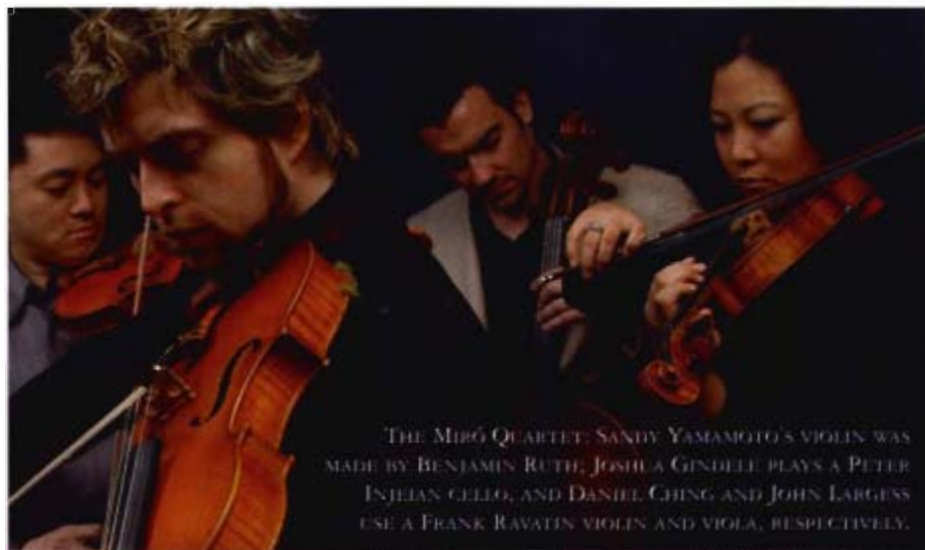
Charles Rufino, a New York City maker, says his attitude toward collaboration has changed. “Musicians used to annoy me a lot,” he admits. “I was okay with them saying a seam’s open, or the D-string doesn’t speak, but I got fed up when they complained about something only they could hear. I think it was mostly nerves, because it usually turned out they had a concert the next week. Then I realized it wasn’t my job to make judgments like that. It was my job to support the musician. I’m not a licensed shrink, but sometimes it feels that way.”

WAITING TIME

First comes the dilemma of waiting. Some makers compile a waiting list and work through it systematically. Others make what they want and try to match their new creations, based on previous conversations, to players who seem compatible. The latter group includes Gregg Alf.

“I can make whatever I want, and I’ve raised my prices high enough so I don’t have a waiting list,” he explains. “I assess players proactively. If what they need is what I want to make, while I’m flying at full wingspan, I’ll do it. Otherwise, I’ll make it easy to go to someone else.”

Stefan-Peter Greiner, who works in Bonn and is far better known in Europe than in



THE MIRÓ QUARTET: SANDY YAMAMOTO'S VIOLIN WAS MADE BY BENJAMIN RUTHE, JOSHUA GINDELL PLAYS A PETER INJHAN GILLO, AND DANIEL CHENG AND JOHN LARGESS USE A FRANK RAVATIN VIOLIN AND VIOLA, RESPECTIVELY.



STEFAN-PETER GREINER, OF BONN: AMONG THOSE WHO PERFORM ON HIS INSTRUMENTS ARE CHRISTIAN TETZLAFF AND KIM KASHKASHIAN.

the United States, applies a merit test. He asks prospective clients to describe their artistic qualifications and state why a new instrument is important for their development. Admitting that he relies heavily on personal impressions, he then decides whether to add an applicant to his five-year waiting list. According to his website, he can fulfill only one-quarter of the requests he receives.

In a similar vein, Roger Hargrave says he “weeds out” amateurs, because they don’t need new instruments as much as professionals do. Frank Ravatin, a French maker, moves players up the list if they have an urgent need, such as pressure to return an instrument that has been on loan.

APPEARANCE

Shiny, new varnish can be a turn-off, as it was for violist John Dexter of the Manhattan String Quartet when he bought an instrument in early 1974 from Marten Cornelissen, of Northampton, Massachusetts.

“It was *bright* orange, embarrassingly so,” says Dexter, “but he told me that over time the color would change.” Dexter kept the instrument only a year. “I had occasion to see the instrument ten years later,” he says now, “and the viola had, indeed, turned a lovely brownish color.”

Cornelissen, 71, disdains antiquing. “It’s like a baby with wrinkles,” he says.

But Czech maker Jan Spidlen, 41, says, “For me an unchangeable glossy finish looks rather like modern furniture—very boring.” Spidlen varies his varnish, but some makers offer full-blown “antiquing,” replicating the scars, dirt smudges, and patchy varnish characteristic of old instruments. Antiquing is a specialty in itself and often carries an extra charge.

When Charles Wetherbee, concertmaster of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra and first violinist of the Carpe Diem String Quartet, commissioned his violin from Kurt Widenhouse, a North Carolina maker, he specifically asked

Widenhouse to apply an antique finish.

“You don’t want the music director looking down and seeing a new instrument in your hands,” Wetherbee explains. “No orchestra can make anyone buy an old instrument, but the music director can say he doesn’t like your sound. You’re just better off playing something that looks old.”

Like most things instrumental, color is a matter of taste. I thought my old, French cello looked like a dark relic of the Renaissance until I took it to René Morel for repair. The great man flipped it back and forth in his hands while I watched, an awestruck music student. “You can tell this is French,” he said with a wink and his heavy French accent, “because it was varnished with Beaujolais.”

THE TRIAL PERIOD

Once the instrument is finished and delivered, the trial period begins. When it ends, payment is due. The length of the trial period seems to cause more tension between maker and player than any other aspect of the working relationship. The maker wants to get paid and move on to the next instrument. The player wants to be sure all is well before committing to something expensive, brand-new, and essentially unknown. For ensemble players, the decision is compounded by the need to have the group accept the instrument.

Most makers offer only one to three weeks of trial time.

As Gregg Alf says, confidently, “I want them to open the case and say, ‘Man, this is it!’ A three-hour trial period should be enough.”

But Josh Gindele, who tried out a succession of modern cellos in the Miró Quartet, disagrees. “A one-week trial is completely ridiculous,” he says. “Even for an old instrument that’s no time. And when you buy a new instrument, you’re not just committing to a year’s waiting

20 MAKERS Prices and Policies

UNITED STATES/CANADA

Maker	Violin	Viola	Cello	Wait Time	Deposit (refundable)	Trial Period	Maintenance
Alf, Gregg	26K	28K	55K	Try-and-buy finished instruments; cellos by commission	10%	4 wks	Lifetime warranty for projection issues; free maintenance and sound post first year
Burgess, David	25K	25K	40K	1.5-2 yrs	\$5,000	Up to 6 mos	Free adjustments indefinitely
Cornelissen, Marten	17K	19K	30K	6 mos	Only for unusual orders	2 wks	New bridge and sound post 1st year; adjustments free indefinitely
Curtin, Joseph	28K	30K	N/A	2 wks	5%	8 wks	1st adjustment free
Folland, David	15K	16K	30K	4-12 mos	10%	2 wks	1st adjustment free
Grubaugh, Joseph & Seifert, Sigrun	28K	28K	43K	Try-and-buy	None	2 wks	Free adjustments indefinitely
Gusset, David	20K	20K	mid-30s	6-12 mos	\$3,000	2 wks	Free or discounted adjustments indefinitely
Jiang, Feng	20K	20K	N/A	3.5-4 yrs	\$1,000	2 wks	1st year free
Lee, Tschu-Ho	23K	25K	45K	6-12 mos	None	10 da	1st year free
Ruth, Benjamin	22K	22K	38K	9 mos	variable	variable	variable
Schryer, Raymond	17K	19.5K	36.5K	6 mos	20%	1 wk	1st year free
Scott, William	16K	17K	30K	4-6 mos	15%	2 wk	1st year free
Wallin, Marilyn	12-15K	12-15K	24K	1 yr (through dealers)	10% or dealer's policy	Dealer's policy	Dealer's policy
Zygmuntowicz, Samuel	50+K	50+K	80+K	4 yrs	20%	2 wks	Free adjustments indefinitely

EUROPE & UK

Dilworth, John	16K	17K	26K	1 yr	10%	2 wks	1st sound post, finger-board planing free
Greiner, Stefan-Peter	35.5K	38K	66K	5 yrs	None	4 wks, then buy or rent; returnable for 6 mos.	Adjustments free first year, then 200 Euros
Hargrave, Roger	26-28K	26-28K	N/A	18 mos	None	2 wks	1st year free
Ravatin, Frank	25K	25K	37K	4-5 yrs	None	1 wk	Flexible policy
Robin, Patrick	27K	27K	42K	3.5 yrs	10%	2 wks	1st year free
Spidlen, Jan	24K	26.5K	N/A	2 yrs	10%	Payment due immediately; 2 wks to return or trade	Fee for service

“As a teenager in postwar Holland, Marten Cornelissen was an avid builder of model airplanes. He thought he wanted to design aircraft—until he held a violin in his hand for the first time.”

time, or whatever it is. After you get the instrument, there's about a year and a half more for it to settle. After six months the neck may sink a little or a seam open up. The wood settles. It's not used to being in that form and glued together. About year two, you have a good sense of what you've got.”

MAINTENANCE

Makers address these concerns by offering follow-up maintenance. Most makers offer adjustments free for a year. Some, like the Grubaugh-Seifert team, will maintain their instruments indefinitely, provided the player pays shipping. Such offers typically extend only to sound adjustments and not to repairs due to abuse or normal wear and tear.

“This is where my customers really get their money's worth,” says David Gusset, a maker in Eugene, Oregon. “I do a lot of work free almost indefinitely, because I like to keep a working relationship with musicians. My instruments are my advertising.”

RETURNS

A player who doesn't like a finished instrument, even one specially commissioned, does not have to buy it. Most makers request a deposit not because they want to pressure a player to buy, but because they want assurance that the player is serious.

Some makers will return a deposit immediately and without question.

“Anytime, for any reason,” says David Burgess, a prominent maker in Ann Arbor. “I don't understand why any maker who claims to have a waiting list wouldn't be willing to do this.”

Others agree to return the deposit as soon as the instrument sells to someone else. Many encourage a player to keep the instrument with the option of trad-

ing straight-across for any other instrument made during the coming year. Sound being a subjective matter, good makers know their instruments will find good homes.

Very seldom does an instrument made by an experienced and well-respected luthier go bad. But because makers learn from their mistakes, like everyone else, major problems may lie dormant in the work of students or recent graduates. Roman Barnas expresses caution about an instrument that sounds very loud under the ear the first time it's played, but then quickly loses sound.

“If you get an immediate response, but it doesn't hold,” he says, “there could be a problem with the arching.” This would be a sign that the instrument should be returned.

Rebecca Elliott warns of the opposite problem. “A bigger red flag,” she says, “is too little response. When an instrument sounds loud and untamed, you can often adjust the sound by changing the sound post, bridge, or strings. Even the tail piece can have a noticeable effect on sound, especially for cellos.”

Experimenting with sound and wood lies at the heart of the craft. Cornelissen thought he wanted to design aircraft until, at the age of 16, he held a violin for the first time. He was a teenager in postwar Holland at the time, an avid builder of model airplanes. He found a book on violin making and used it as his only guide to making his first 40 instruments.

“Model airplanes?” said Gregg Alf, after hearing the story. “That's perfect. Airplane design is all about weight versus strength,

and so is violin making. An airplane is mass moving through air, and the lighter it is, the less fuel it consumes. A lightweight violin is easier to play, because the artist's energy goes into the concert hall instead of being absorbed by the acoustical system itself. The challenge is to take away structural things that aren't needed and leave the things that are.”

As for the notion that taking away too much wood makes an instrument sound good now but fade in fifteen years, Alf disagrees. “If the wood's too thin, it won't sound good from Day One, he says. “It will sound wolfy, and it will be hard to project or control the dynamics.”

To any musician with a limited budget and a serious need to upgrade a stringed instrument, Gindele of the Miró Quartet offers this advice.

“There are a lot of great instruments that can be bought inexpensively. Go into a shop and try *everything*. It doesn't take that long to play every cello in the shop. Don't read the labels. Look for sound. It doesn't matter what someone else says is a good cello. You're looking for the one that's right for you.”

Katherine Millett is a lawyer and a freelance writer whose last contribution to this magazine (“Bargaining Power: Ensembles in Academe”) appeared in the November/December 2007 issue. A former cello student of Claus Adam, she frequently plays quartets as an amateur near her home in suburban Chicago. Her website is www.katherinemillett.com.