



From The Maker's Bench

Sometimes A Great Notion...

A close look at the violetta, an obscure 19th century German stringed instrument.

By Laurence Anderson with Anette Gollar

The remarkable thing about the violin is that it appeared so suddenly in the middle of the 16th century, caught on immediately and has dominated the music world since. The violin of course is an exception. Museums around the world are filled with thousands of obsolete and unsuccessful instruments. Some of these instruments are comical, most are uninteresting, but a few are quite interesting, both historically and artistically.

I recently restored a violetta, an obscure 19th century experimental viola, for the Shrine to Music Museum in Vermillion, South Dakota. The instrument was found in storage at Carleton College by Prof. Hector Valdivia while doing inventory. When I first saw the instrument I had no idea what it was; nevertheless I was fascinated by the unique design and impressed with the craftsmanship.

This violetta was one of a set of six instruments designed by Alfred Stelzner, a forgotten German composer. The instruments were based on an acoustical principle which he patented in 1891. Four of the instruments in the set are essentially a violin, viola, cello and bass, but feature slightly wider plates and ribs that are higher at the corners than the top and bottom blocks. All of his instruments have f-holes that end with an attractive leaf design similar to a viola d'amore.

To this set he added two intermediate instruments: a violetta, tuned one octave lower than a violin and a cellone, tuned one octave lower than the violetta. (The violetta is somewhat larger than a viola; I could find no information on the size of the cellone.)

The acoustical principal of these instruments is based on a geometric design of intersecting circles: the outline is very curvaceous, following to a great

Stelzner, himself, wrote many pieces for the instruments, and included them in several of his larger works, including two operas. The instruments were a failure but not without merit. The workmanship and the varnish are admirable. The particular one I restored had, at one time, been heavily played, for strings had cut deep grooves into the ebony fingerboard.

Before I took it to the Shrine to Music Museum, I had a chance to play the

violetta. I put on gut viola strings which, although historically inaccurate, were the only strings available. Although the rib height was nearly twice that of a modern viola, the instrument was played under the chin. In my hands it felt cumbersome; I could not imagine ever getting comfortable with it. The sound was as I expected: melancholy, pastose and nasal. It reminded me of "le mal du siècle," a term used to describe the artistic and cultural mood in Europe at



Laurence Anderson restoring the Violetta

the turn of the century depicted in the poetry of Paul Verlaine. Information for this article comes from entries in *Zeitschrift fur Instrumentenbau Luettgendorff*.

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Some composers wrote for Stelzner's instruments, including a few sextets.

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