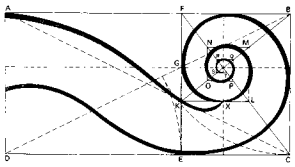

From the Maker's Bench

Reflections on the Baroque

by Laurence Anderson

When I was an undergraduate, I was taught that the Renaissance was the zenith of European culture. What preceded it was a long period of superstition and primitiveness and what followed was a period of consolidation and conformity. The pessimism of Shakespeare and Montaigne was evidence of a culture in decline. Early Baroque art was at best ornamental, often merely derivative and frivolous. This is what I was taught anyway, but I believed then and I believe now that this is nonsense.

The Baroque was a reaction to the intellectualism of the Renaissance. Renaissance art used geometry, perspective and knowledge of antiquity to appeal, through the intellect, to a small group of humanists. Baroque art, by contrast, was a popular art, appealing through the emotions to a wide audience, giving ordinary people a means, through imagery and music, to satisfy their deepest emotional impulses. J.S. Bach wrote the *Goldberg Variations* to help a patron deal with debilitating insomnia. I cannot imagine any Renaissance master creating art to heal.

The date usually given for the beginning of the Baroque Era is 1564, the year Michelangelo accepts from Pope Paul III the post as overseer of the construction of St. Peter's. It was around this time that a small group of instrument makers in northern Italy introduced the violin to the world.

The term "violino" was used as early as 1540, but it was then still a generic term for bowed instruments. As late as 1597, Gabrielli published a double quartet for "violino" but written obviously for the tenor, for the violin could not play the music. In 1608, Monteverde scored *Orfeo* for "piccoli violini alla Francese" indicating the term "violino" alone would not have indicated that the instrument he had written for was the violin. But in the first decade of the 17th century the violin was rapidly coming into orchestral use, and in just three years after scoring *Orfeo* for violin, Monteverde was writing passages for the violin to be played in 5th position.

The rapid acceptance of the violin is clearly shown in the careers of two celebrated Brescian makers. In 1602 Giovanni Paolo Maggini apprenticed himself to Gaspar da Salo. Though only a generation apart, they had very different careers. Gaspar da Salo died in 1608, having made a variety of instruments, including a few violins. Maggini, who died in 1632, was in the last decade of his career fulfilling commission after commission for violin. The Renaissance instruments were rapidly becoming obsolete. In less than a quarter century the violin had assumed a dominance it has yet to relinquish.

Scroll of a Baroque violin recently made by Laurence Anderson for a member of the Twin-Cities based Lyra Concert.

The advent of the violin corresponds with a sudden burst of creative activity in Italy. Rome had been sacked in 1527, an event which historians tell us was more symbolic than historically significant; but however symbolic, it was an event that, nevertheless, terrified and demoralized the people of Rome. In 50 years though, Rome had fully recovered. In 1590 St. Peter's was completed. The Italian spirit was reinvigorated. The violin was one example of this creative energy that marked a renewal of confidence.

We usually consider artists to be the most rebellious segment of society. In fact in our time artistic rebellion has been formalized into something called performance art where arrested adolescents act out their rage. But almost without exception Baroque artists were devout and obedient Christians. Rubens, for example, went to Mass daily before beginning to paint. The violin was created in an era of faith and obedience. It is a tool of course, not a work of art; but unique among tools, the violin is conceived aesthetically not scientifically. It is a quintessential Baroque creation, a masterpiece of harmonious proportions.

Ironically, for the past two hundred years, scholars and makers have attempted to calculate its proportions mathematically. Essentially to try to understand it as a Renaissance creation, they have produced ingenious systems that are so complex that I find them hard to accept. One of the most elaborate mathematical descriptions is found in *Violin Making, As it Was and Is* by the 19th century maker, Heron-Allen. I have managed to draw a violin using

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his calculations, but it was a generic form resembling little the instruments of Andrea Amati, Gaspar da Salo or any of the early makers. I am convinced that these makers created these instruments based on aesthetic considerations rather than a mathematical ideal. No doubt if we look long enough at a violin of any of the 16th or 17th century makers, and take enough measurements we can eventually come up with a mathematical explanation for the proportions. But the early makers struggled with f-hole shape and position, bridge placement, the shape of the bass bar and the arch, and the length of the neck; their work developed empirically, not theoretically.

I suppose it is normal for modern makers to want to understand the violin in scientific terms, for science and technology have come to dominate our lives and give us the illusion of perfection. I have on many occasions listened to musicians and makers talk about creating the perfect violin with the help of a computer and physicists. My eyes usually glaze over. For the violin has never been about perfection.

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