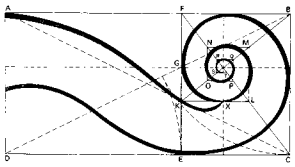

From the Maker's Bench

A Lesson From an Old Master

by Laurence Anderson

One of the most rewarding aspects of violin restoration is having the opportunity of learning directly from one of the old masters while working on his instruments. Each year I have the chance to restore one or two magnificent instruments and last fall I had the privilege of restoring a violin of the 17th century Italian master, Giovanni Paolo Maggini, an instrument now owned by a former professor of mine. It was not a major restoration, but I had to remove the top and consequently had nearly a week to study the violin while it sat on my bench. Maggini, a student of Gaspar da Salo, was the last of the masters of the Brescian school which also included Giovanni Derlino (b. 1450), Giacomo della Corna (b. 1484), Zanetto de Michelis (b. 1495), Girolamo Virchi (b. 1593), Giovanni Batista d'Oneda (b. 1529) and Matteo Bente (b.1579), a tradition that was unbroken for nearly 150 years. Maggini's career was unfortunately cut short in 1632 by the plague before he was able to take on an apprentice to keep the Brescian tradition alive. His master, Gaspar da Salo (b. 1562), was one of the earliest violin makers, (a few historians argue that he actually created the violin); Maggini's career paralleled the assent of the violin, for in his first decade he made mostly viols, but dedicated his final decade almost entirely to fulfilling violin commissions.

Scroll and bridge area of violin by Giovanni Paolo Maggini

Maggini began his career by predictably reproducing all the characteristics of his teacher, Gaspar da Salo. We see in his work the same heavy ungraceful modeling, the same short unpronounced corners, the same poorly inlaid purfling with badly prepared grooves, the same rough heads with poorly defined curves and unevenly worked outline. Maggini's later work shows not only improvements in execution but a great advance in violin construction. He certainly became more skilled as he grew more experienced, but no doubt he was challenged by the superior craftsmanship of the Brother's Amati, his contemporaries working in Cremona.

Maggini was a pivotal figure in the history of violin making. He is the first to use corner blocks and linings and the first to use quarter cut wood for the top plate. He initiated a system for graduating the thickness of the plates and most importantly he created the model for the modern violin, viola and cello. It is his model for the violin that is perhaps his most important legacy. But because his career was cut short, his influence was not felt until 60 years later when Antonio Stradivari broke away from the influence of his teacher, Nicolo Amati, turning to Maggini for inspiration.

With Maggini's death in 1632, Cremona became the undisputed capital of instrument making. But until 1690, all the Cremonese makers and well as the makers form other European countries, were copying the small high ribbed and high arched instruments of Nicolo Amati. In 1690, Stradivari suddenly broke from this tradition and began producing his "Long Pattern" in which the two most important dimensions in violin construction, length of body and length of stop, are practically the same as Maggini's.

Maggini-inspired violin by Laurence Anderson

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Spring 2000 (Vol. 2, No. 3)

Both have a stop length of 194 millimeters; the length of the Stradivarius is 14 5/16" whereas Maggini's instruments could be from 14" to 14 9/16" in length. These similarities are certainly more than coincidental.

Maggini's influence on Guarneri del Jesu is even more evident; here the similarities are striking. The broad powerful shoulders, the slanting f-holes nearly 83 millimeters long, the strongly semicircular middle bouts, and the arches rising from the purfling with an absence of hollowing near the edges so characteristic of Maggini, are found in the instruments of Guarneri nearly a century later. In fact, as I tried to understand the Maggini on my bench, I often went to the technical drawings of the several different Guarneris I have in my library for help.

The instrument I worked on was 14" long. Its stop length was slightly less than 194 millimeters (and may have been shorter initially for I thought I saw bridge feet indentations slightly higher up on the instrument). The craftsmanship was not a good as the Brother's Amati, Maggini's Cremonese contemporaries, but the instrument had character and great beauty. It became the inspiration for a violin commission I completed this winter.

Laurence Anderson is a violin maker and restorer in Northfield, MN.

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Spring 2000 (Vol. 2, No. 3)