



# From the Maker's Bench

## Nine Lives

by Lawrence Anderson

Two years ago I was at the Smithsonian to study several violins of Giovanni Battista Guadagnini in their collection of historical instruments. Having arranged to view the instruments several weeks in advance, I was met at the front desk by one of the curators, who took me to the seventh floor and lead me down a corridor into a large windowless room where the Guadagninis awaited. The room we were in was a temporary repository for recent acquisitions that had not yet been catalogued. On a table behind me were memorabilia of Ella Fitzgerald and on a table next to that was a collection of footballs and baseballs autographed by past Super Bowl champions and all-stars. Also in the room, on a long table in front of me, were fifteen new violins all laid out in a row. Although most of what I saw piqued my interest, I forced myself to ignore the table of violins, not wanting to clutter my mind with anything other than the instruments that I had come to study.

Not until several hours later, when I got up to go, did I glance at the other table of violins. One stood out from the others. It had a warmth

and depth of color that attracted my attention. I picked it up to get a closer look and discovered it was a violin of Lothar Meisel, the dean of mid-western violin makers, who has been working in Owatonna for nearly half a century.

I have known Meisel professionally for a decade now; we have met on several occasions at instrument making conferences and I have worked on several of his instruments. His work has always impressed me. He is a skilled craftsman with a profound understanding of the work of past masters. The violin that I held in my hands that afternoon, however, was better than any instrument of his I had ever seen. Unlike the work of most modern American makers, characterized by machine like precision and sharp edges, this instrument had a refreshing softness and warmth.

Lothar Meisel is the last maker in an unbroken line of violin makers dating back nine generations to 1660. In the 1930's, as Hitler became obsessed with ethnic purity, all Germans were required to prove their Aryan roots back three generations. Ironically, it was through this decree that Lothar's family was able to trace their violin making tradition to Johann Meisel (1660-1713), an almost exact contemporary of Stradivari. Lothar's family escaped East Germany after the war, settling in Owatonna in

the 1950's.

Lothar Meisel owns an instrument of all but one of his ancestors. He views these instruments with tremendous pride. He admires most the work of his grandfather, Oswald (1868-1935), who died when Lothar was a child of six. Oswald Meisel created the Meisel model which Lothar still copies. "If I could sit down and talk with any of my ancestors, I would choose to pick my grandfather's brain," he told me that morning of my visit.

Although Meisel has always done well in competitions, he has never won a gold medal, and unless tastes change, he probably never will. His instruments are unique because he is one of the few makers who builds them without a mold. Working free hand, Lothar sacrifices precision for a warm soft sculpted look. After viewing his instrument at the Smithsonian, I went to visit his shop to show him my work for his critical impression and to view two more of his recent instruments. His work is casual, not labored, because he concentrates on the beauty of the line rather than perfect symmetry. Lothar's instruments are original, and like all confident craftsmen, he is no longer trying to impress anyone.

We chatted for a while and he was complimentary about my work. Lothar then gave me a master class, politely and gently criticizing my approach.

He had a violin of his that he had made in the early 1950's, in the shop for a major restoration. He showed it to me and told me what repairs were necessary. When I suggested a different less aggressive approach, he handed the violin to me and said, "Here, then you do it." I was honored; his trust in my skill and my knowledge was the greatest compliment he could have given me.

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Violin by Lothar Meisel with detail of scroll and f hole