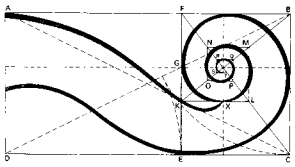

From the Maker's Bench

A Masterpiece in Miniature

by Laurence Anderson

When he was well into his middle age and in complete control of his craft, the celebrated 20th century restorer and maker Vahakan Nigogosian decided to make a tiny violin that could fit in the palm of his hand. It was not to be a charming ornament that looked like a violin but a detailed miniature replica of a full size instrument.

I came across this violin by accident one afternoon when I was perusing the Goodkind collection at the library at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. It was in the summer of 1992. Nigo took a group of participants attending a month long workshop he was directing to take a look at some of the books in this celebrated collection dedicated to the history of stringed instruments. The first book which caught my attention while I was flipping through the catalogue was one dedicated to the career of Simone Sacconi. I asked the librarian if I could check it out. She brought me a beautifully bound oversized edition filled with pictures of violins made by past masters, as well as violins by Sacconi's contemporaries and Sacconi himself.

When I saw a violin attributed to Nigo, I covered up the text, took the book to Nigo, and asked him to identify the maker. He glanced at the picture and answered matter-of-factly, "Vahakan Nigogosian."

"You recognize your work."

"Of course. I worked on that instrument on and off for several years."

"I can't quite put my finger on it," I said, "but there is something about this violin that just doesn't seem right."

"It's only this big," he informed me smiling, stretching out his thumb and forefinger as far as he could to indicate the size.

I was stunned. I suddenly realized that what bothered me about the two photographs of the instrument were the disproportionately large markings on the wood: grains lines too thick, flames too wide, and flecks too large. But it was otherwise so perfectly crafted, so proportionately designed, so precisely detailed, it was impossible to tell without contextual clues that it was barely 5 inches long. In perfect proportion and beautifully executed were the pegs, the bridge, the chin rest, and tailpiece.

As soon as he told me the size of the instrument, my mind started spinning, thinking about all the construction problems miniaturizing pose. On a full size violin, the top and back plates are carved from solid pieces of wood. The thickness of these plates, which varies from the center to the edge, what makers call the graduation, is critical to the sound and response. My first question was a ridiculous one about the plates. "How did you determine the graduations," I asked. Nigo did not answer me; he just looked up at me and rolled his eyes.

My second question was hardly any less ridiculous. "Can it be played?"

"I suppose it could be made to make some squeaky sound," he said miming a musician holding a 5 inch violin under his chin stroking it with a 5 inch bow. I continued with a few more silly questions about the bass bar and the neck angle until I finally figured out what it was I really wanted to know.

"Why did you make it?" I asked. He shrugged his shoulders at first. Finally he said that he was intrigued by the challenge; later he admitted, with a mischievous grin, that he wanted to show off a bit. Historians have told me that the making of miniature instruments was common practice in the 17th and 18th centuries. I have visited many of the great collections of Europe and the United States, but I have yet to see anything like it. The violin first appeared in public at the exhibition held in New York City in 1965, celebrating the 70th birthday of Simone Sacconi. During the celebration, it was on display along side of many of the greatest instruments ever made.

Several years later, visiting Nigo's workshop, I was able to see the tools he had to make in miniature in order to make the violin. When I saw them neatly arranged on his desk in his studio, I thought for a moment that I was looking at Tom Thumb's workbench. Laid out before me were the tiny gouges, chisels, knives, scrapers, templates, the mold, even the tiny scribe used to mark out the purfling channel. There too I saw the bow he made to go with the violin, a stick of pernambuco, a tiny ebony frog with silver ferrule, mother of pearl slide, and tiny screw, eyelets, and button neatly strung with horse hair.

Whenever I think about this instrument, and I think about it often, for I have a picture of it up on the wall in my work shop to inspire me, I recall the celebrated words of Oscar Wilde, "All art is quite useless." Art, of course, is seldom useless. The great prehistoric masterpieces at Stonehenge, Easter Island, and Lascaux, France, intrigue us precisely because we wonder what their purposes were. Theories about these ancient works of art abound; uselessness is not one of them.

But this violin is an example of useless art. No matter how much violin makers want their instruments to be admired for their beauty or their craftsmanship, in the end, they want their instruments to be used for making music. Creating an instrument not intended to be played goes against the very nature of a violinmaker. I suppose that is what I admire most about this instrument. Nigo was just having a little fun.

Laurence Anderson is a violin maker and restorer in Northfield Minnesota.

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Winter 2002/2003 (Vol. 5, No. 2)