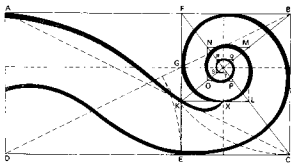

From the Maker's Bench

One for the Ages

The Art of Andrea Amati

by Laurence Anderson

Unless you have been on a hermitage for the past 9 months, you probably already know that this year marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of Andrea Amati. I have been fortunate enough to have been able to spend several days at the Shrine to Music Museum in Vermillion, South Dakota, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England, and the Royal Academy of Music in London to study many of the instruments of Andrea and his descendents. I think I am entitled to make a few comments.

We are not certain of his birth in the year of 1505. We have no birth or baptismal certificate. No census was taken that year. The date was determined indirectly by looking at military records and housing contracts. Civil authorities at the time didn't think it necessary to record the birth of the son of an artisan. Contemporaries are seldom able to identify the individuals posterity will revere.

Andrea Amati was the inventor of the violin. Again we have no direct evidence of this. Over the years, musical historians have put forth other names, like Giovanni Batista d'Oneda or Giovanni Martinengo, but no violins from the hands of these makers have ever been found. The Bresian maker, Gaspar da Salo was Andrea's most serious rival, but recent scholarship dates all of his extant violins later than Andrea's. So we are left with Andrea as inventor, founder of the Cremonese school, and father of several generations of distinguished makers.

Around a dozen instruments of Andrea have survived. I believe that they are now all in museums, played only on the rarest of occasions. Nevertheless his influence reverberates down the centuries. His name will be remembered as long as people make music with bowed instruments.

Pluto and Proserpina
by Gianlorenzo Bernini

Andrea made the violin a piece of Baroque sculpture. It's shape, the curves of its outline, the convexities of its back and table are so essentially Baroque that one could easily argue that the shape of the violin was dictated as much by aesthetics as by acoustics.

Much of what Rudolph Wittkower wrote of Baroque sculpture in his study of the 17th century Roman sculptor Bernini can easily apply to the violin, "The block-shape seems to impose no limitations of the imagination of Baroque sculptors. They invented freely, unrestricted by material limitations. The contours of the figures were broken up, and the extremities made to stick out. This new freedom was expressive of a deep spiritual change. Bernini laid the foundation for a new conception of sculpture in which all elements are complementary: the single viewpoint and energetic action, the choice of a transitory moment, the breaking down of the restrictions imposed by the block, the subtle differentiation of texture. Theses were the means by which Bernini made the beholder an emotional participant in the spectacle before his eyes." One need look at any one of Bernini's representative sculptures, *Pluto and Proserpina* for example, to see all the contours of a violin.

The spirit of the Baroque is the spirit of passionate energy. This passionate energy found early expression in music. The violin was the ideal instrument to express this passion.

violin by Andrea Amati

For many years, I have thought the violin was product of Baroque principles, but now I have come to believe that the violins of Andrea Amati anticipate the Baroque. They express design elements that will not show up in Italian sculpture and painting for at least a generation after his death. Were it not for Amati, the violin might have evolved as a Renaissance instrument. These highly decorated instruments seem in a way more restrictive that the elegance of the Amati pattern. We need only think of the violins with fantastic shapes and ornately carved heads that came from Germany and France at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries that now sit in museums admired for their craftsmanship but influencing no one.

The rise of the violin corresponds with the rise of opera and the popularity of dance, quoting from the introduction to the Hill biography of the Guarneri family: "The most important thing about the change which came over music after the 16th century was not the abandonment of counterpoint, nor the substitution of keys for modes; it was the change in the attitude of musicians towards rhythm. The music of the 17th century is based on a sense of emphatic accent and stress; it was only this vigorous periodic emphasis that made the classical key-system possible, made it indeed inevitable. It was the energy of the accent that lead to the new view of dissonance and to the style of counterpoint employed by Bach in which the driving force of the regular rhythm carried the composer ruthlessly over every obstacle of discord. For this

new type of music the violin was an ideal instrument."

Practicality surely played an important part in the violin's immediate popularity. Dancing masters and music teachers took to the violin immediately because of its ability to express rhythm and color. It was also much easier to transport and to tune than, for example, the lute.

The finest collection of Amati instruments is housed in the Shrine to Music museum in Vermillion, South Dakota. I have been lucky to have spent many weekends studying the instruments in that collection. However much we admire the works of the later Cremonese makers, Andrea set the standard for design and craftsmanship. As John Dilworth pointed out, "No Andrea Amati would have meant no Stradivari, no Guarneri. It's as simple as that. Who can tell what the modern violin would look like without Andrea, the founding father of violin making? Maybe something developed from the clumsily charming forms of Gaspar da Salo or the fantastical patterns of the early Fussen makers."

Andrea Amati got the violin right on his first attempt. It has change little over the past 450 years. The outline, the shape of the scroll, the low powerful arching, and the delicate purfling — over the centuries, makers have deviated from these standards at their peril. The extremely high arching of the 17th German makers and of Andrea's grandson Nicolo proved finally to be a degeneration of Andrea's original design. Only the f-holes, now with smaller eyes, wider wings, and narrower arms show any significant change.

Imagine that for a moment— unchanged for 450 years! In the past 450 years empires have come and gone. We have witnessed the Industrial Revolution, the Information Age, human flight, and the splitting of the atom. We have discovered continents, planets, and galaxies. But this little vibrating pine box, invented by a humble artisan 450 years ago, that would revolutionize music making, has survived the dizzying pace of scientific and cultural change in pretty good shape.

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

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Fall 2005 (Vol. 8, No. 1)