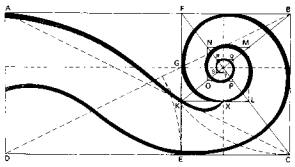

From the Makers Bench

1706 — The Year That Gave Shape to the Golden Era

by Laurence Anderson

In the history of violin making, few years stand out as pivotal as 1706. There is, of course, the year 1632, when the plague broke out in Brescia killing Maginni and killing and scattering the other Brescian makers thus bringing to an abrupt end the only school that stood as a serious artistic and technical rival to the Cremonese school. Maginni's early demise probably delayed the development of the viola by a century. 1797 is the year Napoleon invaded Italy, setting off social and economic instability that brought to a conclusion the Classical Age of Italian violin making. The economic instability forced Italian nobility to lay off court musicians who soon left Italy in search of work in France, Germany, Austria and England. Italian makers were left without clients. Then there is the year 1828, when the young virtuoso Paganini first toured France and encountered Vuillaume who gave him a reconditioned violin with a new neck and bass bar by a neglected Italian maker, Guarneri del Gesu.

But 1706 stands out as the year Stradivari designed the violin that would define his craft and influence every maker since. Stradivari was in his early fifties, the age when Shakespeare would retire to his country home at Stratford on Avon. Stradivari had already been making violins for 30 years; his reputation well established throughout Europe. Yet in 1706 Stradivari would begin the most productive period of his life. For the next twenty years he would make violins from a single mold. These instruments are his most original, made from the most beautiful wood, executed with confidence and skill. They define this golden era.

For the first 30 years of his career, Stradivari's designs are still a work in progress. The "Betts" violin from 1704, for example, is a beautiful design, but presents some serious problems for a modern maker. The "Archinto" viola, from 1696, still shows the deep influence of Nicolo Amati in the long corners and the round upper bouts. Hundreds of books and thousands of articles have detailed the evolution of the designs of Stradivari; I cannot even summarize them now. But I can say that after 30 years of experimentations, everything seems to come together in the design he created in the year 1706.

Stradivari made only 11 instruments during the years 1705-1706 — less than half his normal output. Of course I have no idea why his output for those two years should be so low; anything I say will be pure speculation. But the Romantic in me wants to believe he was at his bench, making designs, transferring those designs to molds, and cutting out plates until he got it right. From 1706 on, Stradivari seems to have made his violins from the same mold. Some experts have even asserted that the only change in the shape of his violins over the next twenty years can be explained by the normal wear of the mold from constant use.

The 1715 "Cremonese"

Sometime before 1706, Stradivari purchased a large quantity of spectacular maple from a single tree that he would begin to use up during those twenty years of his golden period. Examples of this wood can be seen on 1709 "Engleman" and again in the 1715 "Cremonese." These violins are made with one-piece backs with dramatic broken flames that dance like fire across the back. He used this wood several times a year and it is valued both for its beauty as well as for its acoustic property.

What happened with his varnish is more difficult to explain. Either he made or purchased or secured a constant source of varnish that he used for the next twenty years. The varnish he used from 1700 to 1725 defines his craft and gave rise to two centuries of speculations and exaggerations. Recent research tends to support the view that Stradivari purchased his varnish from a local apothecary. The strongest case for the view that Stradivari purchased his varnish is made by comparing the varnish on the violins of the Neapolitan and Venetian makers with the varnish on the furniture and picture frames made at the same time now on display in the local museums. We can see that it is the same varnish. We can also see regional differences in varnishes. The varnish a maker used was determined by where he worked, not where he studied. If there is a secret to Stradivari's varnish, the secret was probably not Stradivari's.

After 1725 the quality of Stradivari's work deteriorated. He was now in his 80s. He was loosing control of his tools and was probably handing over more of the daily duties of the shop to his assistants and his sons. But his sons had neither his skill nor his passion. We need only compare the 1715 "Cremonese" with the 1734 "Habeneck" to realize that Stradivari is no longer the craftsman he once was. The elegance of outline is replaced by a heavy, coarse shape; the corners are thick and stubby. The purfling channel is filled with wood putty because he no longer had the ability to cut parallel

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purfling channel lines. In his final years his scrolls became thick and heavy. The varnish changed from the iridescent orange brown to an opaque brown that seems to have chipped away in the first few decades.

1706 — Did Stradivari's success come from the mold? the wood? the varnish? Success takes hard work. Success is sometimes a matter of luck.

This idea for this article was inspired by a recent best selling biography of William Shakespeare, *Will of the World* by Stephen Greenblatt. He writes a somewhat speculative biography of on a small amount of biographical and historical information that we have on the bard. Unfortunately, we have only a fraction of the biographical material on Stradivari that we have on Shakespeare. So I had a little fun speculating.

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

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