



MAKER'S BENCH

A Career in Instrument Repair

by Lisbeth Nelson Butler

"Oh no! My beautiful instrument (or bow) has been:

- dented by a falling music stand
- cracked by a falling speaker
- whacked on the doorframe
- stepped on
- sat on
- tripped over
- run over by a car
- left on the roof of a speeding car and has fallen off
- dropped by a baggage handler onto the tarmac
- sounding like a scratchy cheap fiddle"

(All of these have actually happened.)

What to do? Of course, the answer is, "Take it to a reputable violin repair shop." Once there, any damage can be repaired and the instrument or bow restored to working condition. When repair work is well done, it can seem like a miracle has occurred, with no visible evidence of the recent disaster, much to the relief of the owner. Who are these miracle workers and where do they come from?

There are a few family businesses where repair knowledge is passed down from generation to generation, but most instrument repairers do not have this available to them. They come into the field from outside, as players, music teachers, woodworkers, or retirees. There are a very few who decided when very young that this was what they wanted to do and started training right after high school.

An apprenticeship is the traditional way to learn, but it's hard to find an experienced violin maker/repairer who is willing to spend the time and effort required. Therefore, most good repairers are graduates of one of the violin making schools, which usually have a three to four-year curriculum. Established schools are located in the United States and Europe, and normally there is no previous experience required for entry. A person trained to build violins has

a good foundation for learning repair, but lacks much of the specialized knowledge and skills.

Another route is available to interested repairers-to-be right here in Minnesota. The Violin Repair program at Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical was established in Red Wing the early 1970s. It is a nine-month program that includes basic repairs and maintenance for violins, violas, cellos, basses and bows. Topics include violin varnish, violin history, ebony work (pegs, nuts, saddles, fingerboards), bow rehairing, bow repairs, bridges and sound posts, and violin repairs. No previous woodworking, tool, or playing experience is required for entry. Minnesota Public Radio recently did a feature on the program, which can be found at <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2009/11/09/violin-repair/>

After graduating from school, many will find jobs in violin shops. There, they will spend several years under the guidance of experienced repairers, working their way up to a professional level of expertise.

It takes a lot of experience to be comfortable working on the highest level of instruments, such as Stradivaris and Guarneris, for professional players. Imagine the stress of taking apart a three million dollar

instrument! The repairer holds in his or her hands not only the irreplaceable, three hundred year old product of a long dead craftsman but an important part of the career of the player as well.

Most repairers and makers are doing work that they love, and even after decades in the field are still excited to go to work every day. Each repair job, each instrument, each player is different, so there is very little chance of boredom. There is also great satisfaction in the work, because one can see and feel the results of one's labor. Taking a box of parts and splinters and making them back into an instrument that not only works but also sounds great is a lot of fun. It's also a lot of fun giving players what they need, a beautiful, great sounding, easy to play instrument!

Lisbeth Nelson Butler holds a Bachelor's degree in Violin Performance and graduated from the Violin Making School of America in Salt Lake City. She ran her own repair shop for nine years and has been teaching Violin Repair at Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical since 1990. This program is the only stand-alone Violin Repair program in the United States. Lisbeth continues to make instruments and plays both professionally and for fun on a violin she made. ♪