



## MAKER'S BENCH

### "The Violin Maker: A Search for the Secrets of Craftsmanship, Sound, and Stradivari"

by John Marchese

Book Review by Matt Wehling

In honor of getting back to school I'm doing a book report of a little summer reading I did at the beach. Well, I never actually made it to a beach but I did do some reading. I would like to share with you a recent text by John Marchese on violins, musicians, music, and the nature of sound. First published in 2007 as *The Violin Maker: Finding a Centuries-Old Tradition in a Brooklyn Workshop*, it has more recently been published in paperback with a different subtitle, *A Search for the Secrets of Craftsmanship, Sound, and Stradivari*. Under either title, it is a good book for people interested in instruments, musicians, music, sound, tone, and the interactions of all these and more. Plus, it's currently available dirt cheap on Amazon, though of course you will first ask for it at your local independent bookseller.

The book follows a well-known violin maker as he makes a violin on commission for a well-known violinist. While it is by no means a step-by-step guide to making, it does follow the main progression of how a violin is made. Along the way it interweaves discussions on what makes the sound of stringed instruments so powerful to humans, craftsmanship and the role of the artisan in society, the musician as artist, violin history and lore, what is sound/tone and how can one try to define it, the beauty of Bach, and the impossibility of achieving perfection but the need to continue trying.

That's to name but a few of the subjects in the book. However it is very readable and all these disparate ideas easily flow together as a mixture of concrete facts and thought-provoking abstract ideas.

The musician in question is Eugene Drucker of the Emerson Quartet. Drucker is described as being both finicky and "perhaps the most articulate person" the author had ever interviewed. "With Gene Drucker well-chosen words formed sentences and those became logical paragraphs." The author sits in on a coaching session Drucker has with a young quartet, and talks with him at length about violins, music, and tone. And yet Drucker, as articulate as he is, can't put his finger on how to exactly define great tone in music or instruments. "There's a problem when it comes down to describing sound. The words we have available to us simply don't work very well."

The maker in question, Sam Zygmuntowicz, balances the fine line that many modern makers do of being in the perpetual long shadow of Stradivari but also living and working in the modern world. He has some very interesting ideas about the role of craftsmanship, including a reference to a thoughtful essay by T.S. Elliot, *Tradition and Individual Talent*. While the book doesn't come out and say it, I sometimes think musicians should relate more to instrument makers, as both are working

within well-defined areas and yet are trying to push the boundaries of what has been previously established as the best that can be done in their fields. I'm not sure this book bridges that gap, but I do think it gives many insights into both fields for musicians, makers and music lovers.

The book is also a source for an amazing amount of violin history and lore. While my knowledge of violin history is much less than my violin making colleagues, the violin makers with whom I discussed the book felt it was quite strong in this area, and I enjoyed learning from it. Of course, these makers had to overcome a bit of professional jealousy to discuss the book...why wasn't the book written about me?...but I do think the author is careful to note that the violin maker he writes about is only one of a number of makers who are at the forefront of the violin making renaissance that is going on. I would certainly put a number of Minnesota makers within that group of great makers.

The book naturally has a focus on the greatest maker of all time, Stradivari, but along the way we get glimpses into makers we have also heard of but don't know nearly as much about, such as the Guarneri and Amati families, important shops through history, and many insights into music (particularly Bach) and the transitive nature of art and performance.

This is a very good book for lovers of music, particularly those with a love of stringed instruments, for players who are constantly challenging themselves, or for makers who are trying to best serve their clients.

*Matt Wehling's experience includes studying bow making in France for five years with modern French master makers. In 2002 and 2006 he was awarded Gold Medals for his violin and cello bows from the Violin Society of America, and he has contributed to Strings and The Strad magazines. His shop is in Northfield, MN. ‡*

