



MAKER'S BENCH

A Tribute to Andrea Amati: Founder of the Cremonese Tradition of Violin Making

by John Waddle

If the average person of today can name one famous violinmaker, that violinmaker is usually Antonio Stradivari. But Antonio Stradivari might be completely unknown to us if it had not been for someone who was born 139 years before him. It is not known how Andrea Amati first came into making violins, violas and cellos, or who might have taught him to make them, because no instruments like what he made are known to exist before.



Close-up view of soundholes on a violin by Andrea Amati, Cremona, 1574.
Ex colls.: William Corbett, London; William Marshall; Hester S. Bowles; Richard Bennett, Lancashire; W. E. Hill & Sons, London.
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Courtesy of the National Music Museum
The University of South Dakota

Some will argue that the first violins were made in Brescia, another town in Italy north of Cremona. But it was Andrea Amati to whom we owe so much.

Amati was born into a time in Cremona, Italy, when music was flourishing because of two local institutions, the Cathedral Choir, and the Schola, both of which influenced many important composers, singers, and musicians. Composers Benedetto Palavicino and Claudio Monteverdi were both products of this era. One violinist, Pietro Francesco Carubello (naturalized as Pierre-Francois Caroubel), from Cremona, was in Paris in 1576 and became violinist to King Henry III, and from there went to the court of Duke von Braunschweig. Violinists Alberto Ardesi and Mario Sinibaldi went from Cremona to Vienna and Prague to the courts of emperors Maximilian II and Rudolf II. So the instruments of Andrea Amati were seen and heard in the best possible situations for the Amati shop to become famous. These composers and musicians had a strong influence on music in general across Italy, and beyond into the rest of Europe. There is, to this day, a café in Cremona that has been in continuous operation since Monteverdi was there.

Andrea Amati's work established the form and proportions of the instruments of the violin family as we know them

today. He must have had some knowledge of bowed stringed instruments that existed before him. Amati's method of making instruments, level of craftsmanship and aesthetic artistry allowed him to produce different sizes of violins, violas and cellos—instruments that are still the foundation today for modern luthiers. He is perhaps most famous for the commission he filled for King Charles IX of France for 38 instruments. King Charles was the son of Catherine de' Medici, who loved to put on musical shows which included dancing and polyphonic music.

It was Andrea Amati who established a flexible method for constructing instruments using an internal wooden form, or mold. The mold was used to construct the body of the instrument on, and then was taken out and used again. If he wanted to make alterations to the mold, he easily could. He made different molds for different sizes of instruments. This allowed him to make instruments of extremely high quality, artistically and acoustically, in an efficient way.

His methods were passed down, not only through his family for four generations, but really for most of the luthiers in the world today. I find it astonishing that so little has changed about the way we make the violins, violas and cellos that Andrea Amati brought into the world. We still make instruments with

four strings, a peg box with tapered pegs, a carved scroll above the peg box, tops and backs carved with sweeping archings, and bass bars. The basic proportions and shapes have changed very little between the mid 1500s and now, though some standardization of sizes has been accepted.

Fortunately, Andrea Amati had two sons who also made stringed instruments, Antonio and Hieronymus. Antonio had a son he named Nicolo. Fortunately Nicolo Amati survived the horrible black plague of the 1630s, which took the lives of all the other violinmakers in Italy at the time. Nicolo Amati was the teacher of another Andrea—Andrea Guarneri, who was the founder of a family of makers that ended with Joseph Guarneri (del Gesu). Nicolo Amati was also possibly the teacher of, among many others, Antonio Stradivari.

In the almost 200 years between the time Andrea Amati made instruments, and the time the last great Cremonese luthiers lived, very little changed. The instruments were still made the same way. The shape and proportions stayed very close to the same. Most of violins, violas, and cellos of today definitely take their inspiration from those made in Cremona by the Amati, Guarneri and Stradivari workshops. And it all started with one person, Andrea Amati.



A violin mold made by John Waddle. This is what an Andrea Amati mold would have looked like.

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