

MAKER'S BENCH

Mathias Dahl

by John Waddle

Mathias Dahl was born into a large family Norway in 1888. He was one of thirteen children. His father was a shoe-maker. He was apparently not totally interested in making shoes, but wanted to play the violin. He made his first violin using only a photograph of one, at the age of seven. When he was 12, he took a job cutting timber so that he could buy himself a better violin. He taught himself to play violin.

In 1910, when Mathias was 22 years old, he didn't want to be drafted into the Norwegian armed forces, so he moved to the United States, settling in Minnesota, and initially did work in a shoe repair shop.

Two years later, in 1912, he started working for the luthier Halvor Blakkestad, also a Norwegian, who had been living in Minneapolis since 1897. The Blakkestad shop at that time was located at 619 Marquette Avenue in Minneapolis. Blakkestad could speak English, German, French, and Norwegian, and travelled to Germany to buy wood in Markneukirchen. His shop was the most important violin shop in the area at the time. Dahl would have had an opportunity to learn valuable information and knowledge from Mr. Blakkestad. In 1918, Blakkestad moved the shop to 710 Marquette Avenue. Eight years later Dahl became a shareholder in the violin shop, but then served in the U.S. army in the First World War.

Twenty-four years later, in 1944, Mathias bought the company along with Alvin Peterson, who had been a salesman for Schmitt music. The shop was named Dahl and Peterson. This lasted only until 1945, when Mr. Peterson died. Erling Lyngstad and Dahl became partners in 1946, and this partnership lasted nine years until

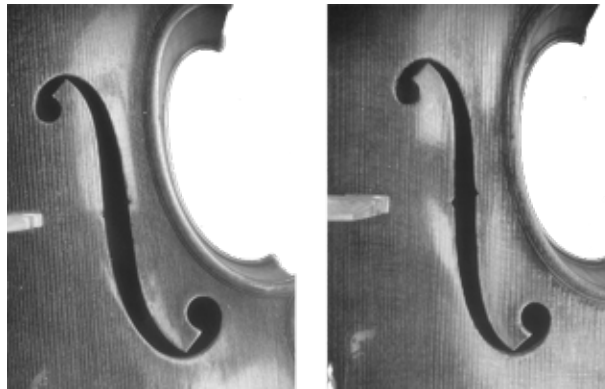
Mr. Dahl decided to retire in 1955, when he sold the business to Lyngstad. Lyngstad decided to move the shop to his home in 1955.

Dahl then came out of retirement and formed a new partnership with Olaf Urdahl. Urdahl had been in Minneapolis since 1901. Between 1924 and 1926, Urdahl went back to Norway and learned to make Hardanger fiddles with Sverre Hansen. Dahl's partnership with Urdahl lasted only two years because Urdahl died. Dahl then started his own shop in 1958.

Dahl's shop was located well in Minneapolis (89 S. 19th Street), and famous soloists would visit him. He is known to have made copies of Mischa Elman's Stradivarius, as well as David Rubinoff's Stradivarius violin. (See front cover for an undated photo of Elman in Dahl's shop.)

Dahl developed his own Stradivari model, his own Guarneri model, and his own Amati model for violins, of which he made close to 400. He labeled them "The Dahl Stradivari," "The Dahl Guarneri" and "The Dahl Amati." He made about 15 violas. His viola model seems to be a personal one, a large model with long f-holes. Dahl made 7 cellos, and his cello model seems more influenced by Stradivari than anything else, but it's hard to tell where he would have acquired it. He seems to have enjoyed making violins, as he continue to make them up until he passed away July 13th, 1973 at the age of 85.

I came to live in Minnesota in 1983, so unfortunately never had a chance to meet Mathias Dahl. What I know of him comes from the books *Violin and Bow Makers of Minnesota* and *The Violin Makers of the United States*, both written by Thomas James Wenberg, and from the many musicians I've met who have Dahl instruments,



Long f-holes on two Dahl violas (1951 L and 1967 R) showing his strong personality. Dahl had strong ideas about design—strong enough that he used basically the same f-holes on both violas. He didn't seem to see any need to change them.



A Dahl family of scrolls: L to R: violin 1934, violin 1973, viola 1941, cello 1952.

All the scrolls clearly belong to a family. The early one seems the most sure and finely carved, and the 1973 one shows the same person as an old man. The viola and cello scrolls are remarkable because they show Dahl's personality. Even though he put "the Dahl Stradivari" or the "Dahl Guarneri" on the label, you can see a Dahl scroll in all four. Stradivari was like that. You can look at five hundred Strad scrolls and what you see are Strad scrolls. Anybody who has tried to copy them might make a nice scroll, but it's not a Strad scroll. Only Strad could do that. Same with Dahl.

and from studying as many as I have had opportunities to see. I currently have seven Dahl violins, two Dahl violas, and one Dahl cello here in the shop.

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