



MAKER'S BENCH

Not Your Mother's College Experience: "The Red Wing School"

by Angela Thompson

As a young luthier, I find myself in the habit now of saying, "I'm originally a violinist" when I'm asked about how I became a violin maker. I studied violin performance at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee and graduated in 2016, but I had known from a young age that I wanted to learn how to make and restore violins. A few years after I graduated, I ended up in Red Wing at Minnesota State College Southeast, commonly referred to as, "The Red Wing School" where I learned how to repair all the violin family instruments and made my first violin just last year.

Minnesota State College Southeast is the only accredited college that offers a program in violin repair and recently reinstated an optional additional class in violin construction. There are three major violin making schools in the United States, but those programs focus on instrument making, don't teach comprehensive repair work, and are usually three to four years in length, depending on which school. The violin repair program at the Red Wing School is one year, August through May. I took the program in 2019-2020 and despite the challenges that Covid brought toward the end of the year, it was the most fulfilling experience I've had in a college setting and ultimately set my career on the right path. I even started substitute teaching there this year as well.

First and foremost, it is important to note that having prior woodworking experience or the ability to play the violin are not requirements for attending the program. I didn't know what a block plane was before I started. I had no knowledge or experience, only ambition and willpower and we jumped right in the first day of class preparing our knives and plane blades. For students who don't have a background in playing the violin, there is an Introduction to Violin Playing class that teaches the basics. While there are benefits to being a luthier who can play the violin well, there are many successful luthiers who don't play beyond simple scales and tunes.

The program is broken down into sev-

eral classes as follows:

- Introduction to Tools
- Basic Materials
- Introduction to Violin Playing
- Violin History
- Bow Rehairing
- Bow Repairs
- Violin Varnish
- Ebony Work
- Bridges and Soundposts
- Violin Repairing
- Optional Class: Violin Construction

Introduction to Tools, Basic Materials and all instrument repair and making classes are taught by Steve Rossow. Violin History, Intro to Violin Playing and the Bow Repair and Rehair classes are taught by Charlotte Matis.

The year starts with learning how to prepare tools (including grinding and honing knives, chisels and plane blades) and techniques on how to use them. A tool list is sent to all students prior to the first day. Power tools are often used to accelerate some processes; the school has a large shop room with bandsaws, drill presses, belt sanders, joiners, planers and more that is open to student use. Students are given demonstrations to familiarize themselves with the tools and tested on how to use them safely.

In the Basic Materials class, students learn about the materials used in the making and repair of violin family instruments. By the end of the class, students will be able to identify tree parts and many different species of wood along with their characteristics.

These classes are only a handful of weeks long and lead into the bulk of the fall semester, which are the Bow Rehair and Repair with Charlotte and Varnish and Ebony Work with Steve. The bow classes teach the steps of the bow rehairing process for all of the stringed instruments' bows and basic bow repairs including tip plate replacement and recambering, or straightening of the stick. In the varnish class, students learn how to clean and polish instruments, how

to make varnishes and polishes, and touch up worn or damaged areas with pigments. Ebony Work focuses on making nuts, saddles, fingerboards and fitting new pegs.

The Bridge and Soundpost, Violin Repair and Violin History classes begin in the spring semester. Students learn how to "cut" bridges and soundposts for violin, viola, cello and bass. Bridges start as blanks, and are made to be fit to the curve of the top of the instrument, thinned and set to an appropriate height for the strings. Other "carving" is done to specific areas of the bridge for tonal and aesthetic purposes. Soundposts are cut and fit to the inside curves of the top and back of the instrument and stood strategically behind the bridge for optimal sound quality and projection. Violin Repair class demonstrates many other common repairs like fingerboard planing, crack repair, gluing open seams, top removal, and edge or corner replacement to name a few. Some advanced repairs may be demonstrated during this class as well for exposure, but are not necessary to complete individually in the curriculum. Violin History dives deeply into the timeline of the creation of the violin and the makers who pioneered and championed the trade, including the early great Italian makers Amati, Guarneri and Stradivari. Many other influential luthiers across Europe and later periods are studied as well, along with discussion of identifying characteristics and workmanship of different makers.

The Violin Construction class is optional and starts right at the beginning of the year in August in conjunction with the other classes. This may sound intimidating, especially if you don't have any woodworking experience, but Steve does a wonderful job of breaking down the steps into shorter demonstrations with detailed handouts, so it doesn't feel overwhelming. I went back in 2021 to take the construction class, after having already completed the repair course, so I had developed some skill that was helpful. In contrast, watching what we called "first year" students at that time, some who

had no prior experience and enrolled right after high school, not only finished their instrument, but did it faster than other “second year” students. Almost all of the students in the repair class who were taking the construction class at the same time were able to take a working violin home with their name on the inside label. It was such a commendable and inspiring accomplishment. I believe this year, everyone who enrolled in the repair classes also signed up for the construction class. It’s exciting to see their progress when I’m needed to substitute teach.

I initially wanted to attend a violin

making school, but I am so glad I started learning the trade in Red Wing. It was unlike any experience I’ve had in a higher education setting. I never felt the pressure or anxiety that came with deadlines and performance in a typical college setting, especially after attending a music school. Steve and Charlotte were always patient and gave attentive one-on-one instruction any time I felt stuck or didn’t fully understand. I recommend anyone who may have interest in lutherie to at least visit the school and consider enrolling. This one year of training completely changed my life for the better and served as a strong foundation for the

success I’ve had since.

Angela Thompson is a violin maker, repairer and player. She is a 2016 graduate of Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee with a Bachelor’s degree in violin performance, and a 2020 graduate from Minnesota State College Southeast in violin repair, where she is now a substitute teacher. Angela is a member of the Violin Society of America and currently works under the instruction of acclaimed luthier David Folland in Northfield where she repairs instruments and continues the study of violin making. †