

# MAKER'S BENCH

## My First Commission

by Angela Thompson

I recently received my first order for a violin! The commission process is especially exciting because it gives me the chance to make a violin explicitly for the player with their wishes in mind. As I have started gathering ideas for what kind of violin I'll be making, I've put together a list of things I'm thinking about and questions I'm asking the player.

I have a unique situation with this commission because the player is an amateur player, but also an aficionado of violin making history and has previously experienced the process through my employer, David Folland, who made him a violin back in 2006. To my benefit, he has sent several resources including articles on patterns, posters and portfolios of specific Stradivari violins that he likes so we can decide how it will look. He even shipped a few sets of wood for me to choose from. This is not typical of the beginning stages of commissioning an instrument; from what I have observed through David, usually the maker will choose the pattern, style and wood to use based on the needs of the player and periodically check in with them throughout the process.

In many cases, players won't likely request a copy of a specific instrument, but they may have played an instrument of a well-known maker and would like their commission to be inspired by it. Most contemporary instruments are made in the style of the old masters. For violins, some of the most commonly used patterns are from Antonio Stradivari, Giuseppe Guarneri "Del Gesu" and the Amati family. These makers have distinct styles and characteristics that make them uniquely appealing. For my commission, the player decided he would like a Strad violin, which means I'll either be using an existing Strad pattern based on the general Strad violin size and shape or creating a new pattern and mould based on a Strad that the player likes. "Pattern" refers to the outline of an instrument. A new instrument begins with a mould and a template that were usually made in reference to another instrument, although some makers draw their own pattern or make some changes to an existing pattern.

I may never have another commission where the player has already purchased

wood for me to use, although I think it would be a nice practice to present options for which piece of maple to use for the back. Aesthetically, a player might prefer a one-piece quartered back over a two piece, or maybe they like the look of quilted maple and want a slab-cut back. The player for whom I'm making a violin shipped two slab cut backs for me to choose from, along with neck blocks and ribs to match. It's relieving having one less decision to make!

Another aesthetic choice is whether to varnish in an antiqued or straight style. An instrument considered to be varnished "straight" would not have any shading or worn areas, including in the craftsmanship of the wood. If the player wanted an antiqued instrument, some of the antiquing process would happen during the construction; for example, worn corners, edges and scroll, some tool marks in the wood, etc. My commissioned violin will be varnished straight, so I'll be leaving the work clean and smooth and the varnish will be the same shade throughout, with the exception of maybe lightening the edges slightly and adding a little patina to create interest.

It can be tricky to talk about tone before

an instrument is made. Of course, it's not possible to predict how an instrument will sound, although there are a few things that will influence the sound: for example, the wood being used, the shape of the arches, the bass bar placement and shape, thickness of the edges and graduations, to some degree. There is no guarantee that an instrument will sound "bright" or "dark" based on these factors, and ultimately people have different perceptions of what those terms mean. Instead, it would be more practical to determine the player's purpose or need for the instrument and maybe talk about characteristics of the quality of the voice. Will it be played in an orchestra, for auditions or shows? Do they like a sweet, singing quality or do they need a powerful, projecting, soloistic sound? This information can guide the maker to choose a particular pattern and carve one way or another based on prior experience with their own instruments or others they have observed and/or played. In the end, the set up of the instrument can also be adjusted and personalized to fit the player's tonal preferences.

I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to make a violin for someone this early in my



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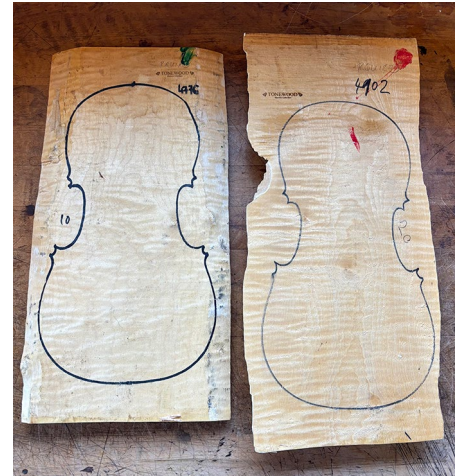
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The mould and template. The template is used to shape the blocks after they are glued to the mould.



Here is a mould with the rib structure finished and ready to be removed.



The slab cut maple backs I'll be choosing from for my commission

career as a violin maker. Some of these elements I mentioned I actually have not yet learned how to do, like copying a pattern from a poster and making a new mould and template. I'm grateful that this experience will help me learn new aspects of violin making, grow in my skills and ultimately,

will prepare me for future commissions.

*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 Minne-*

*sota 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. ♪*