Nicola Amati & the 'Alard'

ROGER HARGRAVE CONTINUES HIS SERIES ON THE AMATI FAMILY WITH AN EXPLORATION OF THE CRAFT OF NICOLA, GRANDSON OF ANDREA, AND AN EXAMINATION OF THE FAMOUS 'ALARD' VIOLIN

As regular readers will recall, I promised three articles on the Amati family of violin makers. The first, which was published in THE STRAD, December 1991, covered the work of Andrea Amati, the founder of the Amati dynasty. The second article was to have been about Andrea's two sons, known as the Brothers Amati. Finally, I was to have covered the work of Nicola[1] Amati, the grandson of Andrea. Unfortunately, for various technical reasons it has been necessary to rearrange the natural order of these articles. I hope that the reader will excuse this.

Nicola Amati

Towards the end of the 16th century, the fame of the Amatis and the monopoly of Cremona as a violin making centre was well-established. Andrea Amati had died in 1577 and his two sons Antonio and Hieronymus, known as the Brothers Amati, had inherited the business. By 1588 however, Hieronymus, the younger of the two brothers, had bought out Antonio. In spite of their buy-out, both the sales contract and subsequent instrument labels seem to indicate that the two continued to work (in harmony?) together perhaps until 1630.

Hieronymus married twice and fathered 12 children On the 3rd December 1596, a boy was born to his second wife Laura de Lazzarini The boy's name was Nicola and he was destined to become the most influential teacher in the history of violin making.

Nicola's mother, Laura de Lazzarini was the daughter of a nobleman, Giovanni Francesco Guazzoni. She was otherwise known as Laura de Medici de Lazzarini and, as I pointed out in my article about Andrea Amati, she was distantly related to the Florentine Medici family.

In spite of these noble connections, life was no bed of roses for Nicola. In fact, he must have been a fairly tough old bird, judging by the few details left to us. Although almost nothing definite is known about his early life, it is assumed that Nicola was apprenticed to his father and uncle at an early age. Unquestionably, Nicola was a superbly trained craftsman and by the 1620s his hand was clearly the dominant one in the production at the Amati workshop.

Two outstanding instruments in the Soviet Union Collection Exhibition, which took- place in Cremona in 1987, demonstrate this admirably. These violins, which bear the labels of Antonio and Hieronymus, respectively dated 1628 and 1629, are clearly the work of Nicola. A comparison of the outlines also shows that these instruments were probably made on the same mould as that of the `Alard' Amati 1649, illustrated here. It is well worth making the effort to find a copy of the Russian exhibition catalogue in order to make comparisons.[2]

These two instruments and a third superb example dated 1628, which is housed in the Shrine to Music Museum in Vermilion. South Dakota. also testify to the Amatis ability to maintain the high quality of their production, even in the face of a severe famine which affected Cremona in 1628 - 29.

Famine however was not to he the worst problem of the period. In 1630 a population already weakened by the famine was devastated by the plague- In this year the plague killed Nicola s father and mother and two of his sisters. (It has been suggested that Nicola's uncle. Antonio Amati. was also killed by the plague. but no documentary evidence has set been found concerning, his death.) The same plague epidemic went on to kill Gio Paolo Maggini in 1632 in effect leaving Nicola as the only surviving violin maker of quality in Italy.

At the age of 34 it must have seemed to Nicola that the weight of the whole world was pressing down on his shoulders. In spite of his exceptional training, I

imagine it required a superhuman effort to pick up the pieces of the business. with his world lying in ruins around him. From this time. until his marriage, Nicola lived with his sister.

Nicola's greatest achievement as a maker was the development of the so-called Grand Pattern violins. These were instruments of a length which we today regard as standard, but, more importantly, they were wider in the bouts than previous works.

Instruments from the period immediately after the plague are rare, almost certainly reflecting the problems which Nicola faced. This may also be the reason why Nicola was still using the same pattern or mould for some of his violins more than twenty years later. Having said this, whenever Nicola worked to a specific set of patterns the consistency and accuracy of his craftsmanship is remarkable, even when many years separate individual examples.

By the 1640s, the loss of momentum caused by the plague had been redressed and production was beginning to reach new peaks in response to an ever increasing demand for instruments. However, this demand created further problems for the maestro. He needed help for his expanding business. Since he had, as yet, no children of his own, Nicola appears to have had no choice but to break with the family tradition and employ non-family members as violin makers. No one can be certain how many people were employed in Nicola's workshop either as assistants or apprentices, but he seemed to have attracted a considerable number. The Hill Guarneri book mentions several Germans who were recorded as living in the Amati household. According to Duane Rosengard, who has been ferreting through the archives, there mere a great many more than the Hills indicate. (More about his pupils later.)

On 23rd May in 1645, at almost 50 years of age, Nicola married Lucrezia Pagliari In spite of Nicola's advanced years they had nine children. To add to the family's woes, but in common with the times, several of these children died at an earn age One of those who managed to survive and live to a Wipe old ale was Hieronymus II. Born in 1649, Hieronymus II was to become the last luthier of the Amati family.

Throughout his long life the production from Nicola'sworkshop was considerable. He appears to have produced fewer colas and cellos than the brothers, concentrating mostly on violins.

Following the tradition of Andrea and the Brothers, Nicola produced at least two decorated violins. Here, however, he departed from the Amatis usual practice of painting and gilding. Instead he chose to inlay these instruments with double purfling fine black scroll work and fleur de lys. The fleur de lys and the eyes of the scroll were also set with semiprecious stones. These violins are purported to have been made by Nicola for King Louis XIV of France. They are both in museum collections. The first, dated 1656, is housed in the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC. The second is part of an equally impressive, though perhaps less well known collection, in the musical instrument museum of Prague. Without doubt these works were the inspiration for Stradivari's famous ornamented instruments (see Hellier STRAD poster). It is even possible that the young Stradivari was working in the Amati workshops in 1656. He would have been about 11 or 12 years old. Andrea Guarneri also copied Nicola's inlaid instruments and in turn passed the designs on to his son Pietro Guarneri of Mantua.

Nicola's greatest achievement as a maker was the development of the so-called `Grand Pattern' violins. These instruments were of a length which we today regard as standard, but perhaps of more importance is the fact that they were considerably wider in the bouts than previous works. Grand Pattern Amatis are usually the most sought after of all the Amati family instruments. They have an excellent reputation for sound: The `Alard' Nicola Amati illustrated here is

not of the Grand Pattern.

Whatever Antonio Stradivari, Guarneri 'del Gesu' and other, later Cremonese school makers may have achieved tonally, it is my firm belief that Nicola fashioned the most aesthetically beautiful instruments of all time. Visually or tonally, we must surely be grateful that he was the survivor of the plague and not some lesser-skilled mortal.

By the end of 1670 Nicola had started his 75th year and it becomes clear from the work of this period that he was personally taking less of a part in the actual production process. More and more we see the hand of Nicola's son, just as we can see Nicola's hand in those later works of the brothers. Nicola finally died on 12 April 1684, aged 87.

Quite apart from the rich legacy of fine instruments which Nicola gave to the world, his most important achievement was his role as a teacher. Naturally, we all know the more famous names associated with Nicola's workshop. They include his own son, Hieronymus II, Francesco Rugeri, Andrea Guarneri, Giovanni Baptista Roger, Jacobus Januarius, Bartolomeo Christofori and Jacobus Stainer. Of all these more or less famous makers, only Nicola's son Hieronymus II, Andrea Guarneri, Jacobus Januarius and Christofori can, for the time being, be directly linked to the Amati household by documentary evidence (and not simply by instrument labels which refer to Alumni Nicolai Amati.) As for the rest, in the main, experts link them stylistically, which of course has led to some controversy.

Francesco Rugeri, generally supposed to have been Nicola's first pupil is said, by the Hills, to have used the tern Alumnus Nicola Amati on certain labels. Beare appears to dispute this, but both sources refer to Francesco's apparent habit of inserting copy Nicola Amati labels in his own instruments:

`He copied the Amati style with care and elegance and often even inserted copies of Nicola Amati's label or he may at times have exported his own work as that of his teachers. As early as 1685 a citizen of Moderna laid complaint that the violin he had purchased for 12 pistoles as an Amati was in fact a Rugeri worth 3 pistoles at the most.' New Grove Dictionary

Without question the works by Francesco Rugeri are amongst the most difficult to distinguish from Nicola's works. Stylistically, there can be no doubt about Francesco's connection to the Amati shop. Quite apart from several subtle stylistic details, a few very minor constructional differences also punctuate Francesco's work. For example, he seems to have used no locating pins, no central back pin (hole) and different material for his white purfling strips.

Andrea Guarneri's connections are indisputable on both stylistic and documentary grounds. Cremonese census returns clearly state that Andrea Guarneri, the founder of the Guarneri school was living in Nicola's house. Furthermore, Andrea was a witness and signatory to the register at Nicola's wedding. Beare records the dates of Andrea Guarneri's apprenticeship as being from, at least, 1641 until 1646. The Hills, writing some 50 years earlier, state that Andrea left Nicola's household in 1645. The Hills also had the following to say about the relationship between Andrea's work and that of his master Nicola:

`Andrea was in no sense a great craftsman, true, here and there he was not far behind the Amati, but ... we have never seen an instrument of his making in which the concepts and execution equalled the best work of the master.' (Hill Guarneri Book)

Andrea Guarneri certainly used the term Alumnus Nicolai Amati on his labels, as did Giacomo. Gennaro. Gennaro, otherwise known as Jacobus Januarius like Guarneri, is also mentioned in the census returns for the Amati household. The work of Januarius is quite rare and almost all of his instruments have been attributed to Amati. Perhaps this is also a testimony to die stylistic similarity of Januarius' work to that of Nicola. Januarius does not seem to have made instruments after Nicola's Grand Pattern. They are usually of the smaller type.

The back of the `Alard' is rippled like sea shore sand and from top to bottom you can quite literally feel the flames with your fingertips

Giovanni Baptista Rogeri of Brescia, who is often confused with Francesco Rugeri because of the various ways of spelling their names, also used the term Alumnus Nicolai Amati on his labels. Once again the stylistic similarities are not disputed.

Readers of THE STRAD will remember John Dilworth's remarkable article on the work of Bartolomeo Christofori. Christofori is better known as a designer of the piano. He was employed by a Florentine nobleman as the keeper of iris musical instru-

ments. There seems little doubt that this is the same Christofori officially recorded as living in Nicola Amati's house. All the dates appear to fit. There are no surviving violins and violas from Christofori, but several cellos exist which are, again, stylistically close to the work of Nicola Amati.

Whether or not Jacobus Stainer was a direct pupil of Nicola Amati will be argued until doomsday. I covered most of the pros and cons in my article on Stainer (THE STRAD April 1990). Unless more documentary evidence is forthcoming, we will probably never know the true extent of Nicola's role as a teacher. What we do know is that it was not uncommon at that time for artists and artisans to travel vast distances in order to study with a well-known master and Nicola was certainly that. J

A certain Paolo Grancino also occurs in the census returns and several biographers including Von Lutgendorff and George Hart suggest that he was the father of Francesco and Giovanni Grancino of Milan. Hart even goes so far as to say that Paolo was a favourite pupil of Nicola. Unfortunately, there is no proof for the existence of any instruments by Paolo Grancino. There is, however, little doubt that early Grancino works were influenced by the Amatis. In particular, these early works have an exceptional, almost Cremonese varnish with a rich texture and a dark brownred or orange colour.

As we have already seen, several Germans were recorded in Nicola's house. However, there is as yet no evidence of these persons ever having become fully fledged makers. We also find several makers whose work is very similar in style to the Amatis but where other supportive evidence is weak. In particular I am thinking of some Dutch makers. These are more likely to be cases of indirect rather than direct influence.

I now turn to the most famous of Nicola's supposed pupils, Antonio Stradivari. Here the documentary evidence is limited to a single label linking Antonio to Nicola. This label is dated 1666 and includes the words Alumnus Nicolai Amati faciebat anno 1666. It was discovered by the Hill brothers in an original early work of Antonio and it is reproduced in the Hill book on Stradivari published in 1902.

Stylistically speaking there are problems with linking Antonio to Nicola's workshop. It is undoubtedly true that the influence of Nicola Amati can clearly be seen in all of Antonio's early works, even up to the 1690s. On the other hand, it is a far more difficult task to identify the work of Antonio in any instrument attributed to Nicola. Here again, the Hill brothers comments are worth repeating:

`As to the exact position occupied by Stradivari while with Amati, nothing is really known, nor does the minute scrutiny of the workmanship of Nicola Amati's later instruments enlighten us to any appreciable extent. We recognise in certain violins the unmistakable handiwork of Andrea Guarneri, of Giovanni Baptista Rogeri and of Francesco Rugeri, but we have hitherto failed to find a single specimen bearing the already strongly characteristic impress of Stradivari.'

This is a powerful comment from the Hills, in spite of the fact that neither they, nor any other serious expert would challenge the idea that Stradivari was a pupil of Nicola Amati. Personally, I think the truth is that Stradivari's unique abilities as a craftsman enabled him to copy his master's style exactly.

In order to complete the list of Nicola's pupils it is necessary to include a few words about his son Hieronymus 11. As we have seen, Nicola Amati did not marry until his 50th year. Because of their precise birth dates, Nicola was actually 53 years old when Hieronymus was born in 1649. Fortunately Nicola lived to a ripe old age and Hieronymus was already 35 years old before his father died aged 87. This was time enough for Hieronymus to gain something from the great teacher, even though Nicola did not make many instruments unaided in his final 15 or so years.

It is difficult to make a fair judgement on Hieronymus 11. Comparative makers both before, during and after his working life, were of an extremely high calibre. Nicola, as his predecessor and teacher, made, unquestionably, the most beautiful instruments of the 17th century. Meanwhile, the two greatest contemporaries of Hieronymus were none other than Antonio Stradivari and Josef Guarneri del Gesu. This is not to mention Carlo Bergonzi, the rest of the Guarneris the Rogeris and the Rugeris. In fact, Hieronymus II was in direct competition with all of these makers and their followers. Makers who his father had invested the best years of his life teaching. We can only hope that they were kind to him.

Having said all this, the work of Hieronymus should not be lightly dismissed. Hieronymus made some exceptional instruments and even though the workmanship was somewhat heavier than that of his father, at least he did not scoop his archings to the same extent. In this respect, at least, he took some

note of the success of his rivals.

After 1700, whether ageing, disillusioned or simply swamped by his rivals, Hieronymus 11 appears to have made very few instruments. It should, however, be remembered, that at this time there was also stiff competition throughout Europe and the economic situation in Northern Italy was very much on the decline. Hieronymus 11 died in 1740 and with him the illustrious Amati family's violin making tradition. He was just five days short of his 91st birthday.

Perhaps I should say finally a little about other makers with a claim to the Amati name.

Bonetti suggests that there is some cause for considering the presence of a second Andrea Amati who may have been a son of Antonio Amati. In the papers referring to Andrea 11 he is described as a master luthier (Maestro Luitaro). The references to him in Cremona are dated 1610 and 1611. The first reference records the death of a daughter aged one month. The second records the death of his wife. There are no further records concerning this maker and there are no known instruments.

In contrast there are a number of surviving instruments by a Don Nicolaus Amati of Bologna circa 1723 to 37. It is uncertain if he was related to the Cremonese family. I have only seen two authentic examples of Don Nicolaus' work. Both bear little sign of his ever having been exposed to the Amati tradition. The workmanship is quite crude by comparison and the varnish has a heavy craqueleur.

There are several other Amatis mentioned by Douring, Von Lutgendorff and others but their inclusion here would hardly be worth the ink. Until such time as further evidence turns up to support their claims, I will let them rest in peace.

The `Alard' Nicola Amati violin 1649

The year 1649 was the one in which Nicola's violin making son Hieronymus 11 was born This instrument, made in that year, was later owned by Delphin Jean Alard (1815 - 1888) the famous French violinist. He was professor of violin at the Paris Conservatoire, but perhaps of more importance for his violin-owning prospects, he was the son-in-law of JB Vuillaume. Several instruments bear the name `Alard' including a 1715 Stradivari and a 1742 Guarneri del Gesu. Sadly for Alard, the most famous instrument which he owned does not bear his name - it is the `Messiah' or `Salabue' Stradivari 1716.

The `Alard' Amati played an important role in my personal development as a violin maker. It was the first instrument which I attempted to copy exactly. I made a total of six instruments after the Mard, including my final examination violin at the Newark Violin Making School. During the time I worked with W E Hill and Sons I enjoyed the privilege of examining the instrument in the Ashmolean Museum library on a large number of occasions. I never tired of admiring this instrument which I regard as possibly the finest masterpiece of 17th century violin making.

Andrea Guarneri's connections are indisputable on both stylistic and documentary-grounds. Cremonese census returns state that he was living in Nicola Amati's house

This instrument is certainly special in many ways and not only because of its exceptional state of preservation. I am convinced that Nicola selected and prepared the materials for the `Alard' in order to achieve the maximum in both aesthetic beauty and functional effectiveness. When I look at this violin I have the overwhelming feeling that, right from the start, Nicola conceived it as something special. His choice of materials is somewhat unusual. The back wood seems to be imported mountain-grown wood in spite of the year rings which are occasionally two to three mm wide. The medium width flame is deep and wild. This kind of `foreign' wood is quite rare for the Amatis and mostly occurs only towards the end of Nicola's life. The wood is cut exactly on the quarter. It is jointed in that peculiarly Amati fashion, with the flames running in the same direction across the centre joint. The ribs are of similar wood to the back but their growth is much finer. Also of fine growth is the head and neck wood. Like the 'Hellier' Stradivari (see STRAD poster September 1987) the figure of the head matches the back and ribs perfectly but it is shallower in structure. Clearly the head and neck wood was selected in order to make the carving process much easier but without compromising the strength or beauty.

The belly wood is similar to that used by Stradivari and Guarneri del Gesu in their later periods. It is also exactly quarter sawn. The year rings are strongly pronounced and of medium width. They are evenly spaced across the belly. Altogether it is difficult to

fault.,Nicola's choice of materials, either in cut, or quality.

Finding fault with Nicola's workmanship and concept would prove equally difficult. Notwithstanding what I said about the heads of Andrea Amati (STRAD December 1991) 1 would go so far as to say that the `Alard' head is the most majestic and beautiful scroll ever carved for a violin. But then, confronted with almost any head cut by Nicola Amati I would probably make the same comment. As I pointed out earlier, Nicola's consistency was remarkable. As a rule his heads are stronger in character than those of Andrea or the brothers whilst at the same time being more graceful than those of Antonio Stradivari.

The fine details which make Nicola's scrolls different from the rest of the family are few and difficult to define. The original concept for all Amati scrolls remained basically the same throughout. Of course, patterns changed slightly over the centuries but it is in the actual carving process that the ultimate differences emerge.

The `Alard' scroll is clearly the work of a confident, competent craftsman in his prune. The artistry of the carving entirely defies any minute deviation from geometric perfection. The work is clean mid sharp with characteristically few tool marks. The few which there are, are to be found on the vertical surfaces of the turns and in the fluting under the front of the head; all standard Cremonese practice. Generally, however, tool marks on Amati heads are extremely fine by comparison. On the `Alard', they are the product of the feather light application of razor sharp gouges.

Viewed from the side the flat surface of the pegbox walls gently curl and taper into accurate and well rounded volutes. The volutes themselves continue to turn cleanly, becoming tighter and deeper towards the eye. The eye has that typical comma form which I described in my article on Andrea Amati. At no point is there a bump, a jump or any deviation from what appears to be an entirely natural course. Few Stradivaris, mostly early, and almost no Guarneris would conform to such an accurate flow. Stradivari tends towards an oval form and Guarneri towards a square.

Viewed from the back the pegbox has that typical Amatese taper which Stradivari later rejected in favour of more space for the A string. The central spine between the flutings is well preserved. Its keen edge still retains all of the fide compass pricks which were applied in the marking out process3. There is, however, no trace of the scribe line, which often marks the central spine on Nicola's heads, not to mention those of most other Cremonese makers.

Unlike the heads of the earlier members of his family, the central spine between the flutes typically continues to run around and rider the front of the head right up to the end of the throat. (See photograph of Andrea Amati where fluting stops short.)

Also under the front of the head the two flutes are immaculately finished. A myriad of tiny gouge cuts have left minute facets somewhat resembling the planished surface of a copper bowl. I must stress that without the aid of an eyeglass these marks are almost invisible. Other Cremonese makers were not quite so careful. Nicola's pupil Andrea Guarneri left much larger gouge marks. These are particularly prominent on cello heads. In all cases such tool marks were probably far less obvious when the instruments were freshly varnished. So often it is time and wear which has created the patterns peculiar to certain individuals.

As a rule, his heads are stronger in character than those of Andrea or the Brothers, whilst at the same time being more graceful than those of Stradivari

From the front, the `Alard' head displays the perfect balance of most Amati heads. The second turns of the volutes complement and follow the first turns exactly. Once again, the combination of strength and grace is paramount.

The pegbox is slightly narrower at the A peg end than a Stradivari box would be. This is the reason why Stradivari pegboxes are fatter behind the throat, when viewed from the back. It is perhaps worth comparing the measurements as well as the photographs of the `Betts' Stradivari (STRAD May 1989) with the `Alard'. Finally, the chamfer, neither too heavy nor too mean, sets the finishing touch to this magnificent head. The general state of preservation is such that the pegholes have never required bushing in almost two and a half centuries. The head also retains its original neck which has however been lengthened at the root and reshaped. At the neck root the remains of three nail holes can also still be seen (see button photo).

I have already mentioned the deep and wild flame of the `Alard' back. It is rippled like sea shore sand and from top to bottom you can quite literally feel the flames with your fingertips. Most classical violins with a strongly pronounced flame have this corrugated feel to the surface. The outline of the back may appear quite extreme to those not used to such works by Nicola Amati, especially one in such fine condition. It is well rounded with just a tendency towards flatness across the bottom. The centre bout curves curl around quite tightly at the top corners rather like some Strads but the middle section of the centre bout curves are not quite as flat as a Stradivari would be, with the resulting kink in the top curve.

It is, however, the corners which attract the attention most. Their extreme length gives them a delicate, almost fragile appearance. There is a definite tendency, especially for the upper corners, to trumpet slightly at the ends. In fact the narrowest point actually occurs before the very end. At this smallest point the upper corners measure less than 6 mm across. This is considerably less than a prime period Strad confer would measure.

The edgework, which has been softened rather than worn by time, is well rounded over the top and has the usual Cremonese knife cut chamfer to the underside. This has been far more carefully applied than it was by many of the later Cremonese makers. It has also been softened. Like Andrea Amati, there is here and there a tendency for the edge to be flat between the top curve and the chamfer. This is particularly so in the tighter curves of the centre bouts. This flatness is not as extreme as that of either his grandfather's work or that of JB Rogeri of Brescia, of whom this feature is very typical.

There is, of course, a clear increase in the edge thickness in the central bouts and even more so at the corners. This Cremonese feature is well documented, especially in writings about Stradivari. I offer one plausible explanation in the VSA journal (Vo1.10, No.2 and also in Close to the Edge, STRAD June 1989) and the Hill brothers offer another in their book on Stradivari.

In several places it is possible, with a jeweller's eyeglass, to see fine scribe lines marking the high point of the edge. These lines sit exactly halfway between the purling and the outside edge. At the corners these lines run on both sides of the mitre. Similar lines on clean Stradivaris lie much closer to the outside edge, relative to the purfling.

Also related to the edgework is the button. On the `Alard', as with all unworn Cremonese instruments, it has a distinctly wedged shape (see measurements).

Perhaps most shocking of all is the arching, which appears quite high and pinched slightly in the centre. The actual height of the arching is somewhat exaggerated by the deeply excavated purfling channel. The channel scoops so far inwards and downwards from the edges that the purfling itself lies on the downward slope way above the deepest point. This scooping of the purfling channel is far more pronounced than that of the Brothers, or Andrea, and it does not have the figure of eight which I described in my article on Andrea. Nicola's back arching has a typically barrel shaped middle section, which leaves the upper and lower bouts much more hollow than those of his predecessors. If you were to pour Guinness into the purfling channel of the `Alard' you would be left with a long straight sausage shaped island in the middle of a wide dark brown sea. With Andrea and the early Brothers archings the island would have a distinct figure of 8 shape with a moat surrounding it.

Although the `Alard' purfling is fine (about 1.25) it is quite prominent because of the deep intensity of the blacks. Intense blacks are a feature common to the Amati family. Sometimes Nicola's black purfling strips are quite wide but they are always very intense. On this instrument the blacks appear to be a fraction eider on the belly. However, this is a feature which I have often observed on Cremonese works and it may simply be the result of the different swelling properties of pine and maple. At the corners long, slender and accurately finished mitres, again testify to Nicola's ability to coordinate hand and eye. Here there is no sting, such as Stradivari often produced, neither is there any marked change of direction at the mitres' end, which was a trick of Andrea Guarneri.

There is, however, the tendency for all the mitres to run not into the middle of the cornier but rather slightly off centre, in effect making a tighter curve than the C bout outline. Nicola achieved this effect by gradually moving the line of the C bout purfling out towards the edge, at the point where the mitre begins, while at the same time shifting the upper and lower bout purfling inwards and away from the edge. The precise point at which the upper and lower bout purfling begins to move away from the outside edge helps us to identify the work of various members of the Amati family (see comparative diagram and explanatory notes, STRAD poster December 1991).

Before leaving the back I would first like to mention the two locating pins and that intriguing third `centre' pin whose very existence still seems to provoke anger and frustration in some readers. Of the two `locating' pins the top one can clearly be seen on the picture of the button. It lies on the centre joint, peeking out from under the purfling The bottom pin lies in a similar position at the opposite end of the back.

As for the central pin, I should begin by saying that I have not seen it in every instrument by Nicola Amati. To my surprise, I could not find one in the 1658 Nicola Grand Pattern, which is housed in the collection of the Commune di Cremona. I do believe, however, that the greater majority of instruments by Nicola do have this central pin. In the case of the `Alard' this pin is clearly visible. On the outside it can only be seen with an eye glass but on the inside it measures about 1.5 min in diameter. It lies half way between the top and bottom pins also on the central line.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that as far as I am aware this phi is only to be found in the work of one, non-family, pupil of Nicola Amati and that is Andrea Guarneri. All further users of this pin were in some way connected to the Guarneri family

I now turn to the `Alard' ribs. In common with most of Nicola's works the flame runs at the same angle all around the instrument. This is also true of Stradivari (see Hellier article).

The bottom rib, is of one piece as was the top rib before the neck was let in. On the bottom rib, a tiny nick below the button, against the back plate, marks the centre line. Such fine nicks are common on Cremonese works where the ribs remain uncut. The `Alard' ribs which are about 1 mm thick, more or less, are more conventional than those of Andrea, which are usually much thicker.

The rib corner joints, like the corners themselves, are extremely long. They can easily be pinched between the thumb and forefinger and, theoretically at least, the instrument can be held up in this way. This is the Saxon test, so called because cheap Saxon factory instruments have the same feature. Unlike such works, we can clearly see that Nicola used an inside mould for the construction of the Alard. The corner blocks bear a strong resemblance to those of Stradivari but the linings do not. They retain the simple triangular section of his forefathers, but they are slightly stronger. They are not, however, as robust as those of Stradivari. As usual the inside work is strong and tidy but not fussy.

The belly arching, like that of the back, is also well scooped, though slightly fuller in the bouts just below the sound holes and also across the centre bouts just above the sound holes. Generally, the tendency is more towards the figure of eight arching of the earlier Amatis. The belly also has the usual long flat section running from under the fingerboard to the tailpiece.

Nicola's sound holes represent the final stages of sound hole development for the Amati family. The Brothers were responsible for developing and consolidating the true violin sound hole from the somewhat primitive `reversed' C type hole of Andrea Amati (see Andrea Amati article, STRAD December 1991). Nicola then took the Brothers' designs and refined them. It can be argued that Nicola produced the perfect sound hole form, and what followed were variations, but not improvements. Perhaps later improvements in sound had more to do with the size -of the sound holes and, in particular, their position on the arching, than it had to do with the actual sound hole shape. With few exceptions, it was from Nicola's sound holes that all subsequent sound holes evolved. The subtle shifts and changes which occurred from master to pupil over the generations are often difficult to appreciate unless all the various stages can be consulted. However, where it is possible to compare, we can clearly see a direct chain of development. For example, from Nicola Amati to Andrea Guarneri. From Andrea Guarneri to Josef Filius Guarneri and eventually to the wildest forms of Guarneri del Gesu. While it is true that del Gesu was probably also influenced by the early Brescian school there is no actual break in the stylistic chain from Nicola Amati.

The characteristics of all Nicola Amati sound holes are captured in the sound holes of the `Alard'. The method used is that which the entire Cremonese school followed. The top and bottom circles were drilled and the main body of the sound holes were cut at right angles to the arching surface.

The elegant curves of the `Alard' sound holes are governed by the same principles as those of the head and body curves. There is no hint of angularity. Actually it is the tapering shape of the so called wings which is the key to the purity of these sound hole curves. The converging tapers of the wings allow the inside curves to follow the outside curves much further than those of a Stradivari sound hole. This tapering of the wings is typical of Nicola Amati. So is

the delicate fluting of the lower wings, which simply seem to be an integral part of the purfling channel. By contrast Stradivari's fluting, though no less valid, is quite definitely a separate sculptural embelishment, breaking the natural flow of the arch.

Even the cut of Nicola's sound hole `nicks' seem to be in complete harmony with the whole concept. They are not as small as Stradivari's nicks nor are they as overweight as those of Andrea Amati. In size and shape, like baby bear's bed in the Goldilock's story, they are just right.

Nicola's sound holes were closely copied by his followers and they were themselves a development of the Brothers' work. For this reason his sound holes, taken on their own, are often difficult to distinguish from those of the Brothers, Francesco Rugeri, Andrea Guarneri and G B Rogeri. Only extremely subtle differences such as the size and shape, the position on the arching and the cut-off angles of the wings can help. For example, Andrea Guarneri's sound hole wings often have a more vertical cut-off angle than Nicola's and G B Rogeri's sound hole bodies have a stiffness to the upper curves which almost amount to a corner.

Nicola seems to have made few concessions to visual aesthetics, perhaps occasionally to the detriment of functionalism (a criticism which many level at the arching scoop). It is perhaps true that a limited number of later makers created a superior sound in terms of colour, response and power, but perhaps what they gained on the swings of sound, they lost on the roundabouts of visual purity.

Even so, we should not underestimate the impact of Nicola's tonal desirability. 'Nicola Amati's instruments are appreciated for the noble quality of the sound, combined with ease of response. There is also ample strength to the tone, at least until comparison is made with instruments of Stradivari and Guarneri del Gesu.' (C Beare; New Grove Dictionary).

The significance of this last sentence should not be underestimated. Sound comparisons with Stradivari and Guarneri del Gesu are comparisons of the very highest order.

Finally, I turn to the varnish. On the belly there is a brown, almost burnt umber colour to the area around the bridge. This is probably a mixture of dirt, polish and colophony. Otherwise, considering the exceptional condition of this instrument, not a great deal of pure varnish is left on the belly. Elsewhere the covering is about 80%. Although the varnish layer is quite thin there is a distinct edge somewhat resembling a coastline, marking the boundary between areas with and without varnish. This is the typical profile of most Cremonese varnishes when they have not been destroyed by excessive polishing. Put simply, the varnish is either there or it is missing and only the naked ground is visible. This ground is highly reflective and changes in refracted light from a pinkish gold colour to a warm, lemon gold. The varnish itself is a highly transparent amber colour which dances and changes hue with every movement of the instrument.

In Margaret Huggins' introductory note to the Hill book on the life and work of Stradivari she writes : `To make this series complete many lives, those of the Amati especially, must be written.' For many reasons the Hills planned major work on the Amati family was never completed. We must, however, be grateful for the contribution which the Hills have made to the violin literature and hope that someone will compile such a work in the near future.

British violin makers will also be grateful to the Hill brothers for their remarkable gesture in presenting the `Alard' Amati, along with so many other magnificent instruments, to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Unfortunately, in Britain today such gestures are all too rare.

Footnotes:

1 'Nicola' was the name used by the violin maker himself. The standard Italian `Nicolo' is equally correct.

2 Stradivari E La Liuteria Cremonese Dall URSS, Editrice Turris Cremona 1988. There are several cases of mistaken identity in this book and the photography is not all it could be, so it might be better to borrow a copy rather than buy one.)

3 For an explanation see - Sacconi's Secrets of Stradivari

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