The fruits of Brotherly love?

ROGER HARGRAVE COMPLETES HIS THREE-PART SERIES ON THE AMATI FAMILY WITH A DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE 1582 TENOR VIOLA BY THE BROTHERS AMATI, ANTONIO AND HIERONYMUS.

Why the large viola? It is generally accepted that the violin is one of the most perfectly designed objects ever created by man. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the viola and cello. A perfectly proportioned viola would require a body length of about 53cm. Against this, even the enormous `Tuscan' tenor viola of Stradivari is by comparison small at 47.6 cm.

The diversities in the size and form of the viola are of necessity controlled by the requirements of the shape player's physical stature, the action of much the bow across the bouts and several other such restrictive problems. For makers, violas offer perhaps the greatest challenge, and for players, perhaps the greatest problem. In the past the musical `gap' which the viola was required to fill led to the development of two types of viola, altos and tenors.

'Historically, the viola was `the instrument of the middle', being used for both the alto and tenor registers: in the 16th and 17th centuries, a four - part ensemble might use two violas; and a five part ensemble, three violas. This distribution accounts for the relatively large number of violas produced in these two centuries... the distribution of parts explains also why the size of violas varied from very large models, needed to play in the deep tenor register, to small models for playing in the higher, alto register.'

Only a very few tenor violas have survived the general ravages of time and the vast majority of those survivors have been subjected to the `restorer's' knife, cut down to a more manageable size. Readers may be curious as to why I chose such a large `unplayable' viola for my final article on the Amati family. Well! Why not? This viola illustrates adequately the work of the Brothers Amati and large violas do seem to be coming back into fashion. If you don't believe me, ask a few professional makers. Among my own acquaintance, tenor violas are filling an increasingly important corner of their order books, my own included. Unplayable! I think not! There are even those who maintain that after playing such a viola it is the smaller violas which are unplayable. In the end it boils down to your taste and your stature, but the image of tenor viola players dragging their knuckles on the floor when they walk is far from true.

Not unusually for the Amati family the head wood on this viola is cut on the slab. This results in the flames, or figure, being prominent on the back of the pegbox rather than on the sides. The wood is medium to fine growth, mountain maple. On the head itself the figure is regular and even but, typically, shallow in its curl. It was clearly selected for easy carving. From the head to the neck the figure fades out quite abruptly and almost completely. This change in the wood's appearance gives the impression that the neck has been grafted. The repair work which has been carried out on the chin also adds to the illusion of a neck graft, so much so that the Hill drawings show the instrument as having been given a replacement neck. The neck is, however, original to the head and also the instrument. Unfortunately, the shape of the neck has been altered so much that I have not thought it worth including any of the main details here. The only valuable exception is the length of the neck from the headshoulder to the belly edge. This can still be devised from the square-cut out at the neck root which has at some time been bushed as the neck was being re-fitted and re-shaped. Sadly, the re-setting of the neck has resulted in the loss of the original top block and also the nails which once went through the block and into the neck root. Stains in the wood at the neck root indicate the position of the two lower nails. There were probably three and possibly four nails originally holding the neck.

The fingerboard is certainly not original and is probably narrower, at least at the root end, than the Brothers intended. From the neck's present condition, nothing can be deduced about the elevation of the instrument in its Baroque form. Curiously, in spite of the fact that this Amati Tenor viola is 4cm, (more than one and a half inches), larger in body than all of Strad's Alto violas, its head is almost exactly the same length and the Amati is just a touch narrower across the eyes. Considering the similarity in the size of these two viola heads the Amati is certainly much lighter in concept. The throat is a little more open, the volutes and flutings are more deeply sculptured and the chamfers are more delicately applied. Even the tool marks are finer. This is a feature which I mentioned in connection with the works of Andrea and Nicola Amati. However, on this instrument and also on the bass viol/cello by the Brothers, which is to be found in the same display cabinet at the Ashmolean Museum, the tool marks appear on the flat surfaces of the volutes as well as the vertical surfaces of the turns. From about the beginning of the second turn of the scroll up to the eye itself hundreds of extremely fine gouge marks (almost scraper marks) radiate outwards from the central bosses to form an even flower-petal type of pattern. I must underline the fine nature of these marks which are really only noticeable on close examination on this viola. The pattern is slightly easier to see on the bass viol/cello because of the larger size of the head. Although we would not normally expect to find such traces of the gouge on the flat surfaces of the volutes of Stradivari's scrolls, we would expect to see tool marks on the vertical surfaces of the bosses on all Classical Cremonese scrolls, including those of Stradivari. Although the Amati's are no exception to the rule, these vertical tool marks are always finer on the works of the Amati than on any other Cremonese makers' heads.

The flutings on the back of the pegbox are deeper and more rounded in form than those of Stradivari and they continue so over the top and front of the head. Like their father, Andrea, the brothers blended the two flutings into one large flute under the front of the head. At this point the central spine which separates the two flutes ends quite abruptly, almost like a tiny nose. There are no obvious tool marks on the flutings.

Like most Cremonese works the central spine has the remains of ascribe line and several pin holes all of which were used in the marking-out process.

On the back of the pegbox, at the deepest point of the right hand flute, a strangely shaped stamp has been deeply incised (see photos and see also explanation of M-shaped stamp).

Turning again to the front of the pegbox we can see the only detail of this head which is more heavily constructed than any comparable Stradivari head. The pegbox walls are very thick. This may be the result of the Amati habit of cutting heads on the slab. Theoretically, there is more chance of splits occurring between the peg holes on a slab cut head. (Slab cut heads are also common on early Brescian instruments).

Generally the workmanship, though clean and delicate, lacks something of the usual pristine quality which one would normally associate with a Brothers' instrument. Fortunately true art is seldom precise and the majestic beauty of this head is not marred by any shortfall in mathematical symmetry. The same comments might be levelled at much of the work on the body, in particular the application of the purfling which I shall be referring to later.

Like the head wood, that of the ribs, is of medium to fine growth. The flame or figure is soft and velvety in appearance. Originally, the top ribs were of one piece but they have since been cut through to receive the re-fitted neck. The flame on the ribs probably ran in the same direction all around the instrument. The bottom bass side rib is however almost certainly a replacement and here the flame runs in the opposite-direction. The flames are, not quite as soft as the remaining ribs and the ground is lifeless in comparison. The original rib may have been badly worm-eaten since there is ample evidence of worm-attack in this area; in particular on the bass side centre rib and the bass side outer, lower bouts.

On the inside the linings are also different to those on the remaining ribs. The original linings are substantial and similar in both form and material to Stradivari's linings (probably red willow). In contrast to Stradivari the corner blocks are of pine and appear to be quite genuine. The two end blocks are, however, replacements. The ribs measure about 1.1mm in thickness and are fairly consistent. The ribs have all the appearance of having been constructed on a form or mould.

The same form was probably used for the uncut Brothers Amati viola in the collection at the Royal Academy of Music (see Masterpieces of Italian Violin Making David Rattray). This was not, however, the

form used by Andrea Amati for the decorated tenor, which hangs in the same case as the viola illustrated here. The Andrea viola is more than 1.5cm longer again.

The back wood is of finer growth than the head and ribs and the flames are somewhat more pronounced although they still retain something of the velvety quality of the rib flames. The back wood is jointed with the flames running across to the centre descending from the treble to the bass side. This is a typically Amatese method of jointing the back wood and although the method was used by later Cremonese makers, including Stradivari, it was rarely used after the second half of the 17th century.

Common practice throughout the Classical period was the addition of `wings' to the lower bouts, especially of violas and cellos. This viola has wings in the lower bouts of the back which, apparently, include the tips of the bottom corners. The lower treble side corner is, however, a replacement, again probably as the result of worm damage.

The back arching rises quickly from a deeply scooped channel creating the figure-of-eight shaped fullness which we associate with the early Amatis. Although the arching becomes quite markedly flat, especially the lower cross-arch, it cannot be described as boxy in the manner of some of Stainer's instruments. Indeed, as my templates seem to indicate, I believe this flatness to be mostly distortion. On the belly this is clearly the result of old repair work and several parallel cracks.

From the thickness measurements of the back (these measurements were taken with the Hacklinger thicknessing gauge) it would seem that there is a band of thicker material running along the centre of the instrument becoming even stronger towards the middle point. Conversely the instrument becomes thinner out towards the bouts. Although this would be considered a typical thicknessing profile for the Amati's, generally the thicknessing at the edges may have been tampered with.

The purfling is substantial with intensely dyed blacks prepared thick enough to cut the long, slender mitres, so typical of the Amati family. The purling is set quite close to the edge - about 3.5mm - but it moves gradually away from the ` edge at a very early stage as it approaches the corners from the upper and lower bouts. The point at which the purling moves away from the corners can be helpful in identifying the various members of the Amati~family (see STS poster on Andrea Amati, December 1991). At the point where the mitre itself begins the purling also turns inwards towards the edges in the C bouts. The bottom treble side corner is, as I have already pointed out, a replacement. However, it must be said that the remaining mitres have not been as carefully finished as might normally be expected of the Brothers. In particular the top bass side corner is of interest. The white from the upper bouts clearly ends short of the mark.

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The high spot of the edges seems to have been set close to the outside edge and the purfling lies on the downward slope of the wide scooping channel. The turning of the edge is more crescent-shaped than it is round and is even quite flat in the tighter curves of the centre bouts, almost in the style of Andrea Amati. There is no clearly defined chamfer on the underside as one might expect on most Cremonese works.

On the outside of the back there are two `locating' pins. The top pin is set on the right hand- side of the joint, about 2.5mm from the purfling, and the bottom pin sits to the left of the joint about 3.5mm from the purfling. (The pins on the Royal Academy viola are set in similar positions). These pins are about 2 mm in diameter and seem to be made of maple. There are two further pins in the button which are probably not original, however, the strange `M' or `W' brand appears to have been applied after or over these pins. I have included here photographs and drawings of these strange brands or stamps which are deeply incised into the button and pegbox. Similar stamps are to be found on several instruments bearing the Brothers' labels. Boyden and several other sources state that these stamps are the marks of the Medici family. This conclusion is, however, based on circumstantial evidence only.

The shape of the larger stamp appears to be the letter `M'. It could, however, easily be the letter `W' or even two letter `V's side by side. It may not even be a letter at all. The fact that Hieronymus' wife, Laura Lazzarini, was also called Laura de Medici has been seen as linking her to the Medicis of Florence, but this is also speculation. Perhaps the strongest reason

for suspecting a link between these stamps and the Medicis are the instruments made by Andrea Amati for Catherine de Medici's son, Charles IX of France, (see STRAD poster, December 1991). Hopefully, further research will prove fruitful in helping to unravel this little mystery as well. The conical pin hole which one might expect to find at the centre of the back on the inside, is small and has not been filled with a wooden pin. This pin-hole is also not visible on the outside as might normally be expected.

The belly arch resembles that of the back except that the long arch has the usual flatness across the top and raises up much earlier under the fingerboard and tailpiece. Unfortunately, I could not take a long arch template for the belly.

There is just the tiniest suggestion of fluting in the lower soundhole wings which are otherwise an integral part of the arching shape. As I indicated earlier, the arching has sunk slightly on the bass bar side, especially in the lower bouts. This is not the only distortion of the belly arching. The upper wing of the left soundhole has dropped slightly and the lower wing of the right hole quite considerably. The upper wing of the right hole actually sticks out. Only the lower wing of the left hole seems to be in its correct place.

The belly wood is quite unusual and at first glance appears to be made up of four pieces. It is actually a two piece belly with a band of wide growth in the centre which becomes quite narrow in the region of the soundholes and again wider in the flanks.

The printed label of this instrument is rather dirty and I can give no opinion as to its authenticity. The wording is identical to that of the bass viol/cello of 1611. (The date is handwritten in brown ink.)

Antonius, & Hieronymus Fr Amati

Cremonen Andreae f 1. F. 1592

The tailpiece accompanying this instrument is worthy a mention. I have included here an outline and the measurements. Despite the fact the Hill drawings' and Boydens catalogue of the Hill collection2, both state that this tailpiece belongs to the instrument, I seriously doubt that it does.

It has a fine crumbly craqueleur reminiscent of Andrea Guarneri's varnish. This is not to say that I believe it to be the work of Andrea. I have absolutely no intention of offering any possible provenence. The tailpiece is, however, very old and probably comes from before the time of wound strings in the late 1670's. I would guess from the varnish that it is Cremonese and the inlay whites certainly look like poplar. The blacks however are too faded to be from the Amatis, and neither are they cleanly enough applied.

I have left until last the soundholes. The Brothers Amati made many experiments and probably produced a wide variety of violin-related instruments. Perhaps the most obvious contribution of the Brothers was their development of the soundhole. Over the period of the Brothers Amati labels the soundhole developed from the simple reversed gamba C hole into the beautifully flowing forms which set the trend for all the great Cremonese makers. The only possible exception to this was Guarneri Del Gesu. Del Gesu seems to have created a curious hybrid between the soundholes of Cremona and those of Brescia.

For comparison I have included on the poster two soundholes from Andrea Amati, three from the Brothers and two more from Nicola. The first two soundholes (poster diags. 1 & 2) show clearly the influence of the C type soundhole. This is the primal form of the violin soundhole and it was probably developed by reversing the top half of a C type soundhole.

The wings are narrow and straight, the top and bottom circles are the same size and the nicks are large and open (for further examples see STRAD poster, 1991 December).

The Brothers Amati illustrated here is an early work. Andrea was dead and both the brothers were apparently still working together in the Casa Amati. Already several changes have occurred to the soundhole (poster diag. 3). The top and bottom circles have different diameters although the top circle is still quite large. The wings are somewhat wider and have begun to turn. (The almost parallel form of the top wing has an uncanny resemblance to the much later Stradivari type wing). Only the nicks remain true to the design of Andrea.

In poster diagram 4 the metamorphosis is almost complete. Ironically, this soundhole is taken from a 1611 bass viol with certain features of a cello3. This must be one of the most elegant soundholes ever de-

signed and cut. It was, however, made after the death of Antonio (1607) and Nicola was still only 15 years-old.

Both circles have been modified in size to balance perfectly with the body of the hole. The body itself flows beautifully from top to bottom. The wings have developed that characteristic tapering and curve which is the hallmark of all the later Amati soundholes. The nicks are simply well proportioned being neither too large or too small. For my tastes the designs which followed this concept went a touch too far especially with the turn of the wings and also the eventual decrease in the size of the upper circles. The increasing turn of the wings begins to show in the Brothers' soundhole of 1617 (diag. 5).

Nicola's influence only became apparent in the `Brothers' workshop after about 1620 but the size and shape of his soundholes had already been established. As we can see from the final two examples, 1649 and 1670, made after the death of Hieronymus, (diag. 6 & 7) there were no major changes in Nicola's soundholes from the 1617 Brothers' soundhole (diag. 5). Only the 1670s example has a slightly smaller top circle. All of these soundholes seem to have had drilled top and bottom circles and after Andrea the main bodies were all cut at right angles to the arching.

Although this viola has some considerable worm damage and many cracks I chose it because of its rarity value, the ever increasing popularity of such large violas and because I find it simply magnificent. 0

An article on the history of the Brothers Amati, using important new evidence on the domestic dates and property details from recently translated Cremonese documents, will follow in an issue in the near future.

Footnotes:

1. John Pringle Drawings Pub. by W.E. Hill & Sons
2. The Hill Collection by David Boyden, Ashmolean Museum Oxford, Pub. by W.E. Hill & Sons)
3. Hill Collection itself, Ashmolean Museum; also The Hill Collection book by David Boyden