

Undercover agents

When is a Strad not a Strad? - When it was made by his son.

Roger Hargrave suggests that many Cremonese masterpieces are in fact the work of lesser-known makers

For centuries information about the lives and methods of the great violin makers has been gathered and recorded, and like some enormous symphonic work this information has been interpreted in the time-honoured manner. Its well-loved themes have provided safety and security for both, dealers and owners of classical instruments.

However, just as there are many ways to interpret a familiar symphonic work, there are many ways to interpret the information that, for generations, has been known about violin making. New research into the careers of the Cremonese painter Sofonisba Anguissola and the violin maker Katarina Guarneri illustrates this (see August 2000 p.832 and September 2000 p.950). They were not of the same social standing or nationality and 200 years separated their lives, but they were both required to earn their own keep in countries foreign to them until the later part of the 20th century, they were both written out of history, Sofonisba through pure prejudice and Katarina (to whatever extent) through sheer greed. Although still little more than an interesting footnote in the history of Cremona, these two women represent the beginnings of a revolutionary new way of thinking about the arts generally and about Cremonese violin making in particular.

The results of thinking in this way can be both exciting and disturbing and, in some respects, they make answering questions about the identity of Cremonese instruments more rather than less difficult. Moreover, archive research and investigations into the style and methods of the school are beginning to expose contradictions as often as they provide revelations. Consequently most Cremonese instruments can no longer be assessed with the confidence and precision of the past. For connoisseurs, that which is being revealed about the Cremonese violin makers should be setting off alarm bells.

One of the great weaknesses of connoisseurs is their tendency to become infatuated with lofty ideas and ideals. In spite of the magnificence of Cremonese instruments, violin making was (and still is) a traditional, repetitive craft, where technical proficiency came before artistic inspiration. However, almost since the time of the violin enthusiast and dealer Count Cozio de Salabue (1755-1840), connoisseurs have largely ignored this fact, preferring to perceive violin making as an art form. As a result, individual makers were elevated to the status of artists, a process which altered the perception of Cremonese instrument production. Inevitably, the myth of the lone individual making one-off masterpieces became firmly established, although the reality was somewhat different.

In the 200 and more years of classical Cremonese violin making, no more than 20-25 master makers are traditionally thought to have been involved in the trade. None of these makers worked entirely alone. At some stage all of them received help, usually from their sons or their apprentices, and in the case of Guarneri 'del Gesù', from his father and probably his wife Katarina. This help was often of major proportions. At various times Nicolo Amati had at least 16 apprentices living and working in his shop. However, although most of these working relationships have been known about for decades, for various reasons they have largely been ignored.

The great Cremonese workshops were famous and highly productive. Although it is difficult to establish the true extent of these shops' productivity, the surviving drawings of Stradivari indicate an output and variety barely represented by the number of violin-family instruments that have survived. An inventory made after the death of the German-born lute maker Laux Maier (c. 1485-1552) might help to shed some light upon the structure and form of instru-

ment making at the time of Andrea Amati.

Maier is accredited with several important developments in lute design, including the elongated or pearshaped lute form. Although few of his instruments have survived, this extensive and detailed inventory reveals among other items 1,100 finished lute: of various sizes, 1,300 soundboards, most carved and ready for assembly, and several chests full of prepared lute ribs. Clearly, in spite of the exceptionally high quality of the rare surviving works, Maier's workshop was a large commercial enterprise. His instruments were marketed throughout Europe, a task which, considering the numbers, would be formidable even in modern times. Although he was apparently a skilled maker, Maier's strengths lay in his organisation and marketing skills. Indeed the business was so well organised that after Maier's death the company continued for a further 61 years, evidently trading under the same name.¹ From the details that are known about the major Cremonese workshops, especially those of the Amatis and the Stradivaris, it is not unreasonable to reflect that they may have been organised in a similar fashion. In particular the high social standing of these makers, the international nature of their businesses and the innovative style of their work suggest this.

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It has become obvious that apart from those makers whose instruments are readily identifiable, several makers whose names are known but whose works are now unknown were also active in Cremona. Some may well have been employed as outworkers for the larger shops. However, at least one family, the Cironi, was granted citizenship in the city. At the time of the first Amatis both the father and the son were making instruments in the town, apparently including violins, but there are no known Cironi instruments of any kind. From such lost but clearly well-established makers, some instruments must have survived. The most likely explanation is that through label manipulation by unscrupulous or misguided dealers their instruments have been provided with better-known and consequently more valuable

pedigrees. This 'culture of mainstream names' is an unworthy tradition often continued today by providing a seductive certificate of authenticity for instruments lacking a favourable label. It is noticeable that few dealers write certificates that declare 'possibly 17th-century Cremonese' or an unknown Cremonese master'. The absence of authentic labels has always caused problems. Experts must have access to instruments bearing unmoved and unaltered original labels. They are the key to every decision made about an instrument's provenance. If the classical violin makers had not labelled their works, no amount of examination or It is an indisputable fact that original and unmoved labels (in some cases handwritten inscriptions, brands or stamps) are the only guide to the authorship of any instrument, whether labelled or not.

The manipulation of labels is not only a catastrophe for so many supposedly lost makers, it also creates havoc for those attempting to assess the stylistic development of the better-known masters. This problem may seem insignificant, but cheating customers for short-term gain is in the long term cheating history. (This practice is still widespread, particularly in the contemporary and semi-modern Italian market.) However, in classical Cremona this can only have happened because the instruments produced by lesser-known, and consequently less valuable, makers closely resembled those of the most sought-after masters.

The fate of makers who were exceptionally good at emulating a more valuable master's work was often obscurity. The larger Cremonese workshops were tightly controlled. Neither the Amatis nor the Stradivaris would have tolerated much individualism. In addition, because Cremonese apprentices were rigorously trained from an early age, they were unlikely to abandon the methods taught by their masters. In spite of various stylistic clues, this is probably the reason why it is now so difficult to separate some apprentices from their masters. Several were so skilled at working in the style of their master that their own style hardly surfaced. This is the obvious explanation for the difficulties experienced by experts when trying to establish the identity of Stradivari's teacher. Conversely, the highly individual style of Andrea Guarneri is more easily identifiable on many Amati workshop instruments.

Like the Cironi family, other uncelebrated Cremonese makers may have established their own businesses, presumably using their own labels, but their

names have simply been erased, initially from the instruments and ultimately from the records. After leaving the Casa Amati, Bartolomeo Pasta may never have made another violin, but just as conceivably he may have made many exceptional instruments in the Amati style, instruments that are now certified as authentic Amatis. In other cases the meanest efforts of some makers may now be recognised as their own work, while their finest creations are accredited to their (usually more marketable) masters. In Cremona the most likely possibilities are Giacomo Gennaro, Girolamo Amati 11, Katarina Guarneri and even the sons of Antonio Stradivari. Gennaro, one of Nicolo Amati's most trusted apprentices, was in business in Cremona for 50 years after leaving the Amati household. The extreme rarity of his instruments defies anything but the most obvious explanation. Sensitive thinkers should even question the true authorship of Antonio Stradivari's acclaimed golden-period instruments.

The facts have been available for a long time, but the will to interpret them in a more creative fashion has always been lacking. According to George Hart, the Hills' and most subsequent aficionados, the year 1700 heralds the dawn of Stradivari's golden period. However, in 1700 Antonio was already 56. By 1704 he was 60. In 1716, the date of the 'Messiah', he had turned 72, and as the golden period drew to a close he was 75. At the beginning of the period his two sons Francesco and Omobono were 29 and 21 respectively. At the end they were 48 and 40. Like the other great Cremonese workshops, the Stradivari shop was primarily a place where violins were manufactured and apprentices were turned into master violin makers. In those uncertain times Antonio Stradivari was not aware that he would live until he was over 90. In order that his sons could continue without him, he would have turned them into skilled craftsmen as quickly as possible. By the age of 20 at the latest, his sons would have been highly proficient makers. Francesco in particular must have contributed massively to the golden period's production. Neither should it be forgotten that a third son of Antonio, Giovanni Battista Martino, was probably also employed in the workshop until his untimely death in November 1727 at the age of 24.

As eminent as the Hill brothers undoubtedly were, their contention that Antonio's sons were somehow substandard is nonsense. In 1902, in their otherwise exceptional work, the Hills made the following comment: 'Omobono and Francesco embraced the career of their father, but neither of them can be said to

have distinguished himself; they were, in fact, completely eclipsed by their brilliant and long-lived father.' Such comments are based upon the quality of one or possibly two labelled works by Francesco and Omobono, which were made after the death of their father. These extremely rare works and presumably several similar unlabelled or relabelled works were created by Francesco between the ages of 66 and 72 and by Omobono between 58 and 63. This is hardly a fair assessment of their contribution to the art of Cremonese violin making.

The Stradivari workshop was probably modelled on that of Nicolo Amati who, as has been pointed out, employed numerous apprentices. Apart from Antonio's three sons, it is possible that several other makers were employed, possibly even after the golden period. There is no sign that Carlo Bergonzi was working alone in Cremona until about 1730. This effectively means that more than 30 of his working years remain unaccounted for. At this time instruments from Vincenzo Rugeri are also rare, as are those of Giuseppe filius Andrea' Guarneri throughout the 1720s. And finally, there is the mysterious absence of Giuseppe Guarneri 'del Gesu', also in the 1720s. In fact, outside the Stradivari workshop, production in Cremona was at an exceptionally low ebb. It is not beyond reason to suppose that these makers were all contributing to the massive output of instruments labelled by Antonio Stradivari. If so, it would also be reasonable to suppose that they were doing important work and not simply jointing backs and making pegs.

As for Antonio Stradivari's personal golden period, this was more likely to have been when the magnificent instruments of the 1690s were created. These represent his most skilful phase as a craftsman. His precision surpassed even that of the Amatis, and it can be argued that if not acoustically, at least aesthetically this was his finest hour. Furthermore, this was probably the last period in which he was designing, if not working, alone. Francesco was 19 in 1690 but almost 30 when the next designs, for the golden period instruments, were being developed.

The 18th-century writings of Count Cozio di Salabue illustrate the problem of these forgotten makers perfectly. In particular, he could identify many Milanese makers who are now unknown. Brescia, too, was a major centre of instrument making with many recorded names, but now only the works of Gasparo da Salo and Maggini are approved. It is impossible to estimate the number of Cremonese makers and in-

struments that fall into this category, but there were certainly far more than was previously believed; in particular the role of women in Cremona's violin workshops is in need of much research, although it may already be too late. Unfortunately, vandalism driven by greed has drastically reduced our knowledge of this and of other great schools. It is the main reason why makers like Girolamo Amati It, Giacomo Gennaro, Katarina Guarneri and the sons of Stradivari are virtual footnotes in the chronicles of Cremonese making. Nevertheless, in spite of label falsification and deliberate misrepresentation, the possibilities for reinterpreting information about the classical makers are still immense.

Whatever the true facts may turn out to be, reassessment does not call for the denigration or devaluation of these great works. It merely offers a different explanation, perhaps a more accurate one, certainly a more interesting one. The artistic merit of the Sistine Chapel is not lessened by knowing that a small army of craftsmen were working under the direction of Michelangelo. Nor are the chairs of Robert Adam and Thomas Chippendale any less worthy because they personally never raised a chisel in their preparation. The world can live with a Henry Moore sculpture that, though weighing several tons, was never more than a tiny model in the artists hands. It must now learn to live with violins to which the accredited master may have contributed little more than the plans and some fatherly guidance.

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