All Work And No Play

Carl C. Holzapfel Puts Music into Fiddles for Others to Draw Out

By Elizabeth H. Moberly

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NCE you’ve stepped from Fayette street into the crowded little workshop that smells of dust and old wood and resin and varnish, you might just as well be back in Cremona in the Seventeenth Century. And the man you see bowed over the workbench painstakingly carving the back of a violin might just as well be one of the old master violin makers at work.

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IKE others in his field, Carl C. Holzapfel, of Baltimore, still follows the traditions of violin-making that were set over 300 years ago by such masters as Stradivarius and Amati. They do their work by hand slowly, with meticulous attention to detail, for all the mechanical innovations of three centuries have not produced any improvement on these methods. Time means nothing to the men who make violins. They may make fifteen instruments a year or eighteen or maybe just six. They spend days in carving the scroll, weeks in shaping the body, months—and even years—in varnishing the instrument.

Mr. Holzapfel has been making violins, he calls them “fid-dies”) for nearly 60 years. Fifty of these years have been spent in Baltimore. Sixty years is, he admits a large part out of his life and he can hardly remember the time when he was not working with violins, but he has never lost the feeling of anticipation and excitement that comes when an instrument nears completion.

CARL HOLZAPFEL learned violin making in Germany. Where he was born, and where at 14 he was apprenticed to his uncle, a violin maker. “I did not choose the work myself,” he says, his speech still edged with an accent. “In the old country it is the father who chooses. That was in 1888 and I worked in my uncle’s shop for three years.”

His life as an apprentice was not easy. His day in the shop began at 6 in the morning and lasted till 9 at night. (He still gets up at 6.) He started by learning about the tools a violin-maker uses - the planes and chisels and files and rasps and frames—about 30 in all—and by cutting wood from seasoned logs. Not all of the people who nowadays make violins undergo such training. Many of them are not what Mr. Holzapfel calls “school fiddle makers” but talented wood craftsmen who have entered this field, it has been estimated that of the 250 or 300 professional violin makers in this country fewer than 100 are “school fiddle makers.”

AFTER he had completed his apprenticeship, Mr. Holzapfel set out for America. He was not yet 18 when he arrived in Philadelphia. He went into a shop there that made all
kinds of instruments—mandolins, guitars, and the like—as well as violins. He remained there until 1896.

“That year my boss got the Klondike fever.” Mr. Holzapfel recalls, “and sold his business to his father and brother-in-law, so he could go prospecting. They moved to Baltimore and asked me to come with them. In 1898 I bought them out and opened my own shop.”

The Baltimore market for violins was small in those days, and so Mr. Holzapfel made other kinds of stringed instruments. As a matter of fact, although the term “violin making” brings to mind just the violin, most makers also produce related instruments—violas, cellos and bass fiddles. Even the great Stradivarius made bass fiddles. Even the great Stradivarius made bass fiddles. Mr. Holzapfel made other kinds of instruments—mandolins, guitars and harps and guitars.

Mr. Holzapfel has had his shop on West Fayette street for 37 years. A casual passerby would have to look twice to find it. For there is only a sedate sign with neat gold lettering on the door and in the window music scores laid out in a double row.

The interior of the shop is dominated by two large glass inclosed cabinets in which rows of violins and violas are hung, their colors shading from the deep ruby red of a Strad copy to the light, natural wood of several Amati copies which are “in the white”—awaiting the application of varnish.

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The craftsmen and his son, Carl Martin, who assists him and will some day take over the shop, work at benches in the back lighted by green-shaded overhead lamps. There instruments brought in for repair mingle with instruments under construction. A piece of maple with the outline of a cello drawn on it lies against the wall and stacks of wood fill the corners.

There is a fairly steady flow of visitors, who come to buy a “fiddle A” (which means a violin A string or a violin composition for the second position (which means it is scored for the hand and fingers held in the second position for playing; there are seven positions), or merely to talk about violins and violinists and to try some of the instruments in the cases. A concert of the night before may be completely rehearsed, or the styles of Heifetz, Kreisler and Menuhin demonstrated. There is nothing hurried. “You can’t rush in our work,” Mr. Holzapfel says. “You may be gluing part of an instrument together when someone comes in. Then they must wait till you can leave the bench... no matter how long it is.”

The violin-maker raps the completed body of an instrument, to judge its resonance. His wood must be 30 years old and seasoned naturally.

When you make a fiddle. It is something like an artist who paints a picture. It is just as hard to tell how long it is going to take you to complete your work or to put a value on it. There is so much more than just labor and material that goes into it.

His own instruments are priced from $200 to $1,000. But there is one of them that he declares he will never sell—a copy of a Guernarius del Gesu that won first prize in competition at the Sesquicentennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1926. Mr. Holzapfel is a stocky man of medium height, slightly stooped from the years at his work bench. His hair is white and a little thin, and he has a square white mustache, crisply cut. His eyes, behind dark rimmed spectacles that sit far down on his nose, are bright blue. Usually soft-spoken, his accent becomes pronounced when he warms to a subject, and his hands make expressive arcs in the air.

“Fiddle making isn’t just working with the hands,” he says. “You have to have the eye for it. A trained fiddle maker can tell at a glance if an instrument is an Amati or a Guarnerius or a Strad, by the cut of the scroll or the shaping of the two sound holes on the top of the instrument. Each maker has his own pattern in these two places and it is as distinctive as a signature. That’s where the eye comes in.”

To illustrate his point, Mr. Holzapfel brings out violins in various stages of completion. As he talks, the differences, for example, between an Amati and a Stradivarius become apparent, however briefly, for even a lay observer... for the stronger looking lines of the Strad, the higher arch in the body of the Amati, the variation in the carving of the sound holes. These differences in construction partly determine the differences in tone between the various makes of violin—for although violins may sound alike to the untrained ear, musicians are quick to notice differences. An Amati is known for its sweetness and a Guarnerius del Gesu for its power, and a
Stradivarius has both these qualities.

The instruments that Mr. Holzapfel makes are copies of originals by those three masters. Turning out a good copy is, in the field of violin making, not forgery so long as the copy is acknowledged as such.

Like most makers of stringed instruments, Mr. Holzapfel acknowledges the skill of the old makers and the superiority of most of the violins of theirs that have been preserved, but he feels it is fallacious to regard all old instruments as masterpieces simply because of their age. "There were mediocre workmen in the old days just as there are today," he asserts. "Many of the old instruments were just junk. Fortunately, almost all the instruments that have been preserved are good ones, but every now and then someone will come into my shop with a fiddle he bought, thinking it was a fine old Italian one. Then I have to tell him he would have been better off to buy an American fiddle made five years ago." When copying an old instrument, it is necessary not only to reproduce exactly the shape and size of the original with all the variations of line that made it distinctive, but also to use the wood so that the grain will give the same pattern.

Even the varnish, believed to be the secret of the tone of the old violins, is duplicated, not only as to color but as to any worn places that have developed where the shoulders of players through several generations have rubbed it away. It took Mr. Holzapfel five years to complete the varnishing of a red-colored Strad hanging in his shop.

The origin of the violin has never been conclusively determined but most authorities believe it developed from an old Indian instrument, the ravanstron, which appeared about 5,000 B.C. The violin is probably the outcome of gradual evolution, taking the characteristics of a number of instruments.

Though all sorts of experiments have been tried, with new patterns and new materials like aluminum and glass and plastics, no adequate substitute for wood has ever been found. No machine-tool has been devised that will supplant the sensitive fingers of a trained violin maker, who can "feel" the work as it progresses. No advantageous change in the shape or construction of the violin has been devised.

Violin making begins with the wood. This has to be properly aged - and just right in texture for the part of the instrument in which it is to be used.

The front of the violin is generally made of softer wood than the back. Mr. Holzapfel uses spruce for the front and maple for the back. The fingerboard and pegs are Madagascar ebony.

"None of the wood I use is less than 30 years old," he says. "It is very important that the wood be seasoned naturally. Some of the fiddles made by the Frenchman, J. B. Vuillaume, in the last century are beginning to go dead because he aged the wood artificially. I know there are fiddle makers today who get wood from old buildings that are being torn down. But material like that will usually lose its resilience before the fiddle has any age on it."

The Baltimore craftsman makes other string instruments, as well as violins, and also repairs them. This double base is a repair job.

When played, the Amati shows surprising power for a violin from a maker whose work was generally characterized by sweetness of tone rather than strength. On occasion, Mr. Holzapfel allows his son, who is a member of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and other friends who are musicians to play the Amati and the Guarnerius.

Mr. Holzapfel is an appreciative listener, quick to sense the nuances of tone in the various instruments that he has made and that are brought into his room to remove hair, but he has no desire to play them himself. "I," he says, "am a fiddle maker."