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All Work And No Play

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

ONCE 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.

LIKE 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-

By Elizabeth H. Moberly

dles") 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 my-

self," 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 lutes and harps and guitars.

Mr. Holzapfel has had his shop on West Fayette street for 37 years. A casual passer-by 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.

THE craftsman 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 in 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."

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 Guarnerius del Gesu that won first prize in competition at the Sesquicentennial Ex-



Carl C. Holzapfel, of Baltimore, makes violins today by the same slow hand methods that were followed more than 300 years ago. All the mechanical innovations of the intervening centuries have failed to produce any improvement on those.



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



Mr. Holzappel displays an original Amati, a make distinctive in appearance for its large sound holes, and in tone for its sweetness.



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

position in Philadelphia in 1926. Mr. Holzappel 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 soundholes 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. Holzappel 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... the stronger looking lines of the Strad, the higher arch in the body of the Amati, the variation in the carving of the soundholes.

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. Holzappel 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. Holzappel 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.

Holzappel five years to complete the varnishing of a ruby-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 ravanastron, 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. Holzappel uses spruce for the front and maple for the back, sides and neck. 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 resiliency before the fiddle has any age on it."

CARVING the body of the violin calls for strength as well as sensitivity of touch. It is done entirely by hand, the maker starting with two pieces of wood, one for the back and one for the front, that are possibly three quarters of an inch thick. By steady cutting away of the wood, the arch of the instrument is

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created. When it is finished with, the wood will be of varying thickness, but will average about one eighth of an inch.

After the body has been completed by gluing in the sides and the ornamental purfling, the neck and the scroll are made. These are carved from one piece of wood—usually by hand, though band saws may be used in early stages—and glued to the body. After the cavity for the peg box has been cut from the scroll, the entire instrument is cleaned with a very fine grade of sandpaper and is said to be "in the white."

The fingerboard and pegs are added, and then the bridge and sound post, and the tail pieces and chin rest.

THE final step is the varnishing. Besides giving color to the instrument, varnish protects it and gives permanency to the tone. The stain may vary in color from a yellow to a deep red. For generations, violin makers have tried to discover the secret of the varnish used by Stradivarius, which is believed to give his instruments their extraordinary tone, but his formula has eluded them. Mr. Holzapfel has his own formula, with an oil varnish as the base.

Among Mr. Holzapfel's prized possessions are an original Nicolas Amati, made about 1640; an original Andreas Guarnerius, dating from about 1690; a Stradivarius made in 1697, and a bow made by the master bow-maker, Francois Torte, in the Eighteenth Century.

"These are real fiddles," he says softly. "The Amati is from an early period of his work and is longer than the instruments he made later. The Guarnerius is the work of the grandfather of the great Joseph Guarnerius del Gesu.

"The Strad I bought about 40 years ago. It was brought to America over a century ago and played in a concert in Baltimore by the great violinist Sivori."

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 shop, but he has no desire to play them himself. "I," he says, "am a fiddle maker."

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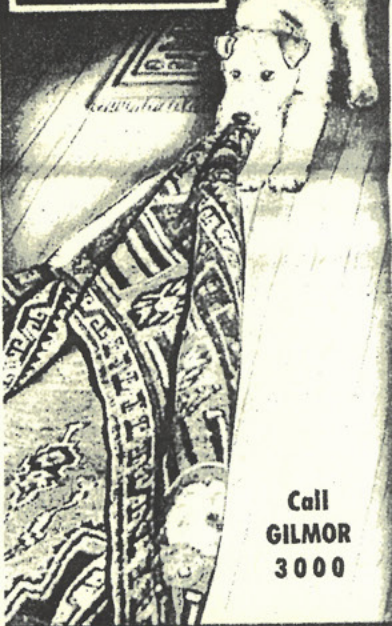
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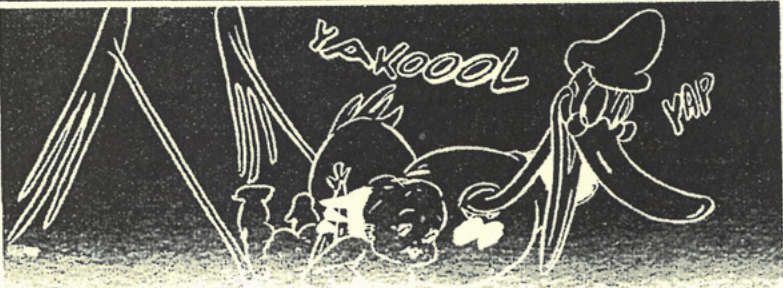
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