



Is there a US lutherie style?

T

really don't think there is a particular making style in the US,' says the New York-based luthier

Luiz Bellini. (There's a danger that this might be a very short article.) Other makers agree: David Wiebe, based in Woodstock, New York, explains, 'If you have a table of first-rate contemporary instruments made by the best makers today and let an uninformed musician walk around the table, I defy any of them to identify which instrument is Italian, Norwegian, British, American, or even Chinese.'

So far, so apparently conclusive. But dig a little deeper and a more complex – and contradictory – picture emerges.

Can makers tell a US instrument from one made elsewhere? Does it even matter? DAVID KETTLE probes luthiers across America to discover whether their individual techniques add up to an overall philosophy

Looking back at early American making provides a revealing starting point. 'The earliest American violins were made as imitations of the work that was being imported to the States from Europe,' explains Philip Kass, an instrument expert based in Pennsylvania. 'They were

being made primarily by people with no violin making training but with woodworking skills. Then immigrant makers came to the US in part because they didn't find opportunities back in Europe, and they felt that America was a new place, a wide-open territory – that anything was possible there.'

David Folland, a maker based in Northfield, Minnesota, feels that this philosophy of openness continues today: 'America has

'I think there's more of an openness in this country – an openness to try new things, and an openness to innovation'

DAVID FOLLAND



► Minnesota maker David Folland and one of his recent violas



'I really admire some of the different instruments that other people have built – but it's just not my bag.' Schuback is clear about why he believes in more traditional models: 'You've got four basic strings on the violin, and you have a certain kind of music that you need to play with the instrument using a certain sound.'

To try to get something different, that's fine – but that's for different music. Let's not try to redefine what these instruments were made for.'

SO DESPITE AN EMBRACING of new ideas, many makers still choose to stick closely to classical forms. Why is this?

Wiebe has an answer: 'If we have any hope of attracting the attention of great musicians, we have no choice but to look

at the greatest instruments ever made and figure out how they did it. If we want to succeed, we won't do so by running out into the Wild West like cowboys and doing some whole new thing.' It's a telling simile. On the one hand, we have immigrant makers believing that anything is possible in America, but on the other, ►

been a melting-pot for a lot of things, and it could be the same for making. I think there's more of an openness in this country – an openness to try new things, and an openness to innovation.' Oregon-based luthier Paul Schuback points to this willingness to embrace new ideas as a key US philosophy: 'A lot of other countries are slow at change, but Americans are quicker.'

But if American making is so open to change and innovation, why isn't the market flooded with radical new forms and controversial designs? Perhaps because other makers admit to being happier sticking to tried and trusted ideas. 'I'll be honest – I don't have the courage to depart from Cremonese design,' admits maker Howard Needham, based in Washington, DC.

INSTRUMENT PHOTO SEAN HAYFORD O'LEARY



Woodstock luthier
David Wiebe and
one of his violas

'If we want to succeed, we won't do so by running out into the Wild West like cowboys and doing some whole new thing'

DAVID WIEBE

a warning that wild innovation won't guarantee success. Does this show the freedom and openness of the New World being tempered by market demands? More on what buyers want later, but let's delve deeper into innovation.

The use of cutting-edge technology is a defining trait of several prominent US makers' work, and complex sound analyses, vibration movies and CT instrument scans have often graced the pages of this publication. Do all US luthiers see this as the way forward? Not necessarily, it seems. 'For me it's more useful to listen really well,' says Folland. 'No computer program is better than a trained ear.' Needham provides a similar rationale for relying on his own senses: 'When you're using frequencies and a sine-wave generator, you may have very accurate pitch, but what's more important is that that pitch will be truly harmonic to the human ear. That's what I'm trying to reach in my instruments – I'm not trying to satisfy a machine.'

SO MUCH FOR THE MAKING METHODS. How about the raw materials? Are makers happy using American wood? There's disagreement, but it's not necessarily down to any issues of patriotism. Instead, pragmatism reigns. For Bellini, authenticity is key, and that rules out native trees: 'I never use American wood. I make copies of particular instruments, so you have to use the proper wood.' Needham, however, is entirely happy with local timber: 'I have no problem with American wood. If you select it carefully, it's acoustically second to none.'

But in terms of a making philosophy, it's Wiebe who links using US wood with making authentically American instruments: 'I started out believing in the use of domestic materials, as I thought that many historic European makers

had done. Thinking I was being purely American, I proudly used only American wood and still primarily use American wood for my instruments.'

Yet despite any high-flying notions of philosophy or innovation, violin making remains a business, and a business needs customers. The extent to which buyers actually dictate or influence trends in US lutherie is a moot point. Kass is clear and succinct: 'I think it's very market-driven.' But is there a particular style that buyers demand? Needham comes down squarely behind one maker: 'I think today the Guarneri model in the US is probably the dominant choice for most players, because it's small, and it's perceived to have enormous power. But the most beautiful of all in many ways is still Amati. If I thought we had more of a market, I would probably not be so hesitant to build them.'

For Schuback, it's not a maker but a quality that's key: 'Americans want sound before anything else.' Bellini agrees: 'It's not an instrument being pretty that sells – it's sounding good. Beauty comes later.' And just what is this sound that makers aim for? Schuback is direct: 'The Stradivari, Guarneri sound is what people want – the really good sound.' There's a less flattering assessment of the sound of modern American instruments from Kass: 'They tend to be more assertive, more aggressive, louder, more responsive in some cases.' Yet he goes on to question whether sound really is at the root of what US buyers want. 'When I was working at the Moennig shop, I noticed that people did care a great deal about the sound, but it was very frequently trumped by the look, the feel, the colour, the smell, the general feeling of the instrument, and often by some characteristic that enabled them to suspend the knowledge that it was new.'

WHICH BRINGS UP THE THORNY ISSUE of antiquing. For Kass, it's a question of illusion versus reality: 'Antiquing is driven by the need to make an instrument that can be played side by side with an old instrument, with at least the illusion of age, and in particular without the appearance of newness that would give a negative connotation to the new instrument.' But is it a particularly American trend? Needham thinks so. 'It's more often done by US makers than by other makers. I think a straight varnish is more acceptable elsewhere than it is here in the United States.' >



← Oregon luthier Paul Schuback in his workshop

'A lot of other countries are slow at change, but Americans are quicker'

PAUL SCHUBACK

Innovation, technology, sound, antiquing – perhaps unsurprisingly, opinions differ. If we're not much nearer to being able to identify any particularly American trends in making itself, perhaps the key lies in the relationships between makers, and in US making organisations. 'I think the Violin Society of America has gone a long way towards advancing making in the US,' states Wiebe, and Needham agrees: 'It's a clearing house for ideas and styles.' Schuback continues the theme: 'The VSA has been exceptionally good for competitions and for striving for perfection. There's a lot of learning there as well. And the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers does a really wonderful job in getting people together.'

Kass continues the theme of sharing knowledge: 'The VSA competitions have ended up giving a big tent under which everyone could meet, bringing different ideas to the table.' Other makers rave about the influence of a certain Ohio workshop. Folland says, 'That Oberlin thing – man, that has really opened things up! There's the attitude that if you don't share, you won't be accepted, so it becomes the thing to do.' Kass draws a revealing comparison: 'In a way it's like taking the greatest classical makers from all over Italy, Germany, Amsterdam, London and Paris and seating them all side by side in 1730 and letting them compare notes.'

We may be on to something here. How important is this idea-sharing to US makers? For many, it seems to be firmly embedded in their beliefs. Folland is glad to be able to draw

on advice from others in his own work: 'I think people are very happy to share ideas, and more and more so – that's been a real shift. Any time you run into any kind of an issue or problem, you just think, "Who's the best person to talk to about this?"' Bellini says, 'I think it's wonderful, especially for young makers that don't have much experience.'

Kass is equally positive about knowledge-sharing, but points to one possible downside: 'I think it will definitely continue to drive standards up. But down the road we may end up with an increasing sameness to work that lacks individuality.' But Needham sees styles focusing ever more closely on an ideal: 'There's a natural blending, and I think the result is an instrument that gets closer and closer to the ideal that the Cremonese established in the 18th century.'

IT SEEMS THAT THE TRUE LEGACY of American making may lie in the wider lutherie world. Kass offers one perhaps contentious opinion: 'I'd say that the Oberlin workshops have served to create an international style of making, because the best Americans, Italians, English, Germans, Dutch, French, Spanish, Canadian violin and bow makers are all sitting side by side with one another making instruments, and they're sharing ideas with each other. You'll see ideas of finish and edging from a maker in Chicago, say, turning up in the work of a violin maker from Cremona, because they just happened to work on benches side by side for two weeks during the summer.'

How is this a defining characteristic of American making? Only in that these particular opportunities for sharing knowledge came about because of competitions and courses in the US, and can be seen to reflect US makers' beliefs in openness and innovation.

And what of the future? All eyes turn to the Far East, and Kass can see American making exerting its influence there: 'In years ahead we will increasingly see a global style. The Chinese workshops are all madly imitating what's coming out of the VSA competitions. They're anxious to make what people buy and like, and they see the American instruments as being the highest standard of quality in a result that people like and will buy. In some ways that's the fullest expression of the American style.' ■

TOWARDS A US STYLE: GENERAL TRENDS

Openness to innovation

Embracing technology

Responding to buyers' demands

Sound is an important consideration

Emphasis on antiquing and appearance

Influential making organisations

Knowledge sharing

Do you agree that these are defining trends in US making? Go online and let us know what you think at www.thestrad.com

.....
Turn to page 64 where US players and teachers offer their opinions on whether there is an American string sound