

A viola made in a week by William Castle

Unlike musicians, most violin makers spend most of their time working in splendid, or sometimes not quite so splendid, isolation. So the week leading up to the RNCM's Strings Festival was rather unusual, because it brought together four violin makers, Kai-Thomas Roth, Helen Michetschläger, Marc Soubeyran and me, and in the course of five days we built a viola. The idea behind the project was to allow students to learn more about the instruments they play, so all our work was done in public.

Having made two violins and two cellos for the college in previous years, our task this time was to make a small viola which will end up in the college's collection to loan to students, the college recognising the need for good-sounding small violas, rather than having some students struggle with instruments which in the long run are likely to cause back, shoulder and neck problems.

The model we chose was an Anselmo Bellosio from 1792, with a 15 3/8 " back length. This is a bit longer than the Bellosio model I usually make, but since the original is in Austria and the others were understandably keen to see the instrument we were going to use as a model, we instead measured an instrument belonging to Charles Beare. Having made templates and a mould we started on the Monday morning with flat pieces of wood for back and belly, and with the blocks glued to the mould, and by Friday afternoon the instrument, still unvarnished, was ready to play.

For me the hardest part of a project like this is starting work on the first morning in a strange and noisy environment, but the need to get on means that we soon are immersed in our work, conscious that each day we need to reach a certain stage, usually to allow glue to dry overnight. Over the week we had numerous questions from students and the public, the most common being, 'Does each of you work on one bit?' 'How do you decide who does what?' 'How do you manage to do it in such a short time?'

From the very first instrument, we decided that no-one should do something which they were unhappy about doing in this situation, and then we just divide out the work. But we don't just work on one part, so

the scroll for instance, is started by one person on day one, but finished by someone else on day two, and the back or the belly will probably be worked on by all of us before the end of the week.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the project for us is our conversations on our approach to making different aspects of the instrument, because we all see things in slightly different ways. This is a great advantage when making an instrument in a week, as rather than mulling over something for a day or so as we might do at home, we have four pairs of eyes and many years of combined experience to draw on.

So our week is a mixture of concentrated work, sometimes fast but never hurried, sometimes slow when necessary, interspersed by a fair bit of banter, discussions on significant points which we all need to agree on, and a very important, proper lunch break.

As to the sound, unfortunately I don't have a picture of Thomas Riebl's broad smile as he had just played the viola for the very first time, but I can remember what he said , 'It is a small viola, but it doesn't sound like a small viola.'

William Castle

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