



CRAFTSMAN AT WORK: Christopher Germain of Philadelphia.

# OPEN SECRET

At the Oberlin violin makers' workshop, the key ingredient in building great violins just might be friendship

**"DOES ANYBODY HAVE A . . . ?"** The question rings out a dozen times as the violin makers' workshop on the campus of Oberlin College, in Ohio, gets underway and people begin to realize which tools they forgot to pack. Inevitably, somewhere among the dozens of portable workbenches filling the cavernous sculpture studio that hosts this annual gathering, a hand will fly up offering the requested tool. Loaner and borrower are probably competitors the other 50 weeks of the year. But for two weeks each summer, about 40 professional violin makers from a dozen countries come to this small Midwestern community to do what would have seemed unthinkable to their predecessors: to live, work, and study great violins—and play together—while openly sharing information, techniques, and sometimes even tools.

"People here are really open and friendly, and most everybody refrains from beating around the bush or explaining how good they

are," says Felix Krafft, a soft-spoken maker from Berlin who has traveled to Oberlin to join his colleagues. In a room where many participants could claim bragging rights in terms of medals won or impressive client lists, a spirit of cooperation prevails and friendships form.

"It's just down to earth," Krafft adds. "I do it this way, what kind of solution did you come up with?"

In a profession famous for clinging to trade secrets until they are lost altogether, the transition from fear of giving the competition a leg up to the belief that sharing what you know makes all boats rise is nothing short of a paradigm shift—when one conceptual world view is replaced with another. Of course, the shift is not universal, but Oberlin has been instrumental in breaking the ice. It's not the only workshop of its kind, but it's the biggest, perhaps the oldest, and certainly the best known.

By Erin Shrader

To the makers who come here, the advantage is obvious. “You exchange one idea or secret and you get 40 in reply,” says Peter Goodfellow, an Australian living in Scotland.

And the results?

Boats are rising. “The overall [quality] level has skyrocketed,” says renowned English maker and writer John Dilworth, who has taught at Oberlin several times. “There’s much more consensus about what a good violin is, because people have seen what other people do and what the criteria are. The more people talk and think about what they’re doing, anything can be achieved.”

Dilworth has even founded a violin-restoration program at West Dean College in England based on the Oberlin model. “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” he says.

most of us are doing very well business-wise, some even fantastic. The market is very strong.

“It doesn’t matter for you to be friendly with your colleagues and cross information, cross knowledge. I think people benefit from it and it doesn’t have a negative [effect] to you.”

**THE OBERLIN WORKSHOP** was founded on openness. It was established in 1985 as a restoration course by the VSA and Oberlin College to address the dire shortage of repair and restoration skills at that time. The director at that time was Vahakn Nigogosian, a Paris-trained, Turkish-born Armenian who worked for ten years in the fabled Wurlitzer shop in New York.

to an invitation-only gathering for trained, professional makers. The format was inspired by a group of bow makers who met across the hall from the restoration course to make bows and exchange ideas. “Chris wanted to

**‘The more people talk and think about what they’re doing, anything can be achieved.’**

—John Dilworth

make this a camp he’d like to go to,” says Boston maker Marilyn Wallin, summing up Germain’s approach. She has attended every workshop from that first transition year. “He creates pockets of things that can grow.”

And grow it has, into a kind of international postgraduate seminar in violin making, an academy with an archive, a group project, demonstrations, and visiting experts. Presentations can turn into hours-long “geek out” sessions at which participants scour Cremonese masterpieces as forensics experts, searching for 300-year-old tool marks that might give a clue as to how the masters cut their f-holes.

Behind his back, Germain is called the Benevolent Dictator; he’s the visionary and the last word. Everything about the workshop, from the group instrument to who attends and the seating chart, is carefully considered.

Each element seems designed to serve a practical purpose and at the same time create the social glue that forms relationships. For example, the workbenches are arranged not in rows but in groups of three or four, facing in, making it easy to talk and creating much-needed storage space.

The three women in the violin shop inhabit one of those pods. “By choice!” they assure me cheerfully. All three are, or have been, teachers at the various violin-making schools: Wallin at the North Bennet Street School in Boston, Rebecca Elliott at the Chicago School of Violin Making, and Lisbeth Butler at Minnesota State College in Red Wing.

As we talk, Elliott is trying to figure out how to do a familiar task—saw wood—in an unfamiliar workspace. Wallin and Butler are carving arches in the top plates of the instruments they’re making. Periodically they exchange plates to check each others’ work with fresh eyes. Spots that need attention are marked in pencil on the crisp, white spruce.



EXACTING WORK: Felix Krafft of Berlin.

“Look at photos of contest winners over the last 25 years,” suggests David Gusset of Eugene, Oregon. He’s talking about the winning instruments, of course. Gusset is a teacher this year, though an outside observer might not notice it. At Oberlin, there’s no obvious separation between participants and staff. Everyone has a bench, everyone pitches in with the cooking and cleaning, and everyone volunteers to do the countless tasks that keep the place running.

Feng Jiang, a second generation maker from China and gold medal winner at the Violin Society of America, pauses thoughtfully before speaking. “It’s partially to do with our time,” says Jiang, now a US citizen living in Ann Arbor, Michigan. “I know

“Bother us!” Nigo, as he was known to all, once said expressing his commitment to sharing knowledge. “If you don’t understand, ask us to explain. Here we don’t hide anything we do.”

That spirit lives on. “Nigo was quite a character. He was passionate about work, life, ideas, everything, and he loved to teach. His father started the first trade school in Istanbul and he had to fight oppression to get his learning,” says Philadelphia violin maker Christopher Germain, who was Nigo’s assistant and took over as director in 1997.

Germain has a serious, steady demeanor that commands respect and belies a sneaky sense of humor. Under his direction, the workshop has transitioned from restoration



**MAKING HIS MARK:** Silvio Levaggi of Cremona.

Wallin explains that she is following advice from the great Chicago maker Carl Becker about where to make the high point. Butler, however, argues in favor of a Cremonese-style arch. “Like Mozart,” she says briskly, but with a smile. “Always perfect.”

**OVER BY THE WINDOWS**, Italian maker Silvio Levaggi is receiving a critique of his latest instrument from California maker Joe Grubaugh. Germain, looking on, points out that Levaggi lives in Cremona, and has won medals in all the most prestigious competitions, but still seeks feedback from colleagues.

Levaggi first came to America in 1996 to attend the VSA competition at which he met Grubaugh and others. “That moment opened the door to something more, more personal,” he says. “In Cremona there is a closed idea how to make an instrument. They all work for Japanese dealers who all want one model, the Red Violin. They don’t want different.”

Levaggi sees this as a handicap for the craft in Cremona. “You come here and share something, and everyone becomes rich,” he says. “Each time you come here, your work changes more.”

Another important activity is the shop instrument, which is built during the workshop and varnished the following summer, then sold to defray expenses. This year they are copying a 1739 Carlo Bergonzi. It’s a model with which not too many are familiar. David Gusset starts by drawing the pattern while Grubaugh draws up a list of tasks and

makes a schedule. It’s sort of an Outward Bound project for violin makers. Everyone completes some task, sometimes working in groups, using strange tools in an unfamiliar environment, under time pressure—and in front of a very discerning audience!

**Each element seems designed to serve a practical purpose and at the same time create the social glue that forms relationships.**

Peter Goodfellow was inspired to take back to Scotland the challenge of making a group instrument. In March 2007, Goodfellow, three other Oberlin alums, and several Scottish makers built a viola in one week in conjunction with the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama’s Voila-Viola String-Fest gathering. The viola, based on a 1570

Gasparo da Salo, was finished “in the white,” or unvarnished, by the end of the week. The brand-new viola, affectionately dubbed Gasparo da Glasgow, was played in concert where it held its own quite favorably in a duet with the original. To complete the Oberlin connection, Goodfellow brought the viola to Ohio to be varnished along with last year’s shop instrument.

The Bergonzi that is being copied is just one of several Cremonese instruments on hand throughout the week, available to be looked at, documented, and played. Access to fine instruments is a boon to makers who don’t do restoration work, such as Thomas Bertrand, a successful maker from Brussels. “Oberlin, for me, is the opportunity to have original instruments in the shop for two weeks,” he says.

Musicians and colleagues back home will share rare instruments with him whenever they have something good, he adds, but he may only get half a day to study it.

**‘In Cremona, there is a closed idea how to make an instrument.’**

—*Silvio Levaggi*

Bertrand has been observing the European scene for 25 years. When he graduated from the Cremona School in 1986, “Things were starting to open up, but that came from the United States and Great Britain,” he says.

In Europe, the older generation was still quite closed. “People who were in their 20s, 30s, and 40s were more open,” he says, but tensions grew between the generations. “In France, the older generation wanted to restrict access to the profession, like in Germany.”

Admission to the Mirecourt School, established in 1970 by Étienne Vatelot, was only for teenagers; anyone older had to go abroad for training. At the first Vatelot (Paris International) Violin Making Competition in 1991, says Bertrand, all the winners were from the foreign schools.

“The old school was not the best.”

**AT OBERLIN**, the shop closes at around five in the afternoon and everyone heads back to the dorm on the other side of campus for a home-cooked meal. Like the shop violin, dinner is a group project. Baldwin Hall, where the dorms are located, is a huge stone mansion, built to impress. But the summer heat



**MAKER IN MOTION:** Feng Jiang of Ann Arbor.

held by the massive stones is downright oppressive. There are appetizers before and dessert after, and the company is always good, but dinner doesn't tend to drag on. By the time the first fireflies are out, people head back to the shop to work some more.

The atmosphere is different at night. There's likely to be music played in the bow

shop—it could be fiddle tunes, chamber music, or their hot Parisian-jazz combo—and there's socializing back and forth between the shops. Though larger than the bow shop, the violin shop seems quieter and more intimate. Looking out over the big room, the desk lamps create pools of warm light that invite conversation. Seeing me alone,

Goodfellow offers an empty glass, a bottle of Scotch, and a smile—an invitation to join the group.

Late at night people wander back to Baldwin and linger on the front steps with tepid beers, talking, hoping to catch a breath of cool air before turning in. Life stories, relationships, kids, and yes, violins—it's all fair game for conversation among friends.

And friendship might just be the foundation for this new way of approaching the 500-year-old trade.

"It's not like you pour information out to everybody you meet," says Jiang. "But especially at Oberlin, they become not only colleagues but your friends. Your very close friends. Sharing happens naturally—very naturally."

The truth might be that change happens gradually, one relationship at a time. Back home in Ann Arbor, Jiang says, "Doing my daily work sometimes I reflect. To really summarize it, we will probably need another ten, 20 years [to absorb everything that goes on at Oberlin]. Because the things that happen, when you're in it, you just don't see.

"The influence happening in this time will be seen much clearer in another 20 years." □