

Paul Harrild – Newark graduate

Interview with Jane Dorner



Paul Harrild in his workshop

VIOLIN making is growing in popularity as a choice of career. Mittenwald now chooses 12 entrants for their violin making school from 1,000 applications. Their bizarre selection procedures mean that the best craftsmen are not necessarily being given the opportunity to learn the trade and it is also virtually impossible for anyone British to be accepted there. In this country new schools are opening all the time, mostly started by ex-students of the Newark School of Violin Making and the London College of Furniture. These two well-established colleges turn about twenty fledgling luthiers per year, all ready and eager to fly out into an already crowded field. With student musicians still scouring the country for

reasonably priced old instruments, how many of these young hopefuls are going to make their mark on an increasingly competitive market?

One recent Newark graduate who is all set to do just that is Paul Harrild, whose flair and deep-seated interest will carry him over the rough patches. In the year since graduation, Paul has not found it necessary to seek bread and butter money from restoration and repair work, and has had no difficulty in selling new instruments almost as fast as he makes them. They are reasonably priced and their owners feel that they have character and give an immediate, good response. Paul lives in a narrow terraced house in Newark, which is to be shared by three or four other makers all working independently but sharing

workshop facilities. The makers share a similar philosophical approach and will work alongside each other without a sense of competition and without the isolation of working entirely on one's own. There are plans to convert the cellars into workshop and there is a small outbuilding in the garden which will be a varnishing room.

For Paul, violin making is not a job, but a way of life, and there is no dividing line between private and professional activity. He works obsessively, sometimes 24 hours at a stretch (once he made a violin in a week, using almost every available hour of the day or night and then began a viola the week after). He works fast, and feels that the number of hours put into the making of an instrument is

dependent on the individual's strength of concentration and ability to organize a method so that there is never an idle moment. He finds that the initial stages of violin making — preparation of the plates, neck blocks, cutting and thickening ribs and so on — require a type of concentration that is not as exhausting as the consideration of arching and the shaping of the *f*-holes, and can therefore be done in a continuous flow. He does not find it necessary to use machine tools in order to speed up the initial stages, as the vibrations of a bandsaw and router might be detrimental to the wood. He even uses hand tools to saw the ribs off a block as he enjoys the intimacy of working closely with the wood and finds that it establishes a relationship with the qualities of the material, making it easier to assess how it will behave.

This understanding of the feel of the wood is vital to Paul Harrild's approach to violin making, which is via sculpture and fine art rather than technical precision and acoustic measurement. He trained originally as a graphic designer and held a top job in an advertising and design studio. He found that an art training was of great value in teaching the eye to appreciate the variations in curvature of the various violin models. He considers most Strad outlines visually quite masculine (Newark students make their first three instruments based on templates from the "Messie") and prefers the interplay of force and femininity of Guarneri del Gesù. The curves and outline of a del Gesù have a charm and grace which, combined with the aggression of the way the *f*-holes are cut and the vigour in the shape of the scroll, is sculpturally satisfying. A violin, in Paul's view, is something that has to work both visually and, most importantly, acoustically. Part of his impulse to work at speed comes from the desire to maintain a sculptural continuity so that the instrument is never put down long enough to lose its flow. This can make for what some of del Gesù's critics call "rough workmanship" (not a phrase Paul agrees with), but at the same time, the instinctive qualities which give an instrument its individuality are not cramped by the over clinical approach that often leads to dull perfectionism. The maker should be continually aiming towards an edge, "it's like a performance. A performance that is safe and technically competent is slightly boring, but a performance where the



Preliminary sketch of the painting designed to go on the back of the cells in the new quartet.

player is pushing himself and is on edge filters through to the audience. This is when it's valuable. Looking at del Gesù's work, some people say he fell off the edge, but at least he got there, whereas a lot of people don't get there at all".

The struggle to achieve mechanical precision is a feature of much modern making — indeed of our whole life style — and sometimes it can crush individuality. Paul hopes that as his experience of violin making grows, he will be able to work in the instinctive manner of the Cremonese masters. There are areas, such as in the thickening of the ribs, or testing the tap tone of the centre of the plates, where Paul is as careful and accurate as any maker, but he likes to keep an open mind about the subtleties of shaping. "Ideally ribs should follow the outline of the mould, but because of the nature of the wood, it can occasionally distort. Though slight, once the overhang is on the distortion is magnified. When that happens, I like to leave it since to some extent it decides itself and contributes to the fluidity of an instrument. One could achieve perfection, say in the arching,

by having a tremendous number of templates so that there was no possibility of mistake. But what's to say that it isn't the slight unplanned imperfection that gives it its quality."

Paul Harrild has studied the outlines of several famous instruments in great detail. One of the advantages of a college training over an apprenticeship to one maker is that it gives the student the opportunity to experiment with various subtly different outlines, to train the eye, to question established ideas and to obtain greater feedback, an example being the opportunity to appreciate the differences and the similarities in the styles of Amati, Stradivari and Guarneri. "After all, these people must have been looking at the work of their contemporaries which helps you to understand the differences in another way. This is why I value looking at the work of J. B. Vuillaume so much. He had such a collection of instruments and was a good observer. You can work backwards to the original knowing he would have picked out typical features in his copies, and then you can make your own decisions." One instrument that Paul

studied in detail was a 1736 del Gesù. He found that the rules of the golden section could be applied, showing that every detail of the instrument was in perfect proportion to each other and to the whole. The balance and harmony that this creates may be unconscious, but the effect is visually pleasing and in some subtle manner this affects the player's relationship with his instrument. He also studied the curves: "There's a point at which a curve changes direction. At that point the eye is confused because it has to decide whether to go one way or another". On the 1736 del Gesù, the change of direction is in direct line with the *f*-holes. That line is a force in itself: "If you think of a straight line as strength, an angled line as direction and a curve as beauty, then the point of change in that curve becomes all these things. Therefore in a linear sense these areas are very important. By opposing such areas, either instinctively or deliberately, they become very interesting in the way the eye is moved or halted travelling round the instrument. This is why it sometimes appears to have slight imperfections or counter-balances in the outline. It almost becomes an irritant which has to be resolved but it is an irritant with a value - I suppose like a discord in music. What matters is the way you resolve it".

Paul has carried his love of the visual pleasure of a violin a stage further than most other makers. He admires the Amati Brothers' instruments, with their warm glowing varnish and traces of decorative painting, such as a shield or emblem painted on the back. While he was

still at college, he painted the Prince of Wales' Feathers on the back of the cello that Glen Collins and the students made for the Prince (see August STRAD 1982, cover) and he plans to do more work on painting single images on the backs of instruments. A picture of his experimental five-stringed electric violin with its pre-Raphaelite painting on the back appeared in July STRAD (p.183). "I have nothing against simplicity, after all one shouldn't gild the lily, but where I can heighten the visual aspect of an instrument and its decorativeness, without losing its simplicity, I like to do it." He enjoys doing a pastiche, especially of the pre-Raphaelites. "Their philosophy was realistic. They felt that people had forgotten how to paint, so they took something they thought was good in principle and used the freedom of the time they lived in to blend the old with the new." In a sense this is what Paul is doing with his decorated instruments. He chooses subjects which coincide with the instruments - usually musical themes - and uses them to introduce subtle visual comment - "the pastiche is a challenge: it puts the past into a present context". In December he will start work on his most ambitious project - a quartet of instruments with visually related themes painted on the backs. The cartoon drawing (on p.395) shows the composition projected for the back of the cello. It is taken from John Strudwick, but combines elements from other paintings used on the other instruments: G. F. Watts' painting of the blind girl with a lyre, Millais' blind girl with a sither (instead of a concertina) and Millais'

return of the dove from the ark. The idea is that the viola is visually bringing together all the other instruments on the cello. The quartet will go on show in the room that Maurice Bouette is setting aside as a showroom and market place for new instruments.

Painting, as a form of decoration, is not as durable as inlay, but it should last as long as varnish. Paul uses artists' oil colours in a transparent glaze. The cartoon is conveyed to the back of a partly varnished instrument. A tonal ground is painted on top of that and then the painter works through the tones, building one colour up on top of another. The glaze is transparent so one colour can be seen through another, e.g. the dichroic effect of orange is obtained by using red on top of yellow. The oil paint is thinned down with liquid, a painting medium which acts as a fast drying agent, enabling the painter to use the paint as thin as desired and drying rapidly enough so that it can be worked over without having to wait and without affecting the varnish. When the painting is completed, a couple of coats of varnish are applied to build it in so that the image does not seem to be sitting on top of the wood.

At present, Paul does not see the painting as adding substantially to the cost of the instrument. "After all, it hangs around in the workshop for varnishing, as the money is tied up in that instrument for a certain length of time anyway." As long as he can sell enough instruments a year to pay for the extra time spent in working on a few instruments in the way he would like, he is happy. "I am doing

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something fulfilling as an individual and that makes it worthwhile. If I am not being realistic, it is because the necessity to be realistic has not arisen." Most craftsmen know what a headache the reality of running a business is. Paul's attitude is that if you worry about cost efficiency, you can take the joy out of a job. "You start to get involved in the question 'am I ever going to make a living at being a violin maker? You have to have belief and faith in your work that it will earn you a living, that people will like your instruments and that you will be able to sell them. You can't sit down and cost every bit of wood or every process. If you did you might find that a violin was making you about £3 an hour. Not many people nowadays would get out of bed for that!' So far this optimism has been justified thanks to help given by Peter Lewis, violinist in the BBC SO, who has sold several instruments for Paul and has supplied the vital feedback of criticism that helps a maker improve his craft. Most of them are violas, and have been made on spec. Paul does not like to work to a defined commission, because it entails compromising his own ideas to fit in with theirs, and he does not want to prostitute his own individuality.

New violas sell better than new violins, partly because there aren't so many old ones and partly because there are an increasing number of viola players. He has three basic violas, a 16½" one based on a Joseph filius Andrea Guarneri, a 16½" based on the Brothers Amati viola owned by Harry Danko, and a 16" viola which he designed himself after a 15½" Forster. He favours a warm orange brown to red varnish which he applies as evenly as possible and then rubs down to remove the bland appearance of an all-over one colour tone.

Paul is also interested in making copies of old instruments for players who want to save the daily wear and tear of their valuable instruments, but want to work or travel with something that feels as familiar as possible. "It is very useful for a young maker to handle an instrument for copying. I spend two days just looking at it, getting the feel of the shapes of the arching and the style and try to see how the maker approached what he was doing. Sometimes an instrument can look a bit rough with age, like the Carlo Testore I worked on last year, but gradually you see that the old makers really knew what they were



Detail of the f-hole of a violin by Paul Herrild made in 1983 which is based on a 1742 del Gesù.

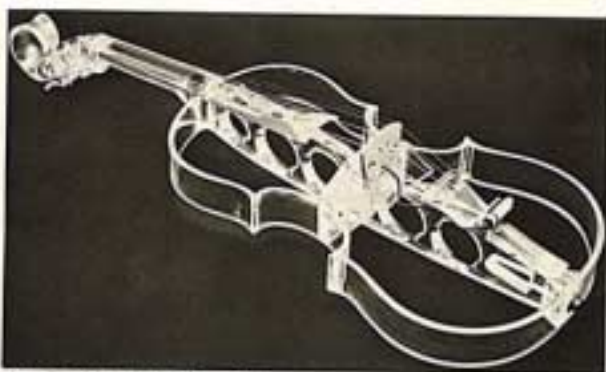
doing. There's a certain amount of freedom in making a copy because all the decisions have been made and it is simply a case of working out how to reproduce them."

Paul copies everything just as it is unless standardizations such as action height and so on can be improved. But the copies are not meant to look old, even if gauge marks and dents are carefully put in. "On the Testore, there was enough about it for people

to know that it wasn't a fake being passed off as an original." Paul is keen to do more work of this kind as he believes it will provide the kind of feedback he needs to improve his own style. He is prepared to spend a lifetime in learning how to make good instruments and like any craftsman who cares about what he is making, will always be striving towards that unqualifiable edge that players and makers are searching for.



A five-string violin made by Paul Harrild with detail (below) of "Hope" by Frederick Watts



Perspex violin made by Guy Duxier

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Multi-strings

The next point in the dictionary definition states that the violin has four strings tuned in 5ths. Taking "violin" again as a family name, this statement ignores the one-, three-, five-, six-, seven- and eight-stringed instruments, as well as such oddities as the umbrella-shaped fiddle made in 1887 which had 16 strings, each with a separate bridge (Fig. 10), or the novelty that Heron-Allen mentions, called the "violin général" which had 18 strings and was played with two bows, its invention being to combine the effect of all four members of the family. Such multi-stringed violins were not necessarily tuned in 5ths. The most serious variants in this category are those with five strings, which were not uncommon in the 18th century. Most were attempts to make the viola more competitive with the violin while retaining the sonority of the larger instrument. The additional string usually extended the range upwards by addition of an E string, though this was not always the case. These instruments had a variety of colourful names - quinton, cinquème, viola alta, viola pomposa and violatin, each with their own characteristics. The quinton, for instance, was one of several instruments that tried to combine the qualities of a viol and a viola. Another way round the fifth string problem, and the one chosen by Fred Dautrich in 1935 and Carleen Hutchins in 1966, was to produce two instruments to extend the viola range in both directions. Fred Dautrich produced the violina and the vilon to correspond to a viola and second violin voices (he also had a vilono below a cello). Carleen Hutchins, in her acoustically

homogeneous octet, has the alto and tenor violins extending the range one 4th into the cello vocabulary. More recently Otto Erdesz has tried to extend the viola range upwards by taking a "bite" out of the front right bout to make playing in even higher positions easier.

The experiment with five strings still continues with the decorative electric violin currently being made by Paul Harrild. The fifth string extends downwards to C and the instrument is designed to work acoustically as well as with an electric pick-up. This instrument is interesting for its fusion of the modern and the Baroque. Its maker hopes to encourage a return to the decorative richness of Amati's day and suggests that makers today should be aware of the limitations of following the classical line. The five-stringed violin is stained black and has a copy of the painting *Hope* by Frederick Watts on its back - a suitable subject for an aspiring musician!

Shape

So much, then, for the dictionary definition. The only point in which it does not err, is to describe all these instruments as bowed. Insofar as they are played at all, they are all bowed. However, it is not the intention of this article to discredit the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*; merely to indicate that there is more to it than meets the eye. Coming back to the drawings on page 184, what does meet the eye? In the first place there is the traditional Baroque shape thought by most makers to be perfect, the prevalent attitude being that since modern technology cannot even re-create the sound produced in the Baroque age,