

COLLECTIVE GOOD

Oberlin's summer lutherie workshops attract makers from around the world. **ARIANE TODES** discovers the community spirit that draws them to Ohio, and **RAYMOND SCHRYER** documents their project to copy a Stradivari violin



IF I WERE CALLED ON TO CONSTRUCT A SOCIETY, I think I might model it on the Violin Society of America's (VSA) summer workshops in Oberlin. It would be a community where the drive was towards betterment, both for the individual and the group; where everyone was appreciated for the unique talent they brought to the collective good; resources and knowledge would be shared; everyone would take turns cooking; and it would be a whole lot of fun to live in. This was exactly the spirit I discovered on my visit to the violin making group this year, so it's not surprising that the various workshops that happen in Oberlin across six weeks every summer have become a vital destination for some of today's top makers.

If the words 'collective' and 'sharing' bring to mind some sort of 1960s hippy commune it's not entirely inappropriate. Everyone has a stint in the kitchen (I was set to cooking duties early on) and the makers stay up into the small hours working, chatting, arguing, smoking and drinking hooch from plastic cups. There's usually an ad hoc folk music session in some corner. But the intent is never less than absolutely serious and the intense work and knowledge-sharing that happen is widely acknowledged to have raised the standard of violin making around the world.

You wouldn't know it to look at the place. Oberlin in June is a pretty, sleepy American town – the college and conservatoire are out of session. It centres on a large green, overlooking which are an old-fashioned drugstore, a bookshop and somewhat fusty clothes and artisanal shops. Make your way to the college's sculpture studio and you enter a different world, one of palpable energy. Makers (this year there were 53) nab their favourite positions on the first afternoon and customise their personal workspaces. Across the corridor is a varnish room; upstairs the classroom where the nightly lectures are held; the corridor also marks the great divide with the bow makers' workshop (see box, page 34).

Even the most free-thinking group needs a leader and here it is Christopher Germain (often referred to as the 'benign dictator'). He has run the violin making workshop since 1997: originally it came out of restoration workshops started in 1986



Luthiers at Oberlin worked on both individual and group projects

PHOTOS WILLIAM SCOTT



Makers regularly compared notes on their instruments