



The lutherie was punctuated by impromptu music sessions

WILLIAM SCOTT

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MARILYN WALLIN

by Vahakn Nigogosian. Germain explains how the workshops' philosophy was set by 'Nigo' right from the beginning: 'His attitude was that knowledge should be accessible to everyone. He was an Armenian brought up in Istanbul: he felt persecuted so he wanted to feel other people weren't held back as he was. He always had this open attitude.'

THE STRUCTURE ALLOWS for parallel ways of learning. Everyone works on their own instruments and has the chance to observe their peers at all stages, to discuss problems and approaches. Many are actively involved in a special project – this year, creating a copy of the 'Betts' Stradivari and varnishing one that was made last year (as detailed in Raymond Schryer's article), with everyone coming together to plan and watch the process at key stages. There are lectures after dinner – this year, for example, Steve Sirr had the collective jaw dropping with his scans of instruments from the Library of Congress, and there were sessions by George Stoppani and Sam Zygmontowicz.

Much of the learning happens just by being together, picking up each other's good habits. Luthier Marilyn Wallin explains: 'I learn by watching others do things in their own ways. Watching Gudrun Kremer carve a cello scroll, for example – her pegbox shape is so elegant. I'm going to go home and do it like that. A lot of learning here is by osmosis, watching people using their scrapers differently. I learnt long ago that the work I get done here is secondary to the observations I make.'

Antoine Nédélec has attended the workshop only once before, and is now sharing varnish responsibilities in the group project. He observes that there's naturally a certain amount of positive peer pressure: 'Every violin maker is lonely. It's not a profession where you see a lot of people. It's easy to fall into the

trap of looking at your work and thinking that everything you do is great. You come to a thing like this and suddenly there are 50 people and their violins around and you realise how your work really is and that you had better come up to scratch very quickly.' But there is also something comforting, as Wallin admits: 'Everyone who has been coming here for 26 years still has problems with certain things. It's reassuring that everyone else at your level still has things they're trying to figure out, and that they can help each other. I haven't been in such a helpful environment since I was at school.'

The success of any group is down to the chemistry of its members, and Germain seems to have this selection down to a fine art. He explains: 'If you

put the right people and the right pieces together – like-minded people at the same level – then they realise that everybody benefits from the experience. It's really like a brotherhood. It has to be the right mix to work properly. It's like a think tank – everyone has a niche or speciality that we can draw on.'

IT'S EASY TO FORGET as an outsider that everyone is effectively in competition. Germain is careful to draw boundaries in this regard, as Sam Zygmontowicz says: 'Chris has been very vigilant about commercial stuff coming in. It's bad form to have a client show up here, or anything that smells too much like you're trying to get any professional advantage. On the one hand we're all friends, but on the other we're competitors. We're all in the same thing, so you have to create a safe space.' Germain says of this: 'Part of what I try to do here is to set a relaxed atmosphere, and even though we're competitors, not to make it such a competitive atmosphere. The idea is that everyone contributes and we're all better off for the experience.' Testament to this generosity of spirit is the fact that while I'm there, it's common for makers to rave about some aspect of a colleague's work, in specific detail. So identifying excellence, appreciating it and modelling it is part of the learning curve. ▶



The subject of acoustics has gradually grown in prominence at Oberlin

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