



The luthiers throw a party for the bow makers in the first week

WITH THE BOW MAKERS

ONLY ACROSS THE CORRIDOR from the violin makers' workshop is that of the bow makers, but it's like a different world, although by tradition the two groups host parties for each other at the end of the first week. Yet the spirit is almost identical – a group of craftsmen (18 this year) come together for two weeks to improve their skills and share their knowledge, while working on a joint project – this year to copy a Tourte bow.

The bow course started in 1996, led by Yung Chin and Morgan Andersen. Inspired by the success of bow making workshops at the 1994 VSA congress, Yung Chin invited makers to Oberlin where there was already an established infrastructure. David Forbes has run the course since 2004 and explains the benefits: 'Part of the idea is to get to know your colleagues. Sitting next to them in a work situation and then going for lunch and dinner with them you develop friendships over the years. You know people's strengths, so if you have a problem you know whom to call.' For Tim Baker, the benefits extend beyond making: 'My understanding of how bows work and what I have to do to sell them has mostly come from this room. I was just leaving Beare's when I first came and I talked to many people about how they run their business. It was brilliant to get feedback before I started.'

WILLIAM SCOTT

With remarkable vision, certain infrastructures were created early on. The varnish cabinet and the desks were bought with money earned from selling the group's instruments (they're stored for the rest of the year in the school) and a database of instrument information was started, collecting drawings, scans, tracings and photos that participants have come across. This in itself may well turn into one of the world's significant bodies of instrument data.

Another achievement that seems to have filtered into the wider lutherie world is how Oberlin has made acoustics more accessible, and vital, to makers. The subject gradually became more and more important until the point that it became its own session, run by Fan Tao. According to Germain, this wasn't necessarily easy: 'It used to be that there was a divide between people who were into acoustics and people who were "real violin makers". People who focused on acoustics came from the realm of science; violin makers were from the realm of art, saying, "You can't fuse science and art – they're two separate disciplines." The truth lies somewhere in between – it's a science and an art, and if we take the best elements from both worlds we'll be successful in our craft. People have been swayed by that argument here.' Not everyone is convinced – while I'm there, there are heated 1am discussions about whether Stradivari would have cared about the science – but it's all there for makers to make their own decisions.

We've talked in *The Strad* before about the current golden age of violin making, and Oberlin has played a significant part in this with its research, questing, sharing and inspiring. But what of the future? The workshop is almost bursting at the seams, and Germain admits that it can't get any bigger. But the thing about a good idea, especially in the string world, is that people usually copy it, and similar workshops have started to happen around the world – Mittenwald, West Dean, Fertans, for starters. So, all it really takes to start a good society, and one that spreads, is a group of people with expertise, passion, ambition, humility and generosity – who don't mind doing a bit of washing up. >



US maker Evan Orman was among those working on a copy of a Tourte bow

DAVID FORBES