

Instrument experts of every stripe rubbed shoulders at this year's Oberlin Violin Makers Workshop. RAYMOND SCHRYER recounts how the teams of luthiers collaborated on a copy of the 'Betts' Stradivari

FIFTY-THREE VIOLIN MAKERS DESCENDED ON Oberlin in June for an eventful two-week workshop. The 2012 project picked up from last year's event, where the assembled luthiers had made a copy of the 1704 'Betts' Stradivari in the white. This year's goal was to varnish that violin, string it up to be played, and also make another 'Betts' copy in the white by the end of two weeks.

GEORGE VU

For this year's violin, it was decided that we would use traditional methods. Last year's had been made with pre-carved plates and scroll by the CNC team of John Waddle, Steve Rossow and Steve Sirt. This year we were divided into four teams: Sam Zygmuntowicz took the lead for the scroll team; Bill Scott for the rib structure team; myself for the back and top teams; and Jeff Phillips with Antoine Nédélec for the varnish team.

Most evenings, there was a scheduled lecture upstairs in the seminar room, where George Stoppani

and Jeff Robinson had kept their equipment set up after the previous acoustics workshop. This created a kind of symbiosis with our workshop.

JUNE 18 There's a vibrant energy in the air as people sign their names on the lists for the various teams. The wood for this year's violin project has already been chosen (old Bosnian maple and Alpine spruce) and the centre joints glued, so the wood is ready to be handed over to the teams. Bill decides we can use the three-part rib mould made for last year's fiddle, which replicates the asymmetry of the original 'Betts'. Meanwhile, the varnish team begins its wood surface-colouration process, and plans out a schedule that gives precisely ten days for completion.

JUNE 19 The scroll team people have made a template to copy the 'Betts' scroll and, with the wood measured, they are all set to make some cuts. The rib team has its maple planed from wood that matches the back, and are now ready to start bending. The ribs will have to conform to the distortions contained within the three-part mould. The back and top teams have a reprieve to work on personal making today, because an outline cannot be produced until the ribs are partially complete. Each step in the varnishing process has an influence on the final outcome, especially when copying a particular Strad like the 'Betts': Jeff and Antoine express the importance of surface texture before tanning a violin in UV light for two to three weeks. 'What exactly do you mean by surface texture, and how much should there be?' one participant asks. Everyone is glad to hear the answers and watch a demonstration. Jeff had completed both the wood wearing process (edges, corners, chamfers) and the UV tanning before the Oberlin workshop began. >

WILLIAM SCOTT



Chris Germain has run the workshop since 1997



The varnishing team was led by Jeff Phillips (left) and Antoine Nédélec