



Daniel Ross - Violin maker

Daniel Well, how I look at it is, I, I, I have a friend who's a violin maker who uses a 'thicknesser', a sander (for thicknessing cello ribs), probably uses a Dremel for the purfling. He uses a router copier that roughs out his archings for him. That's fine. That's his business and you know, he does it like that. But to be honest, I'm 36 and I'm starting to get arthritis in my fingers and, like, my hands are starting to hurt when I'm making stuff now. So, I'm actually thinking, actually, maybe if I want to carry on may in 10 years or 15 years maybe I'll have to use machines, cos, cos my fingers hurt too much. Because I've been working like the apprentice since the start. He's supposed to be doing just be doing the purfling in the end, and having everyone else doing the hard work, you know. Before violin makers in the 18th century and 17th century they would've had a bunch of sons ... 'Oh, make that flap for me,' you know. Like, you do all the planning, and the rubbing, and all that, and I'll just do the little, fine work, you know. So there's a bit of that, but at the same time ... For example, I've got a big band-saw, and, er, I have a big band-saw and I've got a table-planer. That I bought a couple of years ago. For the first 15 years I didn't have them. And, um, so I bought them ... I bought them after I'd finished my house. I'd just planed all the beams and the rafters and everything in the house by hand, and I was knackered. And then I wanted to make some flute cases and things like that and it was just impossible. By hand, if you've got a plank that's 2cm thick, and you want a piece of wood that's 5mm thick, by hand sawing stuff like that if it's 6 inches thick ... you'd literally have to saw it in two and then plane it down to the thickness you want. Because you can't cut straight enough – it's just not possible, so um, by hand. So actually using machines, and that kind of thing, you save loads of time, you save loads of effort, that you can concentrate on something else afterwards, and you save save a lot of material as well. With a band-saw, you don't need, it cuts straighter than I can cut with a massive saw with big teeth through a really big piece of wood it's really hard to cut really straight, you know. So using routers and that kind of thing is ... I draw the line, I like using, you know, the band-saw in the same way that a saw-mill uses a band-saw to chop the tree up, I'll chop it down to a size that I can make a violin out of and then I'll stop and I'll do it by hand. But, um, like I'm a tool collector, you know, I collect tools – like all sorts of tools. And what I see when I look at old instruments, when you look at a Strad you get something that's fairly symmetrical and really quite clean and proper, and really well-made, it's a really beautiful thing. But when you look at something like a del Gesu or, you know, Guenaris, or more lumpy makers, you know, the scrolls they can be covered in gouge marks. Probably, when they were made, the gouge marks – you couldn't see them as much, because the varnish sort of levels, it's like old gloss varnish, old gloss paint, it sort of levels, the brush strokes go away. And it kind of levels out over the tool marks and they disappear. And then the minute the varnish starts to wear, the tool marks stand out cos they keep the colour and the rest goes away, so then you start ... the instrument starts to get a patina and then you actually start to see how it's made, you know. So, er, or if something's completely asymmetrical, I mean carving a violin scroll, basically one side you do it with your right hand, and the other side you do half with your right hand and half with your left hand. Cos it's turning in the opposite direction, so if you want the same movement, you've got to use the same gesture, so you've got to do it with the other hand. So I can't scroll sort of probably three-quarters right-handed and then some bits I'll do left-handed.

Jon And when you carve a scroll, couldn't you just go clockwise on way and anti-clockwise ...

Daniel No, you have to go downhill. No, 'cos you'd be carving against the grain. And flame maple is the nastiest wood in the world to carve already. You don't want to go against the grain as well. So, anyway, so



when you start ... when you start looking at woodwork as, like, classical woodwork as ... in fact these people they'd never seen anything made of melamine, or hardboard. They'd never seen a perfectly flat kitchen table. Everything made out of wood for them it was planed or scraped, and it had, like ... there were tool marks that you just can't get rid of. On some pieces of wood, some pieces of wood, they're just so badly figured that you get a tear in it, and that's just part of it, and then the varnish process will fill that a little bit of tear up and then when it wears off we can see it, because the varnish is still left in it, you know. When you use a ... I really hate them. In Brittany, there's loads of houses that have got wooden beams, you know, they're all the same wooden beams every two foot along the house. And I really hate the ones from about 1920 onwards because they're always pine or oak beams and they're always planed on a table-planer, and they've always got this little ripple on them from the blades of the table-planer. And there's nothing ... that's why I planed all the beams of my house by hand, so they're all covered in plane marks cos they're ripped out all over the place cos there's no way you can sharpen your plane every, you know, every five cuts for the scale of the house. So there's lots of rip out around the knots and stuff like that, but I'd rather see the wood ripped than see this bobbly effect, and the bobbly ... the rippled bit you get from the plane you can sand it off, but then you wouldn't have a plane surface, you've have a sanded and the sanding's not the same either.

So I think if you want, if you want ... if you appreciate calligraphy, and you appreciate a line that's got energy in it, then symmetry's less important. And then, when you start looking at the way, you know, basically, not all but practically all ... I can't speak for everyone but ... I know one violin maker who uses an outside mould, well he's dead now, but Wilfred Saunders in Nottingham – one of the guys that started the violin school that I went to. He uses an outside mould. I know cos I saw his mould. But, but, I think most violin makers they use an inside mould. And an inside mould is the easiest way to get good joints on your rib structure, but it's the most difficult way to get a perfectly symmetrical rib structure. So you end up with an instrument, where basically you make the rib structure, the rib structure's not perfect, you kind of fudge it a little bit, to even it up, and when you make the front and the back, you modify the shape of the corners to even that up, and in the end you can't really see that it wasn't symmetrical, you know, perfectly symmetrical. You can't really see it, it's been balanced. And that's part of the art of making the corners on the violin. And that's how the old ones were made. And that's why they're asymmetrical you know. So when we make a copy of a Stradivari, I mean, basically, I mean front or back, left or right, you take your pick, it's like four lines. You know, so mostly, what most people would do, what I'll do, I'll pick the back, because the back wears less than the front, you see, the corners of ... are harder wood so it wears less. And generally, you'll pick the best side and then double it. Or, the last violin I made, like this one, that's a copy of the Gibson Huberman, and it's actually asymmetrical – it's completely asymmetrical. You can see it. I didn't make any effort to balance it up. I've copied the asymmetry. You can see this shoulder's higher than this shoulder.

Jon Not to me it isn't. In fact, if anything I'd say that should was higher than that.

Daniel Well, no it's completely asymmetrical.