



Violin Virtuosos

*Repairing fiddles
worth millions is no
job for the unskilled
or faint-hearted*

by William Duckworth

John Becker is the only woodworker I've ever met who comes to work in a white shirt, tie, pressed pants and polished shoes. Then again, Becker and his two employees don't generate a lot of dust as they go about repairing rare and expensive violins, some of them more than 300 years old. Except for the occasional use of a beautiful old Oliver bandsaw tucked away in an adjacent room, they do all their work with hand tools. A major restoration job can mean as much as 2,000 hours devoted to a single instrument. The goal is always to avoid

removing very little, if any, of the original wood.

Becker's shop is in the Fine Arts Building, a turn-of-the-century landmark on the shore of Lake Michigan in downtown Chicago. A little brass plaque by the front door tells you that he and his two employees occupy a space that served as Frank Lloyd Wright's studio in 1908 and from 1910 to 1911. The space is not large, but generous skylights above the windows bathe the room in an even stream of northern light. This looks like a nice place to work (see the photo on p. 92).

Nicolaus Amatius Cremonensis Hieronymi filii Antonii Nepos fecit Ao. 1677

*“the best teachers
are the dead masters”*

Becker is a master restorer, which is the top of four skill levels in the violin trade. In the 18 years he's been working at it (Becker is 38), he's moved through the ranks—apprentice, repairman, restorer. Keisuke Hori has been with Becker for five years; he's a restorer. Takeshi Nogawa has worked there for a little over one year; he's a repairman. Both men studied violin making before coming to work for Becker. In this field, the demonstration of learned skills means more than time of service.

Learning the trade from the ground up

How does one go about becoming one of the half-dozen or so people on earth who are allowed to work on some of these instruments? Schools exist—in Mittenwald, Germany, others in Tokyo and Salt Lake City—but that's not the route Becker took. As he says, “the best teachers are the dead masters,” meaning the Italian craftsmen who produced the very best fiddles.

He worked his way into the craft, starting by making guitars, but he soon realized there was no money in it. After that, he took a job at Lyon & Healy in Chicago, a venerable name in the musical instrument business, where he was an apprentice making grand-concert harps.

Then in 1981, he answered an advertisement he had seen in an issue of *Fine Woodworking*. Bein & Fushi, a prominent Chicago violin dealer, was looking for someone to work in its in-house repair shop. Becker moved in and moved up to take over the management of the Bein & Fushi shop. Three years ago, he decided to go on his own and worked out a deal with Bein & Fushi. He still works exclusively for the company (its showroom is right down the hall), but the business is his.

Who are the dead masters?

Scores of really fine violin makers abound (English, French and German). But only several generations of a few different families from Cremona, Italy, are considered the best. Andrea Amati (1511-1577) invented the instrument, deriving the basic design from the viol, a sort of clunky predecessor to the violin that had anywhere from three to seven strings. His earliest violins are dated to the year 1564. His grandson, Niccolo Amati (1596-1684), produced what are considered the best violins to come from the Amati family. Like most of the old masters, he also made violas and cellos.

Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737), regarded as the unequalled master of violin making, studied under Niccolo Amati. The only other maker whose fiddles come close to being ranked with those of Stradivari is Giuseppe Guarneri (1698-1744).

Guarneri apparently was a deeply religious man. He signed his violins with the mark of a cross and the initials *IHS*, which is a reference to Jesus Christ. People in the know refer to Guarneri



Back in the shop—John Becker (above) works on the neck of a violin made in 1725 by Guarneri del Gesu.

Old masters—Label from a 1677 cello made by Niccolo Amati (top of page). Makers signed their names in Latin.

Two classics, still making music—A 1742 Guarneri del Gesu called The Wieniawski (left, facing page). A 1708 Stradivari called The Ruby, for its red varnish (right, facing page).

simply as *del Gesii* (of Jesus). He was given to bold innovations in the design and execution of his instruments, especially those made in his later years. Decker compared the two men like this: Think of Stradivari as Leonardo da Vinci and Guameri as Van Gogh. Becker estimates that he's restored approximately 40 Stradivari violins and close to a dozen of those made by Guarneri del Gesu.

So how much are these fiddles worth?

I was surprised to learn that some 650 or so "Strads" are still with us, along with approximately 130 del Gesu violins. Prices for these instruments are like Olympic pole-vault records—they keep going higher. When you talk about money for these fiddles, it depends on whether you mean the auction price or the cost of one purchased privately. The figures for private sales are higher, but they're not always made public. Some

people don't want to advertise to the world that they have one of these things stored in a closet.

According to Becker, the current record prices paid for a single instrument are \$2 million at auction and \$3.7 million privately, both for violins made by Stradivari. Becker recently restored a violin by del Gesu that may top that (see the photo on p. 90). It is nicknamed *The Wieniawski* after a former owner, a Polish virtuoso. (Most of these instruments have some sort of affectionate handle.) Becker spent a considerable amount of time restoring this instrument. Bein & Fushi has it up for sale, on consignment. The asking price is \$4 million.

Many young prodigies who can play like Paganini can't afford to buy one of these violins. But the musical world has found a way around that problem. Becker is a curator with an organization called The Stradivari Society, which keeps track of some 20 instruments made by the two masters. The society



They work sitting down. Shown left to right, Takeshi Nogawa, John Becker and Keisuke Hori work on different instruments in Seeker's shop in Chicago. The space was once Frank Lloyd Wright's studio.

strives to keep the instruments in the hands of those who can play them by finding private patrons (individuals, not corporations) to purchase the violins and then loan them to the violinists. The Stradivari Society absorbs the cost of maintaining them.

Considering the prices of these violins, I could only imagine the stress that these guys must work under. So I had to ask Decker if he had ever dropped one of these fiddles. The answer was no.

Horacio Pifeiro copies the masters

Horacio Pineiro runs his restoration business a little differently. For one thing, he works alone. His shop is in a spare bedroom on the third floor of his house in Jackson Heights, Queens—across the 59th Street bridge from Manhattan. Unlike Becker, he'll work on cellos too. Pineiro showed me one of the violins he was making, a copy detailed after a Stradivari. His own label credits the original.

When I first met Horacio Pineiro, he was prying apart the belly of a 200-year-old violin. He took it apart with a gusto akin to my old neighborhood butcher yet with the care and self-confidence I'd want from a brain surgeon. I had the feeling that this man knew what he was doing and that he didn't waste his time.

When I asked Pineiro about the process, I learned that these instruments were designed to be taken apart (see the photo above). All the seams are fastened with hide glue. The bond is reversible with a butter knife dipped in hot water and lubricated with a little soap. The original instrumentmakers anticipated the problems wood movement causes over time, and they were certainly familiar with the tremendous pressure exerted on the instruments by those four stretched strings.

Pineiro got his start studying furnituremaking in his native Argentina before moving to New York 20 years ago (he's in his 50s). He took a job in the workshops of Jacques Frangais, near Carnegie Hall. He spent 14 years there before deciding to go on his own, and he's happy he made that decision.

If you want to place an order with Pineiro for a new violin, expect to pay \$10,000 to \$15,000, depending on the wood he uses. He has a stash of curly maple from the former Czechoslovakia that's 80 years old and some quartersawn spruce that's more than 100 years old. He showed me a piece of the maple that looked like something close to 2 bd. ft. of lumber. He



These instruments were designed to be taken apart. After removing the belly of this violin, Horacio Pineiro uses a gouge to carve away some of the end block that supports the neck.

said that if I offered him \$1,000 he would refuse to sell it. He wasn't joking. That lumber is a lot more stable than your local kiln-dried stock. He wants his violins to last.

Finish formulas are a secret

Violins are often described in terms of the color of the varnish used by the maker. According to John Becker, many thousands of dollars and countless hours have been spent trying to analyze the varnishes of the masters, especially Stradivari. Still, no one knows exactly what the recipes were.

And neither John Becker nor Horacio Pineiro is anxious to share his own formula. Becker told me that his finish was his secret and would remain that way. He did add that he uses the same one on every fiddle, and it's meant to be reversible. Pineiro was a little more diplomatic in his response. But from what he told me, I certainly wouldn't have been able to run back to my shop to whip up a batch.

William Duckworth is an associate editor of Fine Woodworking.