

A conversation with Sarah Shatz, photographer and author of *Music Makers*, an excerpt of a larger work which appeared in the Fall 2012 edition of Listen magazine.

*Sarah Shatz: How did you become interested in being a luthier? Where did you study? Did you have an apprenticeship or teacher that was influential?*

Jason: Music has always been a big part of my life and from an early age I tried to play just about any instrument I could get my hands on - from the piano to woodwinds and percussion to string instruments. To make a musical instrument was something that seemed, well, human, useful, and interesting. The violin though stood apart from other things. At once a musical instrument and an object of art, (and these days more and more an investment collected to offer some sort of future return!) it seemed to me to hold a host of interests and problems. The violin (and here I mean the violin family instruments) contained within it a wealth of information that had been obscured a bit by time, a market, and its great success as a musical instrument. It is a complex object but an object nonetheless. By complex object I mean that more than a tool it is something like a subject rather than an object, a pursuit, a chasing after something in sound. The thing could be beautiful, a piece that sits in a gallery - something crafted by hand, something with a pleasing shape, something with some color, etc. It is also something that could sit in a museum - an artifact with a place in history. But it could be used too - something that could take a place on stage in the hands of a musician, to play music, something that could travel from room to room, place to place, sound to sound. As this, it was something that contained these movements too, indeed it might outlast whoever played it, carried it, and whoever played it next, and perhaps, with some attention and care, outlast even he or she who plays it today (though it is the player today who by using it, preserves it and who in turn is preserved by it; and this an important point to comprehend - that some things remember those who use it.)

That the violin hasn't changed much over time speaks both to the integrity of its design and construction but as well to the continued interest in the sound that it makes and continues to make, more specifically in the complexity of its sound that a musician with subtle skill can employ in myriad ways to give shape to what they want or need to express that is particular and unique to them. It is a voice and gives the musician who plays it a chance to extend their own voice in song. This is what I saw in it and still do: a technical problem - how to make it? - and a container of problems - how was it made at a particular time and how so successfully that we can still ask it to do so many things. And it also contained a hope - that it might be better understood and perhaps better expressed by those who make them today and by those who use them today.

When I meet my colleagues I am always impressed by the various ways in which they found their way to violin making as a pursuit be it professional or amateur. Some pursued a passion that they had for the instrument from an early age; others trained as a high schooler in schools not unlike other types of trade schools; others began quite late in life after a career in physics or engineering and approach it like the greatest problem that got caught in their head, more compelling than the airplanes

they spent 40 years designing. When I began my studies, I had just completed a masters degree that delved into a history of ideas that spanned from literature and philosophy to politics and science - a course in classical texts that traced a history of thought which led to a contemporary scene. The idea that there might be an object that contained a history of ideas within it - that its current form was a product of a long conversation which coalesced at a particularly bright spot in time when our intellectual and technical abilities were particularly ripe and rich - appealed to me. And it seemed then that the violin exists in a way that distinguishes it from many other things that rest less lively on the shelf of human creations. Indeed it's not shelved at all. I realized that to learn how to make a violin well would involve explorations into a host of subjects - a complexity I found marvelous at the beginning of my apprenticeship and which inspires me still.

Crafts can be passed on from master to apprentice. The precision of tool use is very imprecisely taught from books and the efficiency of learning directly from watching and doing really only happens in an existing workshop. In this way I learned my craft from those who were most successful at it, from those who made the work work. I studied with Robert Young in New York and now of France, a dear friend of mine who was taught by Brice Dupin de Saint Cyr in his studio in Carnegie Hall and who in turn was taught by Paul Schuback who trained in Mirecourt. But Dupin also worked under Rene Morel at Jaques Francais' in NYC; Rene who worked under the influence of Simone Sacconi when both were at Wurlitzer's; Sacconi who was once assistant to Giuseppe Rossi, a pupil of Degani. That is the timeline of the teachers. Was one mine or were all of them? Or are the instruments that we studied our teachers? Or the methods of our contemporaries? Or the demands of our clients? These are the questions that a good teacher passes on to their student. Learning how to see a beautiful instrument through the eyes of someone who has made a study of it through their own teacher and the teacher before - this is key I think.

*Sarah: Do you play the instruments that you make?*

Jason: I make instruments for others to play!

*Sarah: What is a career highlight? A memorable instrument you've made and worked on, or a particular musician you've worked with?*

Jason: Actually, there are many memorable moments from humbling professional acknowledgements to moments of discovery. From hearing seven of my instruments on stage in concert at Carnegie where I had made everything except the harpsichord; to the moment years of research uncovered a varnishing technique instead of another recipe; to the employment of measurement techniques which allowed the designing of an instrument instead of the mere tracing of one. But it is the smaller moments which have the biggest impact and which move me the most: the principal cellist for one of our symphonies who stops by for periodic adjustments and I get to hear how the instrument continues to develop through his virtuosity; the child who visits my studio to see that an instrument must first be made before it is played; the musician on the NYC subway platform playing on an instrument you are so intimately involved with even if it is not your own. There are music in these moments.

*Sarah: What is the most challenging and most pleasurable part of your work?*

Jason: That there are rules to it. That there are infinite ways of interpreting them. That one needs to be so good at so many things but that the thing in itself must be excellent. That in order to make an excellent violin, one must not be afraid to be abandoned by it. That the success of things created necessitates their departure. That an instrument completed has just begun. That a living musician and a living maker give life to something that surpasses them both. That is the straightforward response. The poetic one is this: That I will never be done being humbled by my knife.

*Sarah: What is your favorite and/or most-used tool?*

Jason: When I first began my apprenticeship, my teacher had me make a knife. This is important and has a lot to do with my craft. If you want to make something, first make the thing that makes it. There is a reflection here. The beginning of a conversation. For in the most elemental way a violin is a tool for making music, a tool used by a violinist. My knife reminds me of this. It is at the center of my toolbox. If I were more clever, I'd say my most used tools are my ears or my hands or my eyes; but since a combination of these things determine how I respond to the sound that my instruments make - or adjust them to suit a musician's style or bow or sensitivity - it seems simpler to say that it is a knife. But really this is not the entire story. Because what drew me to violin making is how many tools are necessary to make one well. Tools that cut, that measure, that shape, that define lines, that adjust frequencies of response, that give voice to different timbres and colors. And so, yes, it is a knife. But it is a set of dividers also. And it is a soundpost setter. It is the cup of tea shared with a musician. Which is to say that yes, it really is a knife, my favorite tool. And the book, the record player, the beautiful instrument that just walked into my studio to be admired is there too.

*Sarah: Is there anything you'd like to say about violins, violas, violoncello making, your craft - can be personal, or historical, whatever you like?*

Jason: Yes. But I can't. The rest is for the instruments to say. And the musicians.

*Sarah: If you weren't making instruments what would you do?*

Jason: I don't know how to answer that.