

# Stradivari's 'Tuscan' viola

## ROGER HARGRAVE ON A RARE SURVIVING VIOLA FROM STRADIVARI'S MOST SKILLFUL PERIOD AS A CRAFTSMAN, MADE FOR PRINCE FERDINAND, SON OF THE GRAND DUKE OF TUSCANY.

From documentary evidence we know that Stradivari made more violas than those which have survived but we have no idea how many. Neither do we seem to know how many still exist today.

Estimates range from 10 to 18; you can take your pick. From the surviving relics of Stradivari's workshop we can deduce that he made at least three types of viola form. The largest of these was the tenor form of which the

most striking example is the viola housed in the Istituto Cherubim in Florence (a notoriously difficult museum to get into). The body length of this viola is 475mm or 18 3/4". (There must be a viola joke there somewhere). Although this large viola is known as the 'Tuscan' and was also made in 1690 it is not the instrument featured here.

The earliest surviving Stradivari viola and apparently the only one of its kind is a contralto constructed in 1672. This instrument, known as the 'Mahler' is similar in length to the contraltos which followed but it is much rounder and wider in its form, especially in the upper bouts (197mm). The modelling and style of the 'Mahler' owes much to the Amati tradition. This beautiful instrument is featured in *La Casa Nuyiale* by Arnaldo Baruzzi, published by W.E. Hill and Sons, where it is quite shamefully described as being unsymmetrical, ungainly, stiff and with grace. I would love to put the record straight some day.

More to Baruzzi zzi and the Hills' taste were the violas constructed on the contralto mood of 1690, which still survives in die Stradivari museum. On that mould and in the same year Stradivari constructed the viola

illustrated here. Like the large tenor previously mentioned, this viola, along with a violin and a cello, was delivered to Prince Ferdinand, son of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III de Medici in Florence, in the autumn of 1690. All of these instruments are known either as the 'Tuscan' or the 'Medici' or sometimes even the 'Tuscan Medici'.

Stradivari's 1690s contralto viola mould was to do good service. He does not seem to have re designed the contralto after this date, and apparently even the last known Stradivari viola, the 'Gibson' 1734, was constructed on this mould (see STRAD poster, September 1986). Any variations in the lengths and widths of the contraltos between 1690 and 1734 can be explained by Stradivari's varying of the edge thickness and/or natural distortion.

Also in 1690, Stradivari developed the designs for his so-called 'long pattern' violins which, however, he appears to have discarded at the turn of the century. These 1690s violins are characterised by their slender feminine outlines and narrow well rounded top bouts. Not unremarkably, in spite of other stylistic changes, Stradivari's violas retained something of the 1690s look long after 1700 had come and gone.

The 'Tuscan' (our 'Tuscan') is 1690s through and through. Quite simply, it looks like a blown up version of any 1690s violin as does, in turn; the 'Tuscan' tenor viola. In its workmanship, its structure and its material the 'Tuscan' (again our 'Tuscan') is worth comparing in detail with the Ex Muir Mackenzie violin of 1694, which was featured in a previous STRAD poster (December 1985). Such comparisons are helpful in explaining how experts can pin point specific periods sometimes down to the exact year even where no other comparable instrument is available.

The importance of this viola lies not only in its status as an instrument but also in the fact that most, if not all, of Stradivari's paper templates and certainly the mould or form on which the instrument was constructed have been preserved. It is quite likely that this instrument was the first to be constructed using these patterns. In a further article I will examine these patterns and their relationship, to this viola and the larger tenor.

This viola is unquestionably a product of Stradivari's most skillful period as a craftsman. It may even be argued that this was his most artistic period. His later instruments became bolder and more masculine in design, developing in particular their tonal prowess, but I do not believe that the early 1690s instruments were ever surpassed as far as craftsmanship is concerned.

The two piece back is well preserved with the exception of, the button which has at one time been broken, glued and reshaped. As I have already pointed out, the well- rounded outline and the long, slightly, droopy upper corners are typical of the 1690s. The edgework, though strong, is as lightly finished as the purfling is graceful. Both are supreme examples of Stradivari's craftsmanship.

As might be expected of most Cremonese works, the edges of this viola vary in thickness. The middle bouts are slightly thicker than the upper and lower bouts and the comers slightly thicker again. For a possible exploration of these variations in edge thickness see the article in THE STRAD, June 1989, entitled Close to the Edge.

The purfling mitres are simply long and slender with no bee sting type finish. They are still very much in the Amati style. Also Amati in style are the purfling blacks. More intense than in later periods, this stained wood closely resembles ebony or whalebone. As is usual for Cremona (though there were exceptions) purfling whites have fine longitudinal splits, indicating they were probably made from poplar.

The purflings are jointed at the top and bottom of the back with a diagonal cut at the centre line (centre joint). Also at the centre joint the locating pins

peep out on either side of the purfling strips. Generally, the purfling lies in the

bottom of the fluted purfling channel but occasionally the fluting scoops a little deeper inside the purfling, especially in the top and bottom bouts.

The back arching rises to a height of almost 20mm and has a typical 'barrel' form running through the centre, somewhat in the Amati style, but a little fuller in the bouts. It is difficult to find viola wood deep enough for such an arch these days.

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Looking along the arching against the light you can see the ripples of the flame or figure so typical of classical works. On modern works this effect is often lost by the process of wetting the wood to raise the grain and then rescraping to remove any such bumps. The flame itself is of fine to medium width sloping down the centre joint very slightly. The wood is quarter sawn and of extremely fine growth.

A quick flip through Goodkind's Iconography of Antonio Stradivari will confirm that a goodly number of 1690s instruments have very similar wood including some cellos (compare again also the Ex Muir Mackenzie). The ribs are of similar wood to that of the back. The flame runs almost vertically all around the instrument. Curiously there are six small holes which have been filled. These are positioned in the lower rib just below the belly at the bottom block. They are probably not original but they have the appearance of having been anchor points for sympathetic strings.

Also unusual is the apparently two piece top rib. Both sides are definitely cut from the same piece of wood but the flame runs in slightly different directions. The bottom rib was certainly made from one piece but a strip of purfling now divides it at the centre line. The rib comers are not blackened in the way that del Gesu often finished them. But they are quite long and certainly much longer than those of later works would be.

The two piece belly wood is also typical of the 1690s with its reed lines, which are super fine in the centre only becoming gradually wider in the extreme lower bouts.

The arching mimics that of the back in height and form. Only the long arch profile is quite different having the usual flatness through the centre. This flatness makes the barrel form of the arch even more pronounced on the belly. The effect is further en-

hanced by the scooping of the soundhole wings. Also across the centre section above the soundholes the belly arch is clearly fuller than that of the back. The soundhole wing flutes run characteristically alongside the body of the holes finally blending into the arching towards the top corners and above the soundholes outer top curves. This blending has created a distinct 'eyebrow' over the top and outer sides of the soundholes. It was a feature often exaggerated by the 19th century French copyists.

In the soundholes we see another outstanding example of Stradivari's craftsmanship. Their set and balance are in perfect harmony even though on close examination the two holes are quite different from each other. As I have often described before, the main body of the soundholes are cut perpendicular to the arching and the top and bottom circles have been chilled.

Only the bottom circles appear slightly small. This is due to the fact that they have been cut with the same size cutter as was used for the violins. This was also something which Stradivari continued to do with few exceptions until the last. This cutter made circular holes 9.5mm in diameter: The ExMuir Mackenzie violin's bottom circles are also 9.5mm

The soundhole nicks are clearly formed by four separate knife cuts two to cut the main V shape and two more to take off the edges. Over the years these features have often become rounded so that the method which Stradivari used can only rarely be observed.

The head has a little more wear than the body. This wear is particularly noticeable on the top right hand side of the scroll. Such wear is the result of the player continually resting the head against a table top or some similar surface while tuning (players please note). Also on the head there is some evidence of slight worm damage and several small pieces have been let into the peg box as a result. Two further pieces have been wedged at the chin and as a result the shape of the chin has been slightly altered (restorers please note).

All original Stradivari viola heads have cello style peg boxes. The design for these heads was established by Andrea Amati more than 100 years earlier. Once

Stradivari had adopted this design he apparently saw no reason to change. In the meantime, contemporaries of the Cremonese school, notably the Brecians, developed violin type heads for their violas. It is felt by some modern theorists that such heads are both more practical and more aesthetic than the cello type head. In fact Cremonese style viola heads have been criticised by even the highest authorities:

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'Though as designed and made by the Amati, this head possesses perfection of

form and workmanship, and is in complete harmony with the body of the instrument, it is unsuitable for the viola because it inconveniences the player's left hand. With the introduction of the smaller sized viola it was necessary to proportionately diminish the head; and strangely in contrast with that fine sense of symmetry which Stradivari so frequently displayed, we here see a comparative failure the scroll being too large for the box which it overhangs and the whole being stunted and ill proportioned.' (Antonio Stradivari, His Life and Work, W.E. Hill & Sons)

It is not often that I would dare to disagree with the mighty Hill brothers, but on this occasion I feel I must. I personally find that the proportions of Stradivari's cello type viola heads match exactly those of the main body of the instrument. Indeed I believe that violin style heads on most violas appear weak and ill placed. As for the instrument's playability, a simple double nut of the type seen on this viola will cure the problem of the player's left hand. Theoretically there may be a question of some extra weight, but a skillfully cut box with shoulders should not weigh any more than a violin type head assuming that the violin type box has been made large enough to allow good access to the pegs and strings.

Viewed from the side the scroll has the perfection of form and flow which we would expect from any head cut by Antonio before 1700. In the main these scrolls still retain a roundness akin to the Amatis. After 1700 a more oval form began to develop in Stradivari's scrolls. Various experts have put this down to the increasing influence of Stradivari's sons. It is certainly true that by the 1730s this feature was quite extreme.

From both back and front it can be seen that Stradivari finished this head with a craftsman's eye for symmetry. Here there are almost no tool marks visible, the exception being the scribe line and the pin holes on the central spine between the flutings. (I will examine this feature in a future article about the templates and patterns for Stradivari's violas.)

The slightly irregular chamfers have traces of the black with which Stradivari accentuated them. The head wood matches perfectly the back and ribs and is cut exactly on the quarter.

Through the soundholes it is clear that the inside work is also in remarkably good condition. There is no sign of any patching or major repair work.

The linings are typically deep and strong and like the heavily built blocks they are of light reddish (willow?) wood. The original label is very clear and easily read. I could not at the time take accurate thickness measurements and so I refer the reader to Sacconi's book.

Finally the varnish is a clear brown orange colour which is still present in quite large amounts. The ground is quite dark (often a feature of 1690's instruments). This may perhaps be due to the varnish having partially penetrated the wood. (I know how it feels). This is especially noticeable on the ribs.

All in all, a truly great viola, heralding a brave new design and finished with both consummate skill and artistic flare.

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