

The Art of Violin Making

A modern luthier
crafts her own tradition

BY LAURA SCHILLER

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WHEN JURGEN WOLF RETIRED as principal cellist of the Dusseldorf Symphony in 2000, he reluctantly gave the orchestra back its prized cello—an original 1713 Gagliano—which had been his to use for ten years. Luckily, shortly before his retirement, during a visit to the United States, he had allowed violin maker Anne Cole to make a drawing and detailed measurements of the instrument. She had been enamored with the cello's tone and unusual pattern, and was inspired to make a copy. True to her trademark style, she subtly decorated the copy in homage to the cellist who inspired it. Nicknamed the "Wolf" cello, it has a bas relief wolf's paw imprint carved on the back of the scroll, and a delicate watercolor of wolf footprints in snow inside the body, visible through the f-holes.

Upon seeing and hearing Cole's copy, Wolf bought it immediately, and has declared himself so pleased with it that he claims not to miss the original.

"I have the best cello in the world!" he has stated on more than one occasion.

Wolf is one of many musicians worldwide who treasure Cole's craftsmanship for both its unique aesthetic and tonal qualities. Instead of a standard luthier's label, Cole adorns the insides of her instruments with her own artwork, much of which reflects the nature surrounding her Albuquerque, New Mexico, home. She often bridges imaginative themes, from the scenes painted inside to intricate carvings on the scrolls. For example, the "Thrush" cello has delicate tendrils of Virginia creeper on the back of the scroll, and a small painted songbird amid lifelike vines in fall color on the inside.

To audiences, the instruments look traditional. To the musicians, the artwork is an inner landscape

that only they know exists—and sometimes *they* don't even know the full extent of it.

Cellist Tony Stogner, who for years had played a Cole instrument with an elegant spruce tree carved on the scroll, tripped unfortunately in a cluttered, dark backstage area and cracked his cello's rib. To repair the damage, the top of the cello had to come off, revealing a lush forest scene he had never known was there.

While many of Cole's themes are contemplative, some are whimsical and others inspirational. On the "Tiger" viola, for example, a musician specially requested a cat's head in place of a traditional scroll. Cole agreed, and then added a full-color tiger inside, painted ingeniously to match the contours of the instrument, as if to say, "Within every creature is an ideal, untamed self."

Inside one of her latest cellos is a large red dragon meant to inspire the cellist who commissioned the instrument to play with more fire. "You know how guys, when they get a hot rod, all of a sudden they're studs? It's psychological," explains the violin maker. "Tone is for sure the main consideration. But I want the person to feel like they're not just using a device to put across their music. It's an inherent artistic thing in and of itself."

HOME SCHOOLED

Aside from the vast watercolor palette in her studio, another major factor distinguishing this luthier is her complete self-training, which began in the seventh grade when she took apart her school cello. Others with her inclination might have eventually apprenticed in a shop or attended violin-making school, but in the 1950s no violin maker lived within miles of Albuquerque. Her main sources were the book *Violin Making As It Was & Is* by Edward Heron-Allen (Algrove Publishing, reprinted in 2000), and her tenacity over the years to make and redesign instruments using blueprints of her own. But that's not to say that she remains totally uninfluenced by the traditional makers.

"Seen from a certain perspective, Anne Cole is very much like one of the old master makers," says Joel Beckett, concert cellist and vice president of Eastman Strings. "She uses techniques she dreams up on her own, and kinds of wood other makers tend not to use because they're not standard, and integrates tradition and creativity in her making. That's



LABOR OF LOVE: Anne Cole at work on the heart-shaped Cupid viola.

PHOTOS BY JOEL BECKETT

shop visit

another way of looking at tradition. "Like the great master makers of the past, she's tried new and different things."

Perhaps if Cole had apprenticed in a shop or subscribed to one of the famous violin-making schools, her instruments would be more standardized, but standard is the opposite of what she strives for. In fact, Cole's quest is to reach new realms of form, slightly altering instruments to make them ergonomically easy to play and beautiful sounding at the same time. Her alibi for violists whose conductors often beseech them for more vol-



BIRD SONG: Cole's "Thrush" cello.

ume is simple: It's an issue of physics. The viola cavity is actually too small to fully support the instrument's low pitch, she insists, because the body must be small enough to play horizontally. Only a seven-foot-tall violist could play a 20-inch-long instrument, which is the appropriate viola size, acoustically, she says.

Her feasible solution?

A larger-size vertical viola that sits on the musician's knees and is played like a cello, inspired by both historic precedent (many 16th- and 17th-century violas were nearly this large) and modern science (several years ago, Carleen Hutchins, founder of the Catgut

Acoustical Society, published plans for just such a large viola). But such innovation doesn't come without its predicaments.

"A conductor would freak out if a violist auditioned for an orchestra with a vertical viola," she admits. "In the quest for tone, you go to the larger size and then run up against this brick wall of nonacceptance. I'm trying to remain practical and useful, and at the same time probe all the avenues to give performers more options. That's what draws me to this whole thing, that there is room for growth in the design of instruments."

MY FUNNY VALENTINE

Practical and useful is how one could describe Cole's heart-shaped viola aptly named Cupid, based on a 1561 Gasparo da Salò template. The heart shape is not just an aesthetic design but a practical solution—a wider, fatter instrument provides more internal airspace to support the viola's low notes. And the crook of the heart offers a chin rest, so the arm can reach another inch down to the scroll. Needless to say, an arrow-bearing Cupid inhabits the inside of the violin and, in full theme spirit, the tuning pegs are valentine-shaped themselves.

Paul Goh, principal violist of the Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra in Singapore, plays one of Cole's heart-shaped violas, which he named Solomon after the Biblical king because of its rich tone and regal feel. "The bottom range is dark and mellow but he sings like a violin at the top registers," Goh explains. "I've never had to struggle to project." In reaction to both the instrument's physical form and projection, Goh's conductor once exclaimed, "This instrument is . . . from God!"

Jorge Mendoza, leader of the chamber-jazz group Celloquium in Mexico (also profiled in this issue on page 64), plays a Cole cello made in 1980 from an original pattern developed by Cole. He says the instrument has two characteristics so hard to find in one: warmth and power. Cole accomplishes this by shaping her exceptional old tonewoods to traditional graduations, and also tap-tuning the tops and backs based on proven methods and her own experimental research. On Mendoza's cello,

called "the Crane," the center line of the scroll becomes the beak of a stylized carved crane. Inside the instrument is a serene watercolor pond, complete with leaves and one gold fish. Mendoza bought his cello in 1999 from Becktell, one of Cole's former cello students for whom she had made the instrument when he was 16 years old.

"I think the scroll on that Crane cello is one of the most beautiful scrolls I've ever seen in my life," says Becktell. "Anne Cole looks at each instrument as having unique expressive potential and gives each its own personality."

Becktell eventually sold the Crane to Mendoza, who had long coveted it, after he borrowed one of Cole's more recent cellos—a Carlo Testore copy—and decided that buying it would be the only way he could relinquish the Crane. Instead of another fish, Cole embellished the inside of this cello with a haiku that Becktell wrote himself: *Wind through outstretched wings / There is nothing but music / When I am flying.*

And for many, it seems there is nothing but flying when playing music with an Anne Cole instrument. "It is truly an exhilarating feeling to know the Crane will respond when I need to whisper, shout, cry, or laugh with my music," says Mendoza. "Thank you, Anne." □



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