

NO SECRETS

Minnesota luthier David Folland, who attended the workshop's first year, still sounds amazed at how easily things came together. "The first meeting that we had on the first day, we're all sitting around the table, and people are kinda wondering, 'How is this going to go?'" Folland recalls.

"The first person to talk was Frank Ravatin," he continues. "He just laid out everything that he does with his varnish, all his secrets, holding nothing back. After Frank, then Gregg and Sam. It was boom, boom, boom. It became a little bit like who had the most to share, a contest over who had the best secret to tell."

Close quarters and constant contact help create the open environment, according to Dilworth, who has twice served as an instructor at the workshop. Luthiers prepare and eat meals together, share a campus dorm, and often wind up working or playing music together late into the night. "You can't spend two weeks working in one workshop with a whole bunch of people and expect to keep your methods secret," Dilworth notes. "Especially once the booze comes out of the fridge. And once the beers start spilling, you might as well empty out the whole sack."

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—Chris Germain

That's not to say that every member of the violin-making community has embraced this Oberlin openness. Germain recalls meeting skeptics in the first year from a few luthiers reluctant to share their secrets.

But a more common reaction was excitement, he says. That enthusiasm reflects what Germain and other makers describe as a growing openness in the craft. "For centuries, the violin world has operated under a shroud of secrecy where makers worked in isolation and didn't share their ideas," Germain says. "I think many have now realized that by open communication you don't lose anything, but everyone gains quite a lot."

Among those standing to gain the most are musicians, who are coming to understand that great violins do not always bear the talismanic names of old Cremona. "[Players] are finding that modern instruments are often quite wonderful," Germain says. "I feel like our whole craft is really at a high-water mark. I don't want to claim responsibility for that,

but I think in our little world at Oberlin we've certainly contributed."

Dilworth agrees. He thinks Oberlin is part of a process of demythologizing violin making, of creating a greater openness in the craft that will allow it to better serve musicians. "[Oberlin] is a research lab in some ways; a hothouse of ideas, and these ideas will inevitably travel through the violin-making world," he notes. "You can't make a violin without input from the players, and if I might get a bit pompous, what's happening at places like Oberlin . . . is in no small way affecting the development of the violin in the future."



ATTENTION TO DETAIL: David Wiebe carves F-holes.

A QUANTUM LEAP

One concrete measure of Oberlin's success is the strong performance of the workshop's participants in violin-making competitions. For instance, Canadian maker Raymond Schryer, who has gone to Oberlin every year, took the gold medal for cello making at last year's VSA competition. "I can't express how much the Oberlin workshop has made my career as a violin maker more successful," Schryer says.

A few musicians have already benefited from the workshop in the most direct way possible: They've played instruments made collectively by the participants. These collective projects, which are completed in a fraction of the time they'd ordinarily take, require a massive investment of effort. In the year that Philadelphia luthier Pamela Anderson first attended, workshop participants made a cello. "I think the workshop was closed maybe five hours a night," Anderson says. "But other than that, someone was working on that cello at every hour, working on some element."

Anderson, one of those female luthiers to attend that year, was deeply impressed by the diverse talents on display. She watched Benjamin Barb demonstrate a method of



FIRST IMPRESSION: Christopher Germain (left) and Gregg All prepare rosin temperature vulcanizing (RTV) rubber for a scroll casting.