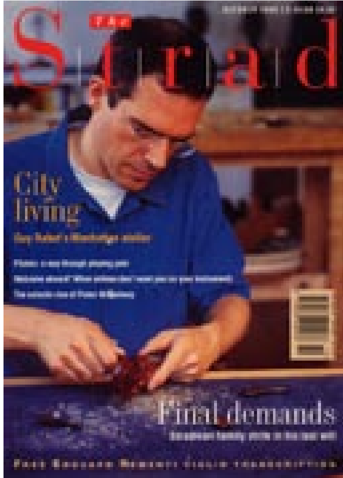


The Strad, October 1998

Urban Space

Luthier Rabut's airy Manhattan atelier gives him room to think and create. Laurinel Owen pays him a visit.

Walk from the dark corridor into the Manhattan workshop of luthier Guy Rabut and you are immediately struck by light - then the view. To the left is the Empire State Building with the Art Deco roof of the Chrysler building peeking out from behind. To the right is a bit of the Flatiron building, while due east the golden roof of Met Life shines brilliantly. From the 15th floor, West 28th Street looks like a tropical jungle, flower vendors lining the street and nude sunbathers casually lying across on the next roof.

It is immediately obvious why Rabut and his associate, bow maker Michael Yeats, moved last January from their glamorous Carnegie Hall location: space. At Carnegie they used to share a small work area in a corner of the showroom of violin dealers Rudig and Oster. Now they each have their own large shop.

"The room was originally L-shaped," Rabut explains. "I took the long leg. We worked on it for four months to fix it up. At first it was just a big raw space. I put down cherry wood floors, adding lighting, made a room for my machinery and wood storage and another (which is dust free) for varnishing. Now I am hoping that my productivity will go up since there are fewer distractions here than there were in the Carnegie studio."

Visually, the studio is very pleasing. Drawings in pen and ink which Rabut sketched for an American Federation of Violin and Bow Maker's calendar hang over bookcases full of photographic albums containing his archive of more than 4000 pictures of instruments. He is sharing these with other Federation members for study purposes. In the corner, next to a row of cello cases, stand half a dozen, six-feet tall Mauritius ebony logs. In the instrument try-out area stands a mobile inspired by sculptor Alexander Calder. Everything here attests to an artistic nature.

Son of an artist and illustrator, Rabut had intentions to go to art school after graduation. To earn pocket money, he found a job rehairing bows (which he learnt to do from a book) in his cello teacher's music shop. After participating in a six-week guitar making course in Vermont, he thought of going to Europe to study violin making. But when a relative gave him a newspaper clipping about the Violin Making School of America in Salt Lake City, Utah, he went there: "It was 1975 and violin making was almost a "new" profession - or I should say that it was coming back as a viable profession since old instruments were starting to sky-rocket in price. There were seven students in my class and we are all still in the business of either making or repairing. I feel

that it is a quirk of fate that economic forces have come together over the last couple of decades that allow me to make a living just making instruments."

On graduation Rabut got a place working under master restorer René Morel in the prestigious New York firm of Jacques Français Rare Violins. "I remember once we had seven Montagnana cellos in the shop at one time!" exclaims Rabut. "I've never even had seven of my own cellos in one room at the same time. We had legions of great instruments to study and René was very generous with his time and teaching. This exposure was both instructive and inspiring and of course, in the evenings - as was the tradition in Morel's workshop - I built instruments and brought them in for critiquing."

After five years of working for Français, Rabut had the confidence and connections to set up a workshop of his own. And then, in the 1980s he sent out a letter thanking his clients for their support and announcing that from then on he would stop repairing instruments in order to concentrate on making: "It was a clear decision. My work develops when I do it every day - it's like practising. I have to do it regularly."

He is certainly busy. Numerous scrolls sun themselves in the window and on the workbench lie a couple of white, neckless fiddles. But one's eye is continually drawn to the other side of the work area where a partially completed Gofriller-model cello stands. The varnish on the body appears well worn while the scroll looks brand new. "Yesterday the varnish was perfect on the body too," Rabut grins, "and by tomorrow the scroll will also show the battle scars of age".

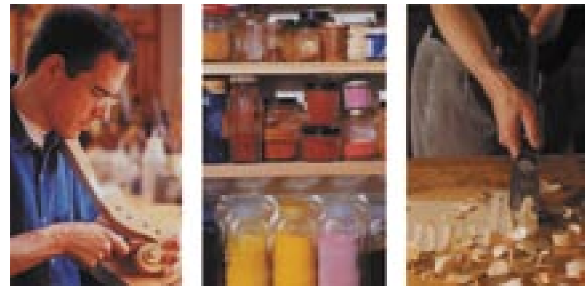
So does he make copies" "On occasion, I am asked to make a replica of a particular instrument. I enjoy the challenge and find that it compliments the rest of my work. It gives me balance." He also finds it extremely instructive to study and attempt to recreate in fine detail every aspect of a master instrument. "A convincing copy is certainly a *tour de force* of craftsmanship which can be widely appreciated and there is a large segment of the musician population which actively supports this work."

The analytical and technical skills which he has developed are also useful in the making of new instruments. Rabut prefers to build new-looking violins, violas and cellos which have a strong classical foundation but at the same time allow his personality to show through: "In this work I take my inspiration from the great instruments of the past and then turn away to allow myself to be creative. These instruments are made as new to be aged by the natural forces of playing and time."

The first consideration when Rabut accepts a commission is selecting a model. He begins by assessing the tonal objectives of the musician. Is the player a soloist or chamber musician seeking a powerful projecting instrument which may require real strength to play, an orchestra member

looking for a clean sounds or an amateur wanting a sweet, mellow, easy to handle violin? Each model, by virtue of its proportions and dimensions, has a characteristic sound. He matches performer and model after analysing the player's style and tonal preferences.

"For the most part," he explains, "the violin models that I use are a basis for my new instruments are the classical models of Cremona, particularly Stradivari and Guarneri 'del Gesù'. The Guarneri model imparts a bit more growl or wild beast qualities to the sound, while the Strad tends to be smoother and more refined. Of course, there will be some variation depending on the choice of wood, type of arching and plate thickness. After years of working with so many great instruments of the past and knowing their sound, I am able to select the right model for the situation at hand; then I make my own personal interpretation of this classical design."

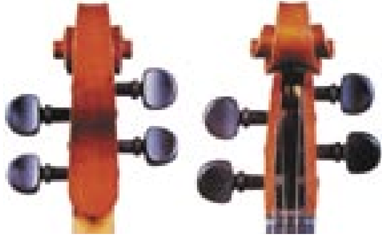


In making a viola, Rabut affords himself much greater latitude in selecting models. His most successful violas are a carefully orchestrated synthesis of different models blended into one. The challenge - especially since the trend today is towards smaller and smaller instruments - is to create a sound which is a true middle or alto voice with a deep, rich C string and a properly voiced A string which avoids the more brilliant qualities of the violin A string. This task seems full of contradictory choices. Rabut's solution is to create a broad chest area across the centre of the viola and maintain a slightly fuller arch in order to compensate for the reduction in body length. This approach has produced some excellent-sounding violas which are easy to play. For his aesthetic inspiration he looks to the Brescian school, including such luminaries as Gaspar da Salò and G.P. Maggini, and to the violas of the Cremonese Amati family.

When it comes to cellos, Rabut turns to examples by Stradivari and the Venetian makers Gofriller and Montagnana: "The Venetian cellos are darker and more mellow as a rule due to their greater breadth while the cellos of Cremona tend to have a more tenor-like voice. As a former cellist I have a special feeling for the cello's sound and the exploration of the range of voice that can be produced."

After choosing a model, wood selection is the next concern. Where it comes from is of less importance to Rabut than its quality. "I don't care about the origin," he says. "I look for superiority since the inherent qualities of the wood will ultimately determine the voice of the finished instrument."

Rabut has spent the past 25 years traveling through North America and Europe searching of the perfect wood. Often the selection process involves looking through several thousand pieces just to find a few that have all the qualities he is looking for to make a truly first-class instrument: "When I pick up a piece of wood I first judge its weight. Then I want to evaluate the density. It must be strong and light. I slide my hands across the surface and tap it lightly, listening for an open ringing tone, in order to picture the type of sound that it will ultimately produce." He uses mostly European wood: Alpine spruce from Italy, Austria and Germany, and maple from



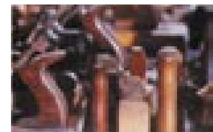
Bosnia. But he also works with maple from Vermont as well as North American willow and poplar.

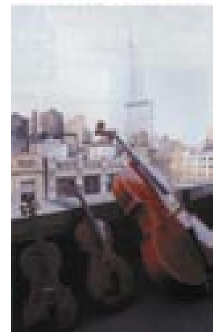
Most makers constantly explore the aesthetic and acoustical role of varnish. Rabut asserts that the best varnishes today are as good as those of the ‘golden age’: “We no longer have to say that today’s instruments would be as good ‘if only we had the varnish’.” When asked if he worries whether his varnish will last 200 years he replies, “Not even Strad knew the answer to that question.”

Rabut recently attended a workshop with other members of the American Federation, held at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC. They spent one week with scientists and researchers form the conservation and analytical laboratories learning varnish chemistry and methods for cleaning old varnishes. From a chip of old varnish embedded in a piece of plastic, which was then sliced and magnified, scientists showed them how each layer had been applied. This autumn they will continue their studies at the Smithsonian when their seminar deals with creating new varnish recipes.

So if Rabut has such an interest in traditional varnishes, what is the row of four wild and crazy gold and black contemporary scrolls doing on the bookcase? Just as making copies adds balance to his work, Rabut says that experimenting with new designs stop his imagination stagnating (he studied drawing, anatomy and figurative sculpture for several years at the Art Students’ League in New York). Perhaps it was the artist within that led him to work in designing and building a violin with a completely unconventional appearance. The objective was to take a Guarneri “del Gesù” model and keep all the sound-producing properties - such as arching, internal air capacity and wood thickness of standard dimensions - while creating something visually new.

“The playing characteristics and set-up had to be identical to a normal violin,” he explains. “The player must be able to switch between instruments. So, working from a schematic of the interior, I began to re-design all aspects of the violin that had no acoustical function. These areas included the corner profiles, the scroll and the accessories. The varnish - which is my normal violin varnish with black pigment added - was applied over a black foundation stain, then 24-carat gold-leaf accents were added. It was a process of abstraction and simplification. The scrolls on the wall were stepping stones on the way to the final design.”





Once an instrument is completed Rabut usually takes time off to clean the shop, work on new ideas and plan future projects. After putting so much of himself into his work, is he said to see an instrument leave the shop? Becoming thoughtful, he replies, “No. For me that moment is not an ending but the beginning of the instrument’s life.”