

EXHIBITION REPORT **BORN IN THE USA**

The AFBVM convention this year housed an exhibition of American violin and bow making. ANDREW RYAN was left impressed by its sheer depth and breadth



ALL PHOTOS MICHAEL ZIRKLE

Delegates admire a case of bows at the AFBVM convention, held at Washington's Library of Congress

THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF VIOLIN

and Bow Makers (AFVBM) met on 6–8 April at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, for a symposium celebrating its 25th anniversary. The focus was a celebration and examination of violin and bow making in America from the time of Thomas Jefferson to the present. The library, established by an Act of Congress in 1800, is the caretaker of America's cultural history and houses the finest public collection of Cremonese instruments in America. These instruments, beginning with the gifts of philanthropist Gertrude Clarke Whittall, are played regularly by guest artists and are available for study to all visitors.

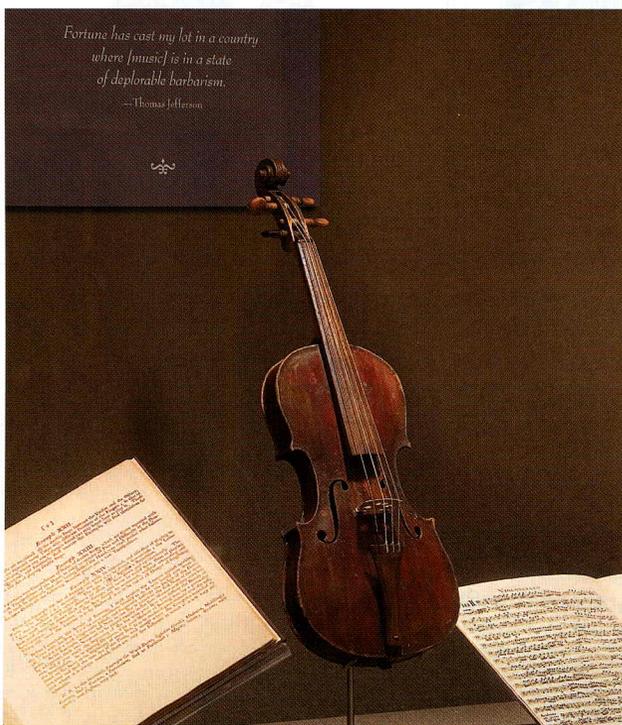
The centrepiece of the convention was an exhibition of important American violins and ephemera together with the library's collection of Cremonese instruments. Curated by the library's music specialist in charge of the instrument collections, Carol Lynn Ward-Bamford, independent violin expert Philip Kass and AFBVM board member John Montgomery, the exhibition portrayed the social, political and economic forces that shaped American violin making. An accompanying catalogue, written by Kass and Montgomery, contained significant new research and gave depth and context to the displays.

Early violin making in America was born of necessity and ingenuity. With no masters to train them, the earliest makers copied what they saw and tried to improve on it where possible. The earliest known extant American violin was made in 1759 by the versatile American-born composer and Moravian missionary **John Antes** (1740–1811) in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. It shows characteristics of the Saxon

violins with which he would have been familiar and was displayed at the exhibition alongside his Three Trios for two violins and cello op. 3, composed in Egypt and published in London c.1790; also on show was Thomas Jefferson's personally annotated copy of *The Art of Playing on the Violin* (1751) by Francesco Geminiani.

Peter Young, a joiner by training, took up violin making to meet the local demand. His violin, dated Philadelphia 1778, with its simple arching and short corners, indicates that he used primitive tools and had no special training.

Abraham Prescott (1789–1858), working in Deerfield, New Hampshire, was no less enterprising and made over 500 'church basses' (essentially a three-stringed cello that provided the bass in a church choir) using Saxon techniques of construction. His one extant violin, displayed at the exhibition, has a neck and upper block in one piece and no linings or corner-blocks. The f-holes are highly idiosyncratic with large eyes, distinctly tapered wings and curved notches. They give the front a playful, animate quality.



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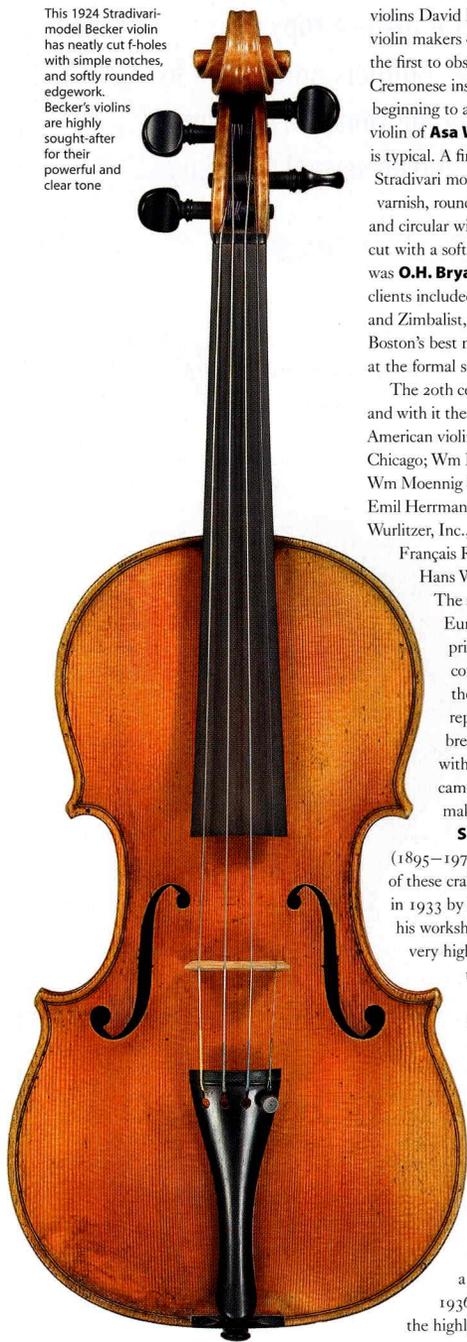
Nineteenth-century America grew quickly with the arrival of immigrants seeking opportunity and freedom from the political and social constraints of the Old World. Some, such as George Gemünder (1816–99) and John Albert (1809–87), settled in the urban centres of the east coast; others, including Herman Macklett (1834–84), went westward to Chicago, which had by 1900 grown to become America's largest city, with a population of 1.7 million.

John Albert, an inventor fleeing political oppression in Baden, settled in Philadelphia in 1852. He developed machinery to make high-quality violins and recruited and trained craftsmen from Germany; many, such as Henry Richard Knopf (1860–1939), later opened their own successful businesses. Albert's violin, with its elaborate carving of an American shield, laurel wreath and American eagle on its back, is an obvious tribute to his new home and the great love he felt for it.

George Gemünder, born in Germany, came to America from the workshop of J.-B. Vuillaume in 1847. He was a proud and skilled craftsman, and the exhibition's copy of his book *Progress in Violin Making*, submitted to the Library of Congress by Gemünder as part of a patent application, is full of shameless self-promotion, especially the story of a 'Guarneri copy, submitted to the Vienna Exposition of 1873, [which] was disqualified by the judges who felt that the maker had actually submitted an original Guarneri'. The American violin virtuoso Maud Powell (1867–1920), whose concert violin was the 1880 Gemünder on display, believed it was a Guadagnini and wrote of the instrument: 'He's a big lusty boy, whom I do love to thrash and beat black and blue.'

Herman Macklett, the maternal grandfather of luthier Carl Becker Sr, arrived in America in the early 1860s and eventually found his way to Chicago. The violin on display, dated 1871, the year of the Great Chicago Fire, may (according to family legend) have been one that he carried with him, along with his tools, into Lake Michigan to escape the burning city. 'America didn't start making great fiddles until they saw great fiddles,' says musician, collector and authority on American >

This 1924 Stradivari-model Becker violin has neatly cut f-holes with simple notches, and softly rounded edgework. Becker's violins are highly sought-after for their powerful and clear tone



violins David Bromberg. New England violin makers of the 19th century were the first to observe and copy great Cremonese instruments, which were just beginning to arrive in the country. The violin of **Asa Warren White** (1826–93) is typical. A fine interpretation of the Stradivari model, it has golden-brown varnish, rounded edgework, a long pegbox and circular windings. The native maple cut with a soft curl is also usual. Later it was **O.H. Bryant** (1873–1943), whose clients included violinists Kreisler, Ysaÿe and Zimbalist, who trained many of Boston's best makers in his workshop and at the formal school he established.

The 20th century brought prosperity and with it the creation of the great American violin houses: Lyon & Healey, Chicago; Wm Lewis & Son, Chicago; Wm Moennig & Son, Philadelphia; Emil Herrmann, New York; Rembert Wurlitzer, Inc., New York; Jacques François Rare Violins, New York; and Hans Weishaar, Inc., Los Angeles.

The steady importation of old European fiddles for sale at low prices meant that most makers could no longer support themselves by making alone; repair work became their bread and butter. However, with the European instruments came some of the most gifted makers of the time.

Simone Sacconi

(1895–1973) is justly the most famous of these craftsmen. Brought to America in 1933 by Emil Herrmann to oversee his workshops, he quickly established very high standards of restoration that were previously unknown. He, along with Carl Becker Sr in Chicago, transformed the very nature of the craft with innovative methods. Sacconi later joined with Rembert Wurlitzer and trained nearly every violin maker of note in America. The violin featured in the exhibition, a Stradivari copy dated 1936, is representative of the highly informed copies he made.



Sacconi's 1936 violin, a Stradivari copy with delicately rounded notches, is a picture of understated elegance

The f-holes are very elegantly cut with the notches delicately rounded and the wings fluted perfectly.

Carl Becker Sr (1887–1975) began his training under John Hornsteiner at Lyon & Healy, and in 1924 he joined Wm Lewis & Son, where he worked for 45 years. Carl Becker & Son was created in 1969 with his son Carl Jr, and it continues to this day. Like Sacconi, Becker developed many new techniques of restoration. Whereas Sacconi, as a maker, excelled by understanding Cremonese methods, culminating in his *I Segreti di Stradivari* (1972), Becker gained fame from the consistency, high finish and clear powerful tone of his instruments. His violins are easily recognisable and the Stradivari model featured in the exhibition, dated 1924 and made of handsome, broadly flamed maple and medium-grained spruce, is covered with a thin, orange varnish that is gently shaded. The f-holes are very neatly cut with simple notches, >

Prescott's only known violin, right, dated 1827, is full of visual and constructional idiosyncrasies

The long and elegant scroll on White's 1877 violin, far right, is typical of the Boston school



William Moennig Jr made a copy of William Primrose's Brothers Amati viola for him. Primrose used it as his principal instrument for performance and on several recordings

the edgework is rounded softly and the purfling, cleanly inlaid, has no pins.

William Moennig Jr (1905–86) came from a family of makers and apprenticed in Markneukirchen, Germany. He was successful at promoting modern instruments and made a copy

of William Primrose's Brothers Amati viola for him. Primrose used it as his principal instrument for performance and on several recordings.

It wasn't until the end of the 19th century that American violins could be played by American bows. **Edward**

Tubbs (1842–1921) was established in New York City in 1879. He and Henry Richard Knopf were the country's leading makers well into the 20th century. The self-taught **Frank J. Callier** (1883–1971) made over 1,500 bows as well as 300 instruments. The exhibited gold-mounted bow, made for Albert Einstein, displays the very personal model of Callier: beautiful pernambuco, the head with a broad face and rounded nose, and the throat of the frog full and open.

The violin's place in jazz was not forgotten at this exhibition, represented as it was by a display of photos and other documents. The violin's

strength is its adaptability to all musical tastes and styles. Many, such as Joe Venuti (1904–78) and Eddie South (1904–62), abandoned their classical training to pursue jazz careers. Stuff Smith (1909–67) was a unique composer and violinist, whose unorthodox style can be

heard on the Nat 'King' Cole track *When I Grow Too Old to Dream*.

On the final day of the symposium, visitors could sample the instruments and bows of over 75 makers at the AFVBM's Players Meet Makers event in the Great Hall of the library. It proved to be a testament to the general high standard of American makers. Appropriately, I was most impressed with the work of two immigrants: the Brazilian-born Sacconi pupil Luis Bellini, who presented an astounding copy of the 'Kreisler' Guarneri 'del Gesù', and newcomer Feng Jiang, who displayed a powerful, liquid-toned 'King Joseph' copy.

This exhibition demonstrated as never before the depth and breadth of American violin making and its important contributions to the art. ■

