

## A Daughter's testimony

Art in general (music, design, painting, carving) fascinated my father since he was a child. But it was violin making that was his great passion, and despite the difficulties and indescribable sacrifices, he cultivated the craft with tenacity, love and dedication.

He passed on his love and passion to his children Domenica (painter and sculptor) and Cesare (composer), in addition to his grandchild Alessio Bidoli (violinist). How is it possible to forget the long, cold Sunday afternoons around the kitchen table in which Papa taught us to draw, paint, cut out, and model, while Mama silently knitted our sweaters? And in the evening, what joy when he lay down with us! His stories fascinated us; they were different from the ones we heard at school, from those we heard from grandma or Mama, they always had some connection to art and music: the competitions between Cimabue and Giotto to see who was better, Paganini and his devil-like way of playing the violin, the funny episodes of the spectators in the gallery at the Scala Theater, the extravagance of the local painters (Todeschini). Even in the tragic stories that took place during the war, there was always a violin looming in the background.

My father was held captive by the Germans, and during the lull periods, they loved to hear him play. Later, when my father succeeded in fleeing his captors, he lived in the woods above the village; even then his survival kit included paper, pencils, brushes and watercolours.

I clearly remember when he received the letter with the results of the 1956 competition: the surprise, the joy, the excitement, the preparations for the journey to Rome to receive the prize...and then the newspapers with his photos.

From that day on, I knew that a new period was beginning. Our modest home was visited by many journalists, and violinists who came to see his workshop, to try out instruments or to have them repaired, and sometimes to buy them.

That workshop, justifiably forbidden to us children if not under the watchful eye of Papa, was not only the source of the sound of scalpels, rasps, files and planes but also to the most splendid music. The scent of the resins that permeated the house when Papa began varnishing was unforgettable! And whenever I saw the varnish jars labelled with the word "poison" written out in block letters, my fantasy came to life.

After we moved into the new house, I was older and allowed to enter the new workshop. But every time I walked in, I felt I was like entering some sacred place, and never touched anything without Papa's permission. He chose me as his helper, after mother, who was the first helper in those difficult moments immediately after the war. My help was indispensable when it was time to glue something. Every time was like the first time: a dry run of all the steps, lighting the wood stove to warm up the room, preparation of the glue in the double boiler, and then finally the real thing. Every piece, from the biggest to the tiniest, was heated, and while Papa brushed on the glue on one part, I continued to keep the other warm so that the glue would not gel up. My presence was important during the gluing of the cleats, the ribs, the linings, the back and the belly because I had to help him hold the instrument and to tighten the clamps in the shortest time possible.

And what should I say about the hunt for seasoned wood, especially spruce? He knew that this is what gave the best sound. He said, "the official suppliers sell you fresh wood and they tell you that it is seasoned, they season it artificially.

To be sure of the seasoning and the consequential sound, it is necessary to find the beams of an old roof that is going to be torn down. In the past, the rules of nature were respected: trees were cut in winter, during the full moon, wood was split and not sawn so that the liquids would flow out." He was always on the look out for wood. People would give him information, and so he and I went out to the work sites to examine old beams. Sometimes these excursions were useless and sometimes we got lucky. After choosing

the right beams, we had a trucker pick up the wood and had the village carpenter cut the wood into wedges. This is the wood Papa used for his “fabulous” bellies.

Unfortunately we do not know what wood went into what violin, as he did not like cataloguing. If pressed, he would respond: “True experts do not need pieces of paper.” “A violin is like a bride - in addition to being beautiful, she must also have a fine dress that makes her even more beautiful: the varnish.” How many times I heard him repeat this phrase! In fact I will never forget the care and attention that went into making the varnish: the search for the various resins and natural colours, the dosages of the various components, drying the varnish in the intense summer heat, the varnish trials on the ribs... The heat and the light of the summer were indispensable for dissolving the resins, but also for brushing on the varnish - prepared years before - on the instruments.

The application of the varnish was something he did exclusively in the summer on instruments that he may have completed the previous winter. In the beginning, varnishing can be quite difficult, as it is known how this aspect is the most challenging for the maker.

But he never lost heart and reached his objectives. I would also like to mention the multitude of record books with notes, recipes and observations. Even though he regarded many of them as useless and outdated, he would occasionally refer to them.

He was suddenly taken ill on a cold March morning, with one of these notebooks in hand and a highlighter!

His death left a great void. Not hearing him at work and seeing his tools – many of which he made himself – sitting idle wrings the heart.

After some time my sister Domenica, who often meditated in Papa’s workshop, began a new artistic project that was inspired by objects in our father’s trade (spruce bellies, maple backs, bridges, chin rests, varnish, etc.). This idea led to the creation of many of the works that were displayed in the exhibit “From wood to sound”; the exhibit originated in Palazzo Vecchio in Florence and continued on to the Archaeology Museum in Rome’s Auditorium complex in 2006. It was here that Domenica met senior officials of the Accademia S. Cecilia, an encounter that led to the transfer of Papa’s workshop to the newly created Museum of Musical Instruments designed by Renzo Piano. The “Musa” (Museum of Musical Instruments of the Accademia of S. Cecilia) was inaugurated on 16 February 2008.

Entering the exhibition area, one can admire many precious instruments, beginning with a 1690 Stradivari. I was finally able to see the Dante Paolo Regazzoni viola once again. This instrument had won the Santa Cecilia competition in 1956 as well as the acquisition prize, which means that it was purchased by the President of the Council of Ministers.

For many years, Papa had tried to find out where the instrument had ended up as he wanted to see it again; but no one could provide him with any information. (letter Lucci, 22 Dec. 1990). The joy that was denied him in during his lifetime was conceded to us.

The greatest emotion was to see his violin making workshop transferred to the museum, behind a glass display; there was the workbench, his scalpels, his forms, his models. There was also a showcase dedicated to him that displayed his diplomas and important tools from his workshop in Cortenova. The room also contained several large picture screens that projected his photos of the various construction phases involved in making a violin. In this museum reconstruction, his tools will be used by violin makers charged with conserving and restoring the instruments of the S. Cecilia collection, and the public will be able to watch the makers at work.

Educational activities for different age groups will be programmed in order to encourage young people to learn about the secrets of violin making. I am certain that keeping his workshop alive and active was a good decision and the perfect consequence to “his silent years of hard work and research.”

**Giulia Regazzoni**