

THE BIRTH OF THE VIOLIN: Comments on Andrea Amati

By Arthur W. Dykes

THE exact attendant circumstances of this notable nativity we shall probably never know—that is a piece of unwritten history. But my studies have led me to the firm belief that Andrea Amati was the first maker of the violin as we know it today. In a previous article I gave some of the data which point irresistibly to that conclusion, and I have now the pleasure of presenting further facts, together with a slight recapitulation of some of the earlier evidence.

Before definite dates were known for the lives of Gasparo and Maggini, our grandfathers were justified to a considerable degree in granting the genetic attribution to the Brescians, in view of the primitive character of their work. In our day, however, a comparison of dates, facts and instruments seems to me to banish the Bertolotti claim to the limbo of discredited opinions. Baconians consistently contend that, as regards the authorship of the Shakespearian writings, there is a lack of conformity between the known facts and the popular belief, but how much more we can claim that in the Gasparo question, there is a hopeless and irreconcilable divergence between the old creed and our present-day knowledge.

Since writing my first article on this subject, I have succeeded in ascertaining the ownership of the Andrea Amati violin of 1564, and I should like to emphasize the significance of the existence of this instrument. In the year of its construction, Gasparo had reached the limited maturity of twenty-two years of age, and the old acceptance would ask us to believe that Bertolotti had invented the violin, and won a sufficiently widespread reputation to obtain a follower from another city, who in turn had started on the path of violin production himself. All of which fantasy, I submit, warrants the application of the oftquoted conclusions of Euclid.

An extraordinary contrast is provided by Gasparo's financial plight in 1588, long after the violin had made its appearance, and his temporary thought of leaving his native country, with Andrea Amati's remarkable position, the latter master enjoying the patronage of Pope and King. A most potent argument is connected with the few violins attributed to Gasparo—the utmost doubt and uncertainty exists with regard to some of them, and respecting the remainder, one is able to now say clearly that they could not possibly have been made by him.

In our illustration this month, we see an instrument by Andrea Amati, which is perhaps unique, - it being the only large violin by that maker that is known to me. The extent of the undiscovered antiquarian riches of the world is indeed something which no man knoweth, and it would be unwise to state that no other full-sized specimen exists, but I have simply to say that I have never seen another, and have not been able to trace one.

It is recorded that Andrea supplied twelve large-pattern violins, together with a similar number of smaller-sized ones, for the private orchestra of Charles IX of France, but it is curious that writers on the violin seem to generally only know of the survival of small-form examples. The charming instrument depicted in this issue has a body length of 13 15/16 inches, this being the identical measurement which I have found on the larger violins of Antonio and Girolamo Amati, which I have examined.

The width of the lower bouts of the Andrea is 7 7/8 inches and the upper extreme width is about 6 7/16. These proportions compare well with those of later Italian violins, as it must be remembered that the majestic amplitude of the grand pattern of Stradivari was not generally followed by the majority of the Italian liutaros.

In the final decade of the last century Hajdecki in a remarkable work, called attention to the part which the lira-da-braccio appears to have played in connection with the early development of the violin, and in the second volume of the monumental Heyer catalogue there is an illuminating series of reproductions of paintings by great Masters, in which the gradual approach of the lira-da-braccio to the form of the violin assumes an astonishing aspect.

We have been told that the soundhole of Andrea is of the Brescian form, but as a point of connoisseurship, and as an original observation, I suggest that it is of an earlier and more embryonic type, and has in its design a reminiscence of the linear extravagance of the lira-da-braccio. When Read criticised this feature in the explosive and unrestrained way which was frequent with him, I consider that he went too far, as I believe that in looking at the soundholes which we all have before us in the plate - we are privileged in seeing the first of their kind, the authentic primal efforts of the pioneer. The pattern of these sound holes is somewhat longer than those of the smaller violins, as may be judged by comparison with the excellent illustration in Heron-Allen's well known book, but the extension is in accord with the greatly increased size of the larger instrument

In various features of the design and construction of the fascinating violin before us, we are reminded of older instruments; the back is of much flatter modelling than the table, the comparative width of the waist is greater than was generally the case in Cremona, a hundred years later, whilst the distance between the upper terminals of the soundholes is much more than was the custom afterwards.

Of the tone of this rare violin one could write at endless length, as it has a quality and charm which come to one like a legacy from the remote youth of instrumental music. Writers have told us of the unusual beauty of tone of the small instruments of Andrea, but they have been compelled to note a lack of volume, owing to the slight capacity of the lesser violins. But in this fine survival, volume is present equal to that of the tone of some of the "Grand Amatis" of a later generation.

There has been a revival of interest in Amati violins in recent years; they have regained a good deal of their old-time renown, and I suppose a philosopher would tell us that this is a re-assumption of power of the perfect feminine, that sway possessed by faultless beauty and charm.

To touch again upon the Andrea violin before us in the illustration, one should notice the corners; it is probable that they started in life as small and delicate ones, judging from the refinement of the purfling and margins, yet to what a subjection have three and a half centuries of use brought them? An interesting technical point concerns the original wing of wood to be found on the lower right side of the back, this procedure of "winging" being a prevalent later Cremonese practice, and which seems to me to suggest the theory that the able craftsmen, on finding a piece of wood of desirable tonality, adapted it on their use, with such additions as were required.

It has sometimes been fallaciously said that violins can be too old, but this is incorrect. The Amati instrument, described on this occasion, is one of the very oldest violins in the world, yet after having examined it closely, I can affirm that there is no vestige of deterioration in either material or tone. The wood shows its great age, and at exposed places, has an extraordinary depth of colour, but its healthy and sound nature is obvious, as the tone also tells us.

The happy moral to be drawn from this observation, is that player and collector alike can remain care-free from the bogey of violin decrepitude; no such thing exists in the world of fine violins, so far as unmutilated, properly-preserved examples are concerned.

The story of the violin is one of many phases and on this occasion we have been taken back to the days of its childhood, whilst in various subsequent articles I aspire to trace its early development in

Cremona and Brescia. The Amatis were the torchbearers, and it is beyond our power to tell how much we owe them, as it seems to me that their great ability in inaugurating violin making , with a settled technique and a fine artistic style, enabled the instrument to quickly win the affection of music lovers; had the first stages been in less able hands, the progress of the violin might have been delayed; and its history been a somewhat different one.

Now to close, and as it may be years before the opportunity again occurs to portray one of these rare Andreas, I should like to call attention to the exceptionally good fortune we have this month, by indicating the scarcity of the instruments of Andrea Amati in the sonorous words of the Encyclopedia of Lavignac and De la Laurencie. "Ses instruments sont de la plus grande rarete."