



the violin maker

In a world of synthesised music and iPad pianos, there are still some instruments that stand the test of time. Schön! talks production and demand with violin maker and artisan Andreas Hudelmayer.



The production of classical violins is dominated by one name: Stradivari. The 17th Century violin maker is now personified by his multi-million pound instruments, which often make the news for their spectacular price tag. Yet for Andreas Hudelmayer, a German born, London-based *luthier* (maker of string instruments), the competitive threat of a Stradivari violin is no greater than the threat of electronic violins or digital music on his trade.

“Classical violins interact within a whole being of music,” Hudelmayer explains. “They are not easily replaced and there is still a market for the sound and what you can do with it.” Sitting in his charming London studio, it is clear to see that the commission of handmade string instruments is no dying trade. Violins in all stages of construction, from blocks of timber (albeit lovingly selected timber) to beautifully curved, polished instruments, are scattered around the space.

Hudelmayer realised that he could combine his two loves – classical music and woodworking – at a young age, and went on to study at The Newark School of Violin Making. Other schooling options are limited; you can count the number of reputable schools in Europe on one hand. But this doesn’t mean that the demand is slackening, it is more an indicator that talent is thoroughly and exclusively nurtured.

After a career in Germany, Hudelmayer set up shop in London where he has been hand making violins, violas and cellos as individual commissions for musicians for over a decade. Once approached by a musician (who will know of Hudelmayer from having played or heard one of his instruments), the making process takes two months, including whittling the board down to as thin as two or three millimetres, but keeping it strong enough to take an enormous amount of pressure. The strings add an equivalent of 50kg of weight on to the board, and that is before the strength of the musician is taken into account.

Built (like most violins) from a combination of spruce and maple wood, Hudelmayer’s instruments differ to other hand-crafted pieces in minute, but numerous ways: “With each instrument I start afresh,” he explains. “I accommodate what that piece of wood wants from me. That sounds very romantic, but all wood behaves differently and by making small, subconscious decisions along the process (such as a higher or lower arch, or what tools to use), the sound is defined.” Even when working with a piece of wood in its rawest form, Hudelmayer is able to make an approximation of the sound that will be produced by the instrument, but despite the individual nuances of the maker, it is the skill and the technique of the musician that can adapt the instrument.

The intangibility of what makes a violin, and violin music, so beautiful is part of the mysticism that surrounds the art, from the legendary Stradivari, to the soloists such as Menuhin or Stern, who set a high bar for contemporary violinists. The legend is so entrenched that Hudelmayer considers it an impossibility to compare his instruments to Stradivari. “We are told from birth how wonderful Strads are and if I were to say: ‘Mine are as good’, I would be ridiculed,” he says. Although even the most classically-trained ear cannot discern a Stradivarius from a quality modern instrument, the legend lives on, as both a burden and a bolster to the modern *luthier*.

*Hudelmayer violins are available from £12,500
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*Words / Rachel McCulloch
Images / Courtesy of Andreas Hudelmayer Violins*