

THE Scroll

The Newsletter for the
Cox Violin Community

FALL 2013

www.coxviolins.com

Dear Friends,

Greetings from the green hills of Southern Vermont

Our summer has been dominated by a major show of my work — “The Art and Craft of the Violin” at David Walter’s Master Craft Gallery in Brattleboro. The creation of this show has given me the opportunity to review my 45-year career and the evolution of my work technically, aesthetically, and acoustically.

David’s gallery is devoted to exploring the realm of craft and art, and he uses this new gallery space to make more visible the extraordinary craftsmanship practiced in this part of the world.

Over the past few years, as I have spent more time with other artists from many disciplines, I have become comfortable thinking of my work as art. The opportunity to make my work accessible to a broad and critical audience with a primarily visual orientation has been stimulating and has opened my thinking.

One of the challenges in my work is talking with players about what they are looking for in a violin or viola and how they experience my instruments. The limits and personal nature of language become very clear in this process. It requires creativity and effort to reach beyond the surface of words available to us. The wildly successful wine tasting events we organized as part of the show built on the excitement of this experiential and linguistic challenge. These events allowed me to understand more deeply the subjective experience of the listener as well as the player. I hope we can share some of that excitement in this edition of The Scroll.

The desire to showcase the sound as well as the visual aspect of my work featured in the show led to a wonderful series of performances in and around the gallery. Trying to demonstrate the range of musical genres as well as styles and techniques that my work finds itself in was a rich exercise for me, and it was eye-opening — ear-opening! — for the mostly local community that got to know my work better through the show and the performances around it.



The Art & Craft of the Violin Show at the Master Craft Gallery

I want to thank you, the violin family that has supported and shaped my work, for providing the growth that was the subject of this show.

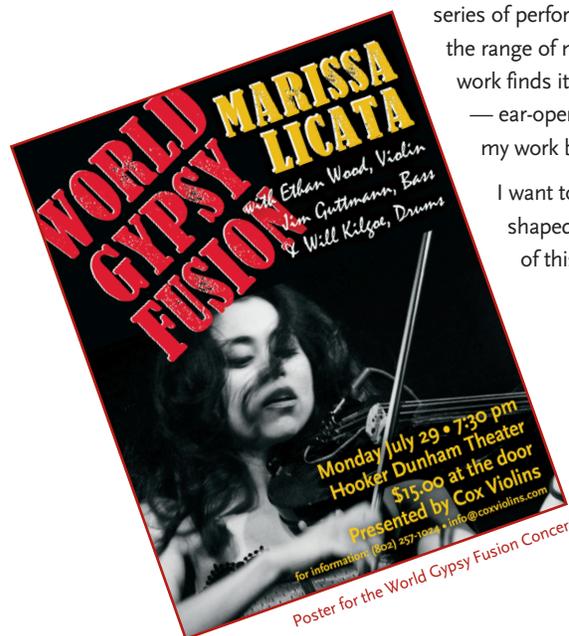
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From the Bench

Lute Camp 2013

Nathaniel, my trumpet-player son, emailed me in the spring to ask if I would help him build a lute during his time home over August. I said yes, and the experience has been good not only for Nathaniel and me to understand each other better, but for me to get a taste of other instrument building goals, problems, and techniques.

Nathaniel provided a set of plans and a very good digitally based lute-making tutorial, while I provided wood and tools, space and time, and my experience—sometimes helpful, sometimes not. Nathaniel returned to Switzerland with a playable 6-course Renaissance lute, and I turned around and used what I had learned to build a 7-course lute for myself. It can be good to step beyond one's comfort zone once in a while.



Photo © Lisa Cox

Nathaniel Cox with Lute Opus One

This instrument has carved sides from solid wood rather than bent ribs. Learning how to do this was another new experience for me. I'm now working on a smaller, more practical lira based on the 1561 Gaspar da Salò instrument at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England.

Someone at the viola wine tasting this summer asked if I ever built flat back violas. My answer was "not yet." That thought, combined with the lira experience, inspired me to try a viola-gamba-lira experiment. The instrument has the flat back and simple corners of a viola da gamba, the outline of a lira, and the top and set-up of a modern viola.

With all this new and experimental work, I am nevertheless eager to get back to my core work: building modern violins and violas. I'm curious to see how I and my work have been changed by taking this busman's holiday back in time.

The Show Catalog

A beautiful catalog of the show is available for purchase. It includes photographs and stories of the instruments in the show, my making philosophy and methods, a forward by David and more.

Working on this catalog has been an opportunity for me to review the most important factors in my career and development as a maker and to illustrate them with stories and images. Working with the staff at Master Craft Gallery has produced a book of beauty, interest and meaning.

\$25 + \$5 shipping at coxviolins.com or by mail. Quantities are limited.



Lira, Viola, Violin, Lute, Tomato

Liras da Braccio, Violas da Braccio

I have long thought about building a lira da braccio, an instrument that served as a transition to the violin from medieval and Arabic instruments. I was particularly interested in the possibilities that open drone strings could add to an instrument for jazz, folk, contemporary and world music. The lute-making project took me away from my routine and back in time, providing the right opportunity for this project. During August, I made a large lira based on the 1563 Francesco Linarol lira at the National Music Museum.

The Art & Craft of the Violin

David Walter is a designer, goldsmith, and platinumsmith who has been producing exceptional pieces of jewelry for clients since 1982, with a special focus on the design and production of one-of-a-kind jewelry.

For years, David produced work of the highest caliber for clients such as Tiffany & Co. and Buccellati out of his barn in Westminster. Three years ago he decided to bring his business to the forefront of the community, opening his store in downtown Brattleboro, including the Master Craft Gallery. The gallery is devoted to exploring the realm of craft and art, making visible the extraordinary craftsmanship practiced in the many private studios of Windham County.

"We're celebrating local artists and craftsmen who have a deep understanding of the materials that they work with and where those materials come from," David says. "Musical instruments, wine, jewelry, pottery — all go way back in human history. A lot of the surviving elements from early times explain how our civilizations lived and celebrated life. Ancient artifacts that we find tell our stories. Musical instruments are a little more fragile than pottery and jewelry, but we see



Photo © Tobias Gelston

David Walter

them depicted, people playing and dancing."

He says that the raw materials in the hands of a skilled craftsman realize their full potential in an object that takes on a life of its own and

transcends the sum of its parts.

"Doug Cox completely transforms the medium of wood, making an astounding instrument that just sings. He can talk about the wood, construction, different forms and proportions ... and then the players evoke these sounds



Photo © Tobias Gelston

Terroir

(French pronunciation: [tɛʁwaʁ] from terre, "land") is the set of special characteristics of a certain place, interacting with the plant's genetics, express in products

Terroir can be loosely translated as "a sense of place," embodied in the sum of the elements that influence the production of the product. The land on which grapes are grown imparts a unique

"One of the things that wine prides itself on is being of its place: the flavors you get from a particular grape grown in a particular soil in a particular climate," Doug says. "Can that concept be applied to violin making? I take pride in using local woods. Part of my reason for making my home in Brattleboro is our northern forest that produces the soft maple and the spruce that make good instruments."

Some native local trees are better suited to instrument making than others, and it takes experimentation and careful selection to stay faithful to the violin tradition that emerged from the forests of Europe.

"One reason we have a maple sugar industry here and there's not a sugar industry in Europe is that we have the hard maples that produce the high sugar content and Europe doesn't. Our soft maple, primarily red maple, is more like European maple. The violin family of instruments evolved around the maple that was there in Europe; that's what we expect a violin to sound like. I have built a couple of instruments out of soft maple. They are brighter, with a sound that is less big and resonant. They would be fine instruments, but they aren't what people are looking for in a violin.

Fine Wine, Violins & Violas

from the instruments. There's no denying... it's spectacular," David says. "When a woman puts on a pair of my earrings, when they resonate, it's just extraordinary. Like Doug with the violins, it completely transforms the medium. Look at the effect of this piece of jewelry on this woman! Look at this instrument; it's singing! That's such a thrill."

Performances

Violins and violas on display in a gallery, as objects to be looked at, are missing their essential purpose: the production of sound. "Their purpose in life is to make music," Doug says, "and to transport the musical ideas within musicians into your ears and into your inner lives."

During the Master Craft Gallery show, we presented a number of events to complete the picture. Violin duets, Swedish and New England fiddle tunes, Bach, and improvisation on the 5-string viola Pomposa filled the gallery with music over the summer. A local ensemble played quartets on the 2009 quartet instruments. Eugene Friesen played his own Cox cello, switching back and forth with the quartet cello between repeats of Bach Cello Suites. Coinciding with the show was a performance by violinist Marissa Licata and her World-Gypsy Fusion ensemble at the Hooker-Dunham Theater. Both Licata and band-member Ethan Wood played Cox violins. Licata played her Rosenblith Strad model and Wood played on violin #701, a "Plowden" Guarneri del Gesù, borrowed for the occasion.

Collaborating with the Gallery staff and Marty Ramsburg of Windham Wines, we held three events pairing instruments with wines. Colleen Jennings performed pieces selected to match five contrasting violins on the first two occasions, and Scott Slapin and Tanya Solomon played viola duets at the viola sampling/wine tasting. Enjoying a fine wine and listening to a musical performance can be much more satisfying when experienced with other people. But Doug and Marty agree that, in the end, both are individual experiences that can defy description.

"Doug said it's so difficult to have a common language to describe the sound and feel of violins. That's certainly the problem we have in wine, too," Marty says. "Wine is very subjective. What you taste is very specific to you. I can tell you about weight and texture, I can tell you what I taste, but that doesn't mean that's what you will taste."

Pairing the wine with the instruments was an attempt to find a common vocabulary to talk about how our senses interpret wine and music. "When you talk about tone, there are words like 'deep' or 'lush' — a textural quality. For wine, that means it has a certain mouth feel and those mouth feels are different," Marty says. "Other words that Doug used that overlap with wine are 'bright,' even 'fiery.' Those typically refer to how the wine finishes and often to the level of acidity that lifts the wine. In a violin or viola, you'll hear that in the higher notes."

Marty says that pairing a wine with each instrument was influenced by a third piece of the puzzle: the choice of music.

"Before the first two tastings, Doug, Colleen and I all met. Colleen played scales on the violin and then the three of us threw out words, like 'copper' or 'resonant'. The words we came up with in common informed the pairings."

Colleen says she enjoyed the opportunity to explore new ways to convey the subtleties of violins and their music. "I was attracted by the endeavor to describe the experience of our senses with words. Developing a vocabulary around sound and specifically a way to describe the sound of a violin struck me as intriguing and also practical.

"While words rarely do justice to the experience of hearing a fine instrument, it is often all we have to communicate or compare our experiences. I notice this most when I am working with a luthier who is adjusting my own instrument or with someone who is helping me locate a new one. I've always found it difficult to communicate what I am looking for so that the proper adjustments can be made or the best violin located.

"In working with Marty, what was interesting was the variety of common and then uncommon words we each came up with. It was fun when we liked the same adjectives but it was also intriguing when we chose seemingly opposite words too. All the more reason to let the senses communicate directly!

"I know much less about wines than I do about violins, but the objective is the same: using words to describe our

sensual experience of taste. I love the idea of using other senses to communicate in place of words. What if a taste could communicate the sound of the violin rather than a flowery assortment of words? That intrigues me!"

While Colleen picked a different musical piece to spotlight each violin's characteristics, for the viola sampling Scott chose instead to play one piece, Bach's Cello Suite No. 1, with each viola matched to a different movement.

"I changed the interpretation of the music to fit the viola," Scott says. "I played the second movement more slowly than I normally would have; I played the third movement a little lighter than I would have. It was a challenge to switch instruments so quickly, but we enjoyed performing on all of the different violas and hearing the real differences between them. You don't often get to do that side by side. The audience was able to really hear all the instruments and ask questions about them, which is not standard at a classical performance. They did a good job of pairing the wines with the violas and we enjoyed them as well!"

Marty Ramsburg, Windham Wines: Marty is passionate about bringing people together over wine, artisanal beer and fine food crafted with local flavors and Vermont flair. Windham Wines features over 450 wines from every major wine-producing region in the world. Learn more at www.windhamwines.com.

Colleen Jennings, Violin: Colleen Jennings has been performing and teaching around the globe for many years. She makes her home in Amherst, Mass., and teaches at Smith College and Westfield State University. She plays with the Arcadia Players, the Springfield Symphony, as principal second violin with Opera North, and has recently joined the Apple Hill String Quartet. Her website is www.colleenjennings.com.

Scott Slapin & Tanya Solomon, Viola Duo: It is unusual to have violinists play duets — even more unique is the husband and wife team doing so. Scott Slapin and Tanya Solomon have recorded several CDs together, featuring viola duos and chamber music from contemporary composers, including Slapin himself, as well as classical duos all the way back to Bach. They share a teaching studio in South Hadley, Mass. Learn more and hear their music at www.violaduo.com.



Marty Ramsburg

Photo © Ned White



Photo © Ned White

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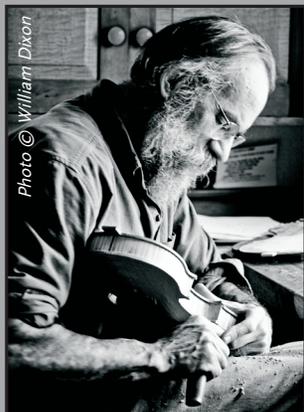


Photo © William Dixon



Two Scrolls and a Rib

Instrument Showings

BOSTON, 2013-2014

I will be bringing instruments to monthly Saturday office hours in Boston, September to May.

September 14, '13	January 18, '14
October 19	February 8
November 16	March 8
December 14	April 12
	May 3

These dates may be subject to change.

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

My work can be seen at dealers of fine instruments in many cities. I travel occasionally and welcome the opportunity to meet people and show my work.

Visitors are always welcome at the studio in the hills of Southern Vermont. Call to be sure I will be available when you want to visit.

ON THE WEB

Visit us on facebook at www.facebook.com/violinmaker

We produce an email newsletter, published more or less quarterly, on no definite schedule. You can opt in via the website, www.coxviolins.com.

The Scroll's purpose is to provide information and enjoyment to people interested in fine new instruments.

We welcome your inquiries and hope you'll tell us how we can be useful to you.

There are a limited number of scholarships for exceptional students who cannot procure fine instruments in other ways. If you'd like more information about scholarships, let us know.

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What People Say

"I was looking for a special instrument to build a relationship with. Working my way through a good fraction of the fine violins available for sale in the San Francisco Area, I encountered three instruments that really stood apart, each of a distinct style and character. I did not know at first that they were of the same maker, but when I found out, it was clear that I had to meet Douglas Cox. Doug had a fantastic selection of instruments and was a great partner in helping me find the right one. I was impressed by his blend of art, science, and craftsmanship, his balance between tradition and experiment."

Ayman Mobarak, Violin #659

"After years searching for a small viola with a fabulous dark sound appropriate for solo performance, I have found Doug Cox's Guarnerius model. Everyone who hears me play it falls in love with this instrument."

Carol Lieberman, Viola #736

"Finally, a big viola with a big, warm, deep sound that's comfortable to play! I was as much impressed by Doug's friendliness and dedication to his craft as I was by the quality of his instruments."

Ken Allen, Viola #716

"How fortunate I am to have found this fantastic violin! It is my most valued possession."

Daniel Vega-Albela, Violin #345

"You are like the person in *Harry Potter* who fits the wand to the wizard! I didn't realize it was the same thing with violins, and it was worth the price of admission just to understand that."

Audience Member at Wine & Violins event

"This violin is as beautiful to behold as it is to hear. I was initially attracted by the graceful proportions, elegantly placed *f*-holes and deep archings. The wood choice is absolutely striking. The tone is rich and complex with a warmth and sweetness I would expect from a fine antique Italian instrument. The response is quick and easy, making this violin pure joy to play."

Alistair Leon Kok, Baroque Violin #118