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MODEL

After you have a workspace set up, the next thing to do is to decide on what you'll be doing in it. That means choosing a model for your first violin.

Most violinists are aware that new violins are usually based on one of two models—a golden-period Antonio Stradivari, or a Joseph Guarneri *del Gesu*. These two makers made the finest violins ever made, in the first third of the 1700s, and in effect defined what we now think of as a “good” violin. Their violins were not identical, however.

Stradivari's instruments, repeatedly and persistently copied for over 200 years, are considered the norm, both in tone and appearance. They have achieved that by being tonally and visually more sophisticated than those of any other maker. Most have a characteristic large, bright, and free tone quality, and ease of playing, cherished by great numbers of violinists. This quality was recognized and appreciated by violinists very early—decades before the *del Gesu's* qualities were. The typical most-desirable *del Gesu* violin model, on the other hand, is darker and more mysterious, and the same construction features that produce this sound (often a less-freely vibrating arching shape and thicker graduations) also make it more difficult to play. Though they are capable of great volume, they don't give it up as easily as Stradivari instruments—one has to push and push for more, making more work for the player. Conversely, Strads give up volume easily, but can choke and distort when pushed and overdriven. Neither maker's violins are louder—there's just a difference in how their power curves work: *del Gesu's* require more energy to accomplish the same thing, and Strads require a more nuanced touch.

Because of the popularity of the *del Gesu* sound, and the preference by some historically important violinists (beginning with Paganini in the 1830s) for those violins, many makers have worked on that model, but relatively few have followed the specific principles that create that particularly mysterious sound. Consequently, one often finds instruments on that model that have some of the superficial personality of a real *del Gesu*, but don't have the depth and core of the originals, sacrificing this for the amateur's preference for an instrument that doesn't require as much work to bring out the sound.

Of course, there are many violin makers other than these two, and other schools of making that just of Cremona in the first decades of the 1700s. In general, dealers try to group instruments into those two major categories, depending which model they superficially resemble, but there are quite a few others minor divisions which don't fit the Strad/*del Gesu* duality, such as "old German" or "modern Italian", or the best known, VSO (violin-shaped object). Most instruments made after 1800 or so are either Stradivari or Guarneri inspired in some way, with a very small percentage following homegrown models or other famous but less popular makers. Copies of off-beat makers are usually done as a maker's personal exercise, for fun, or as the result of a special commission. Historically these less-known makers' names aren't as well recognized by customers for new instruments, and consequently are harder to sell, so individual makers have stayed away from using them as models, and players won't often run across them.

Most "copies" of more obscure makers such as Maggini, Stainer, and Hopf (and also the greatest number of Strad, Guarneri, and Amati copies) are factory-made violins, cranked out by the tens of thousands in Germany and Eastern Europe, with little concern for quality, no concern for faithfulness to the model, and sold at the turn of 1900s with a bow and case for various prices under \$10. Properly, these are another category, entirely, and have little physical or tonal resemblance to the models they purport to copy. This type of violin is still being made today, in some of the same original towns where they came from 100 or 200 years ago, and recently in Asia. To the consternation of owners of these, I've often referred to them as not being "real" violins, and in the sense of being an artistic production of a single maker with the desire to absolutely maximize the tonal properties of his work, they aren't. Any good characteristics they have (and they sometimes do have them) are accidental, not the result of design and intent. In fact the cheaper models have traditionally often been intentionally crippled so that they won't compete with better (more expensive) ones from the same workshops.

There is a lesson for this in the maker, and that is that you can't make a good violin by accident. You need to do what works, and at it's most basic, initially, you need to pick a good model and follow it as closely as you can at least until you have developed an understanding of why it works, and what small changes do to the tone of the normal models. This is the process by which all of the great makers became great—by working under a master, to his standards, and then later growing from that with their own ideas.

Because Stradivari model instruments are the easiest to make work, I recommend you choose a straight-ahead Strad model. Because little things are important, and precise arching is perhaps the most important factor in creating the violin's sound, it's essential to work from good drawings, and the best are the violin posters available from STRAD magazine's mail order service (<http://www.orpheusmusicshop.com/category-9.html>). These posters include life-sized outlines, photos, and measurements of the important aspects of the instruments they represent, and are the most complete source for these,

short of having an actual instrument in your hands. If you're interested in *del Gesu* violins, the primo source for information on these is a very expensive and complete two-book set, *Giuseppe Guarneri 'del Gesù'* by Carlo Chiesa, John Dilworth, Roger Hargrave, Stewart Pollens, Duane Rosengard and Eric Wen, available from the STRAD bookshop and violin book dealers.

I know that some people don't want to take this advice. They believe they can strike out on their own, with their own ideas, making a great violin without being a “copyist”. They're wrong. You cannot make something “better” than something you don't really understand in the first place. The violin is a specific object with hundreds of years of precedent. The greatest ones are great because they work, and they work because everything about them is right, not only tonal and aesthetic, but also in the finest details having to do with usability. In fact, there is a huge body of accumulated standards—dimensions and placement of the various pieces—related to players' interactions with the instrument that really can't be dismissed if one wishes players to use a particular violin. Most importantly, players will evaluate your instrument in the context of those old instruments and what they can do. In order to make your own violin you *must* understand what's come before you, how it works, and how to do it. This not only gives you a solid, repeatable foundation to build on, but having that foundation enables you to make specific changes in what you're doing and evaluate their effects. This is not being a “copyist”—it's part of the learning process that you will use to assemble the skills that will enable you to become a skilled maker rather than an accidental one.