Chapter 2 The History of The Viola-Introduction

Maurice Riley's great work, *The History of the Viola, Volumes I and II* provide a wealth of information about the viola. One can read from these two volumes many times and still learn something of importance. It is difficult to summarize or introduce such a complex field as the history of the viola. Perhaps it is best if we quote some of the author Maurice Riley's generalizations and summary statements. These involve not only the makers of the violas historically but the history of compositions for the viola and the outstanding players and teachers who have all contributed.

It will be necessary to limit the scope of this introductory chapter to the findings that the writer thinks are most relevant to the subject of this book - *The Standard Viola*. The focus on Andrea Amati as the founder of the tenor and contralto violas will be presented below in Chapter 4, *The Standard Viola*. Unfortunately there is no conclusive evidence to date that more than three contralto violas are extant, which are made by four generations of this glorious family - two by the Brothers Amati and one by Girolomo Amati II. The paucity of contralto violas produced by the Cremonese and other Italian makers may have simply been due to the lack of a demand for the viola. From Riley Vol I pp 70-71:

The omission of the viola from the trio sonata was an unfortunate development that retarded the progress of this instrument in many ways. Not only was the viola usually excluded from the most popular and most prevalent form of instrumental chamber music of the Baroque era, but also composers were failing to recognize it as a solo instrument. --- Early in the 17th century the preference of the Italians for the violin as a solo instrument precluded the choice of the viola by composers for their works. --- Very few works were written specifically for the viola as a solo instrument, probably because there were very few demands for viola solos.

Stradivari made about 18 violas - three tenor violas, and the others were contralto violas based on only one model, all much like the 1690 Tuscan contralto. The Guarneri family, the two sons of Andrea Guarneri and three generations, from Andrea to Giussepe to Pietro II and del Gesu, probably made fewer than a dozen violas (Riley II, p 12). The controversial subject of the tone (and importantly the dimensions according to the writer) of Stradivari's violas will be taken up below and in Chapter 4. The fact that Andrea Guarneri's 1676 and 1697 violas have been the models most commonly copied by contemporary luthiers, along with the writer's first efforts, will be discussed in Chapter 4 *The Standard Viola* (and dimensions by Bein and Fushi presented in *Appendix A*).

On the other hand, there were more tenor violas, in contrast to contralto violas, which survived the ravages of time. From Riley volume II, pp 20-21:

Da Salo instrument are much in demand today. Their big resonant tone makes them particularly desirable for chamber music. Some of them are also played in major symphony orchestras.

That large da Salo violas are used today as solo concert instruments was reflected at the 2006 Viola Congress in Montreal. Riley lists seventeen owners of Gasparo da Salo violas. Only one da Salo viola was small - the Kievman viola; however several Brescian contralto violas, by Zanetto and Maggini, survived. From Riley:

Luthiers continued to make large size violas (tenors) throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, but by the middle of the 18th century the lack of demand for the large size resulted in most of the tenors being reduced to smaller dimensions to make them easier to play the music being written for the viola.

Italian violas produced since 1700 are few, but important for makers and players today, as noted in Chapter 4 *The Standard Viola*. Riley concludes his chapter *Italian Violas from C. 1700 to the Present* with the following, vol II, p 112:

Many of the old masterpieces made by Italian luthiers are no longer available to performers because they are now in museums or they are a part of permanent private collections. Many of the once fine instruments have been damaged beyond repair, or are lost, or worn out by careless or thoughtless players, or they are the victims of the attrition of time.

Riley continues volume II with presentation of examples of violas from Germany, Austria, England and France as well as many other countries throughout the world. Riley concludes his chapter *The Viola in Germany during the 17th Century*, Vol I, p 105:

By the end of the 17th century, the viola was receiving more attention and prestige in Germany than in any other country. This interest and prestige laid the foundation that produced the earliest important solo music for the instrument in Hamburg, Cothen, Berlin, and other German cities in the 18th century.

The next chapter presents the writers experience in tone evaluations as a player and listener. My own approach to violinmaking, and selection of models I use are selection of violins, violas and cellos that have exceptionally good tone. This was not difficult for violin and cello as noted in the introduction. For selection of the best model(s) for violas I have had to be first impressed very favorably by a live performance, to be followed by recordings. Unfortunately I have never heard a live performance of a violist playing solo works, sonatas or concertos, on a Stradivari viola, nor have I ever heard recordings of such. I have noted however dealers, players and makers who have commented on the questionable tone of Stradivari's violas.

From the Hill brothers classic book, *Antonio Stradivari, His Life and Work*, pp 101-104:

We now come to probably the best-known example of the violas – that named the "Macdonald" dated 1701. ---

The style of this viola in certain details – the flat model, the squarer outline and corners, broad edge, and very sturdy aspect as a whole – plainly heralds that of many of Stradivari's later productions ---

The construction of the (Stradivari) violas is more uniform than that of the violins or violincellos, and a comparison of the tone gives a corresponding result. Any difference of tone in the violas is so slight that their quality in this respect may properly be treated collectively. We have shown that Stradivari adopted other principles of viola construction than those of Gasparo and the Amatis and, in consequence the deep expansive volume and timbre of the Gasparo viola are very different to those of the Stradivari instrument. In this we find a tone which reflects that of his violins in the clear and full woody quality, and in the easy and rapid articulation of the sounds, particularly on the G and C strings. There is, however, we consider, a deficiency in weight and reserve of tone in these two strings; and in listening to a Stradivari viola, associated with other fine instruments of the maker in the performance of a quartet we have always felt, when a sonorous solo passage on the G and C strings was rendered, that the tone became tight and lost its resonance. In other words, the instrument was overtasked, and the player, with all possible skill and goodwill, could not, owing to the more limited resources of the Stradivari viola, emulate or support his colleagues' efforts. The great similarity of the timbre in Stradivari's violins and violas deprives listeners, too, of variety in tone color. The first and second violin parts of a string quartet naturally resemble each other in quality; therefore the viola part should in its timbre be distinctive from that of the violins, and partake of the qualities of the contralto rather than of the soprano voice.

William Primrose has had a significant effect on violinmakers, many who have based their work on the 1697 Andrea Guarneri model, about 16 ¼ inches body size (see Bein and Fushi). The contributions of William Primrose on modern viola performance have been presented in his book *Walk on the North Side*, and in David Dalton's 1988 book *Playing the Viola, Conversations with William Primrose.* The establishment of the Primrose International Viola Archives (PIVA) at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah provides a comprehensive collection of memorabilia donated by Primrose and others such as Franz Zeyringer. The PIVA library houses the largest collection of viola

music and materials relating to the viola in the world. We shall later comment on the suggestions of Franz Zeyringer of a 16.2 in. body length and 14 3/4 in. string length. From Maurice Riley Volume I of *The History of the Viola*, p 290:

Primrose has performed on different violas during his career, including his father's Brothers-Amati viola of C.1600, the famous Andrea Guarneri of 1697, the Macdonald Stradivarius of 1701, as well as several instruments made by 20th century makers. His own comments on the violas he has used follow:

Now, as to my (Primrose) violas: After the Bros. Amati (It belonged to my good father, and was the apple of his eye. He bought it from the then well known dealer, Andrew Smillie, in Glasgow, years and years ago, and I don't' know who owned it before him.) I played for a number of years on a magnificent instrument made for me by Bill Moennig. Dimensions? Ask him. I am never aware or take much interest in dimensions. I am only concerned with sound. I am not sure, but I believe it was ultimately purchased by Carlton Cooley. Following that one, of course, I had the Guarneri. And you all know about that. ---

In a footnote, p 290 Riley states:

See "A viola by William Moennig, Jr. "The Strad (March, 1947) pp 326-7, for pictures and specifications. The article describes a viola made for William Primrose in 1945, with a body length of 41 cm. (16 1/8 inches). Moennig blended measurements of Stradivarius and Amati to get Amati's mellow roundness and Stradivari's greater brilliance of tone.

Continuing from p 290 of Riley:

While I (Primrose) prefer the mezzo quality violas, I found it, the Macdonald, too much so, as I have found all Strads, and weak on the C string. The Gasparos, while very great instruments, have too much contralto quality for me. They are the ideal of many players, and who am I to disagree with their choice.

One wonders whether this failure in Strad viola tone, if such were recognized, resulted in players making the assumption that a much larger viola is required to produce a good viola tone. The Hill brothers may have fostered the belief that a viola should be much larger to produce a good viola tone.

From the Hill brothers book *Antonio Stradivari, His Life and Work*, continuing p 108:

It is our loss, we believe, that the influences of the time were not in sympathy with the viola. With a greater incentive Stradivari would have risen to the occasion, and we can imagine the result – a viola constructed on Maggini lines, about 16 ¾ inches in length of body, a combination of Brescian principles and his own ideas, with a tone which, while retaining Gasparo quality and sufficient sonority, would have had in addition some of that woody brilliance so characteristic of the instruments of Stradivari.

There are many other makers illustrated in Riley's volume II work who make 15 ½ to 16 ¼ inch violas. One wonders whether the Hill brothers had considered some of them for their excellent tonal qualities compared with Stradivari and Gasparo violas? Not only are examples of Italian, English, French and other violas illustrated, but also their dimensions are included along with photographs of the violas. The dimensions include the width of the C-bouts, widths of the upper and lower bouts as well as the body length. Also of value is the description of major violists and the instruments they played in the Volume II appendix, *Brief Biographies of Violists*. But first we must again discuss ideal viola tone and how to evaluate viola tone.