

## VSA Member Profile: Jan Spidlen

By Laurinel Owen

As a fourth-generation violin maker Jan Spidlen's accomplishments may prove there is a luthier gene and he inherited it. Since he began entering competitions in 1990 he has won top prizes in Paris, Mittenwald, Prague, Manchester and Paris. Then in 2003 he won the unthinkable: both 1st and 2nd prize in Cremona. And last November he received a Certificate of Merit for Violin Workmanship at the Violin Society's International Competition.

Intrigued with all this success, I decided to visit him at his workshop in Prague, to learn his secrets. Located about halfway between Wenceslas Square and the Charles Bridge, which crosses the River Vltava, better known in English as the Moldau (made famous by Smetana's symphonic tone poem), it was easy to find. We arrived at the same time - I on foot and Spidlen roaring up to the curb on his powerful fire-engine-red Ducati, dressed in leather and a Darth Vader helmet. Instrument posters adorn the walls, mingling with signed photographs of grateful customers such as Oistrakh, Rostropovich, Kremer, Suk, and Kubelik. The collection of books is as extensive as the hand tools. Hanging in the window overlooking the courtyard, caged parakeets sing, competing with a Czech pop station.

Sitting at the bench next to him I remark on his enviable pedigree. 'My great-grandfather, Frantisek Spidlen, left for Russia in the late 19th Century,' he begins in soft-spoken near perfect, but accented English, 'and ran the instrument department of a music store in Kiev owned by another Czech. Later, when he won a competition at the Czar's Conservatory in Moscow, he became virtually the first violinmaker in Russia. In 1907 Frantisek returned to Prague and established his own shop near the Conservatory. Slowly he developed a reputation, but when he died in 1916 his son, Otakar, who was about 19 was forced to take over in order to feed the family. He was very successful and built the business into the largest music store in Prague before the Communists came and took it away. Under communism all businesses were owned by the state and it was illegal to be self-employed. We only survived because my grandfather made a petition that violinmaking is an art, not a trade, and therefore didn't fall under the law.'

Jan's father, Premysl, was born in 1920 and enjoyed making rather than dealing, and so was not pushed to run the family business. But under communism he had problems: no travel was allowed and the country was very poor. However, his customers included Jan Kubelik, owner of the 1715 Golden Period "Emperor" Strad, David Oistrakh, Vása Prhoda, and Josef Suk. When Kubelik died, his son Raphaël, the conductor, left the Strad with Premysl, who played it every day.

Jan learned woodcarving in secondary school, which was interrupted when he went to study violin making in Mittenwald. 'In 1984 going to West Germany was difficult because it was the "Imperialist Devil",' he remembers. 'After a year I returned, finished school, and then went to London to join J & A Beare's in 1989. While I was there the revolution took place. When they told me I started crying in front of the television - I couldn't believe it.'

'I saw so many instruments and learned about modern restoration at Beare's. They taught me not to show my own hand and keep the original of the instrument, which is the opposite of new making! When you make a new instrument you want to express your character. I was allowed to go into the safe anytime. I even made a copy of the 1741 "Vieuxtemps" Guarneri in my spare time.'



The models Spidlen favors are a Stradivari 1718 "Marlboro" and a del Gesù from 1736 that he saw at Beare's that belongs to Kyung-Wha Chung. 'I made a copy of the outline then widened it and changed the f-holes,' he admits. 'My father calls my f holes "the parrots" because the top comes around like a beak.'

Jan says that he and his father still have wood bought by his great-grandfather that came from Bosnia. They also have wood from his grandfather, who had obtained it from ethnic German makers in Schönbach and Markneukirchen when they were expelled from the Sudetenland during border disputes after World War II and the entrenchment of communist rule in 1948.

Though Spidlen has commissions from around the world and has a long waiting list, he has recently become interested in innovations. 'I was born into violinmaking and don't think about why I do it,' he says. 'But the more I work the more I realize what I don't know. We talk about measurements and finding out how the violin works, but we still don't understand. We are attempting to "beat" Strad. That's why I decided to try something new - making replicas only takes me in a circle. Our discipline is the Baroque violin and it has borders. With innovations I can jump the borders and search for a better sound.'

'I made a blue violin, but this is only a trick. If you decide to free yourself from tradition you can use blue paint, which you'd never do with a Strad model. My culture is conservative and I struggle with this conflict: musicians are satisfied with the Baroque violin, but does it make sense to stay within these boundaries? My decision is not to mix the two. I'll stay with tradition and next to it try all my weird ideas.'

'I was searching for the weak points of violins, the neck drooping, for example. So I put a screw in the heel to put tension against the strings, like a guitar. I changed the outline by shortening the corners and making the edges narrower. My theory is that the body is integrated as one piece. When you look how it moves and vibrates the whole thing twists and moves, so I wanted to eliminate the stiffness - with smaller edges it became more elastic. There is a very light and fine carbon fiber strip in the bass bar that will prevent distortion. I can't prove it now because usually a bass bar lasts 30 years - this maybe 100. And there are lead weights in the scroll. First I put a clamp on the scroll and the sound improved, especially the lower strings. My theory is the head and body vibrates and must be in balance. I think that is why the ultra-light violins

sound so good. This also allows me to play with the shape of the scroll. I made lots of drawings looking for something new.'

Violinmaking is only half of Jan's life. 'I love sports. My father was a famous skier on the national team and was nominated for the Olympics,' he beams. 'I tried skiing then switched to wind surfing and made the national team. The same in snowboarding. Now I'm into mountain biking, but I'm not that good - it takes too much exercise and there are no tricks. I love it though. I go on long rides that always end in the pub. The motorbike is the connection - that's how I get to work.'

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