

who: Douglas Martin

Job: Violinmaker



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What do boats, planes, and violins have in common? The answer is Doug Martin. The dots connect like this: With the aerodynamic knowledge he gained from his work with model aircraft, Doug developed improved shapes for rowing oar blades. In fact, all the oars that are used in competition today extend from his designs. “The [oar] revolution was hard,” Doug recalls, “but because they worked better, they caught on.” Today, Doug hopes to recreate the same magic with his violin designs: “I hope to make an instrument that would be recognized as equal to a Stradivarius.” For over 50 years, Doug has worked with nontraditional materials and designs in this attempt. Although traditionalists think it’s unlikely he’ll succeed, he filled us in on how he’s getting close.

When did you first become interested in violins?

At a campfire, my best friend’s father had a very good, old Italian violin; he played it, and the sound of that violin was just burned into my head. I just had to recreate it. When I get interested in something, I always end up designing and making things in that area. I built a workshop, bought wood and tools, and by the time I was 13, I made my first violin. I have one from that time hanging on my wall.

Where did you learn how to play the violin?

I had three lessons when I was in high school, and that’s it. My essential problem is that I have rhythmic dyslexia—but I have a very good sense of pitch. I can make really nice sounds on a violin, but when it comes to playing music, I just don’t seem to have it. I find my satisfaction making the tools that someone else can use.

What made you experiment with nontraditional materials?

The principal thing I’m studying right now is how light an instrument can be and still have that solid sound that a good violin has. Balsa wood is much lighter and less stressful to hold while playing. The other thing is that light instruments respond very quickly, so you can play them much faster and they’ll pick up on each note.

What was the response to a balsa violin?

When I started with the balsa, I didn’t think it would make a good instrument. I found out that I could

string it up and play it unfinished, and that was quite a surprise.

It totally [contradicted] a lot of the common wisdom that I had acquired. A week later, I had my first encounter with instrument makers from the Violin Society of America. I expected to be thrown out. I thought some violinmakers wouldn’t even talk to me because it was such a departure from tradition. But the balsa instrument was a hit.

How do people react when they see your violins?

My experiments are deliberately unfinished looking. People expect a beautifully finished item to sound good. So, if professionals think my pieces, which look like junk, play really well, then I know it’s a genuine reaction. The acoustic properties are good enough to overcome the visual part of it. I’m amazed at the number of players who don’t mind the appearance at all. They’re interested in the playability and the sound.

Why change violin design when it already works so well?

The violin is unique in that this tradition is unbroken since the time of Antonio Stradivari [1644–1737]. Currently, all instruments are pretty much copies of his. But there is a pent-up energy among violinmakers. We want to make our own mark on the world rather than just be known as a good copiers of Stradivari.

—Veronica Dominguez-Garcia

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