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New Chips Off the Old Block - *Luthiers carve the future of acoustic bowed instruments*

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In an episode of the futuristic TV series *Star Trek*, a hyper-human android once conjured a Stradivari copy from the starship's replicator. The Strad was perfectly rendered down to the last ding, and the sound was extraordinary, suffering only from the android's mechanical expression.



This fictional conceit that a Stradivari will trek through time as the perfect violin may be prophetic. The great Cremona workshops that codified the violin family also produced fine mandolins and guitars that have evolved over the years into many diverse and equally acceptable forms. Not so the violin. "Those Strads and Guarneris and Amatis that were made 400 years ago are very beautiful, elegant, and perfect, really, in terms of their abilities to produce wonderful sound," says Oregon luthier David Gusset. "I'm happy to make something that can even approach that."

Gusset's reverence for the classic form, materials, and craftsmanship is prevalent throughout the violin trade. But there are mavericks in the ranks.

FORM FOLLOWS FUNDING

New York luthier Guy Rabut has created an innovative modern violin by melding a dramatic contemporary look with a Guarneri sound chamber and traditional materials and assembly. The playful abstract design was an aesthetic success and its sound applauded by musicians of all stripes, but it remains the sole prototype for the quartet of instruments Rabut hopes to build. The problem is money. "That project took me three times as much time as a conventional instrument in terms of planning, design, and building prototypes, and that was a very nice investment to make," says Rabut, "but I still own the violin."

Musicians daring enough to embrace Rabut's creation can't swing the investment, and he can't afford to do it on his own. The problem, as he sees it, is one of attitude. "People are used to saying, 'fine old instruments.' They need to learn to say, 'fine new instruments.'"

Rabut is hopeful that some patron will underwrite further production.

Such contemporary makers as Christophe Landon, Roger Lanne, Suzi Norris, and others have also built instruments that buck the Cremona imperative. Despite a lot of enthusiasm for these attempts, most makers still adhere to the traditional forms, and many find antiqued creations sell best. "There is a growing trend of interest toward instruments that look new," says Rabut, "but it is certainly the exception. People find new instruments that look old much more accessible. If someone has a violin that looks like Heifetz's instrument, they somehow feel connected to Heifetz."