UNRAVELLING THE ENIGMA

While researchers have been exploring the Italian and German violin making schools for decades, Dutch lutherie has received relatively little attention – despite cities such as Amsterdam enjoying huge success in their time. **Hubert de Launay** examines some of the key makers of the city's 'golden age' and their work

In the past, words such as 'mystery' and 'secrets' were commonly used when dealing with the history of violin making in Cremona. Now, after decades of high-quality research and investigation into the makers and their work, we can profess to have a good understanding of the evolution of stringed instruments in that city – as well as in Germany, Spain, Britain and many other territories. There is, however, one sizeable making school that still retains its secrets and mysteries: Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Considered to be the trading capital of northern Europe in the 17th century, the city had a strong lutherie tradition, despite its location – almost 700 miles from Cremona.

Amsterdam's history as a cultural hub effectively began around the end of the 16th century. From that time until the 1670s, waves of immigrants flooded into the metropolis from countries such as Belgium, Portugal, Spain and later, France. Within just 80 years Amsterdam's population grew sevenfold, to more than 200,000, and its status as a trading capital grew with it. Farmers, seafarers and craftsmen found a new home in the 'free city', while investments by wealthy, cultured immigrants who observed the increasing prosperity meant that Amsterdam itself also expanded. The city was run neither by royals nor by the church (as was usual in other cities), but instead by merchants. The Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602 with its headquarters in Amsterdam, provided so much wealth for the Netherlands that by the middle of the 17th century half of all the trade in the so-called 'Republic of the United Netherlands' passed through this liberal metropolis. All this created the perfect environment for science, art and craftsmanship to flourish: a unique melting pot, many elements of which are still found in the city today.

Music was to be found everywhere, particularly in homes and taverns; rich or poor, professional or amateur, all were avid consumers of music. Itinerant musicians found work there, some of them employed by the city to add to its prosperous image. And with the music culture came the instrument makers. ▹

PHOTO 1 How bare whalebone shows up under UV light

PHOTO 2 Corner details of a Jacobs violin made from Brazilian rosewood with negative inlay

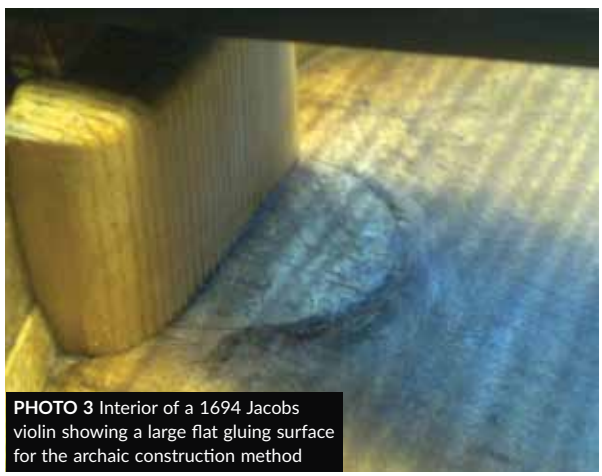

PHOTO 3 Interior of a 1694 Jacobs violin showing a large flat gluing surface for the archaic construction method

PHOTO 3 COURTESY ANDREAS POST

Through the centuries, Amsterdam housed many makers of lutes, citterns, violas da gamba and violins within its walls. In paintings of the era, viols and virginals can be seen being played in aristocratic scenes, whereas the violin was more often depicted in the hands of drunken musicians, or in brothels. These violins were still in their archaic form, and likely made by the musicians themselves. As the violin's popularity increased, professional makers started to create violins alongside other instruments. Before 1600, most were calling themselves *luijtenmaker* (lute maker), followed by *cythermaker* (cittern maker). But from around 1650, more and more started to register their profession as *fioolmaker* (violin maker).

Violin makers in the Low Countries were most likely the first to adopt the style of the Amati family outside Italy. The city's trading links with Venice, which had a rich musical culture, may have played a part in this development; also, many Italian musicians came to Amsterdam to have their music printed and published. Instruments were imported from Italy, England and Germany. We know for certain that Italian violins had arrived in Amsterdam by 1660, because a notarial deed from that year records the insurance for a number of Italian violins. In addition, we have an auction advertisement from 1671 that announces the sale of Cremonese violins, along with a good deal of Italian music. The next stage was for Amsterdam violin makers to start making copies of the Italian models, to satisfy the demand and possibly also to keep the trade in their own hands.

Although the Dutch have their own distinct style of making, when looking at an early Dutch violin one can tell that they studied the Italian schools closely, in particular the models of the Amati family (Nicolò Amati finished the famous 'Alard' violin in 1649). Some Dutch instruments from the era exhibit features of Rogeri instruments as well. As the preferred model changed from Amati to Stainer, so the style of the Amsterdam makers changed too.

One attribute common to many of the early Dutch makers' instruments is the use of whalebone purfling. Luthiers such as Gragnani, Mausiel and Dall'Aglio all used whalebone as purfling later on, but the Amsterdam makers were most likely the first to use it. A simple explanation can be found in the fact that the Netherlands had one of the biggest whale hunting industries at the time. Whalebone was a common product that was used in corsets, umbrellas, tobacco boxes and furniture decoration. As a purfling material it can sometimes be hard to recognise, but it always reveals itself under UV light. When covered by varnish it shows up as a normal black line, but in areas where there is wear in the varnish (such as under the chin, or where the hand touches the upper bout), the black whalebone will show up as a bright white (**photo 1**).

LUTHIERS

One of the first Amsterdam luthiers to refer to himself as a 'violin maker' was **Hendrik Jacobs** (c.1629–1704). His profession is recorded as such in his marriage certificate of 20 August 1654. He remains the most well-known and celebrated maker in the history of Dutch lutherie: the so-called 'golden period' started with him and lasted nearly 80 years until the death of his stepson, **Pieter Rombouts** (1667–1728). Jacobs was among the first to make instruments in the Italian manner.

Over the years Jacobs started to put more Stainer-like details into his Amati models, such as fuller arching, shorter corners and thicker purfling; Rombouts took these features even further after

Jacobs's death. Throughout his career Jacobs was never afraid to try something new; this is evident in those violins where he made the back and ribs out of Brazilian rosewood with a negative (white–black–white) inlay (**photo 2**) and a walnut neck and scroll.

Jacobs seemed to have used the archaic neck construction or 'slipper heel' for most of his career. The interior of a violin from 1694 still shows the flat extended gluing surface on the back (**photo 3**). A unique construction feature, which I have so far found only on his c.1690 instruments, is the use of linen on the ribs. Although linen had been used by many other makers before him, he only used it on the tight curves of the ribs: on the centre bouts and near the corner-blocks. One other interesting fact about this is that he glued both his linings and corner-blocks on top of the linen (**photo 4**), leaving it 'sandwiched' between the ribs and construction (**photo 5**).

When we discuss Jacobs's work, the names of his relations are often mentioned because it is sometimes difficult to judge which violins or parts were made entirely by him. He was probably assisted by Gijsbert Verbeek, who married his niece in 1669, and most certainly later on, when he remarried in 1676, by his stepson, Pieter Rombouts.

Rombouts is still one of the most highly regarded makers of the Netherlands: one of his violas da gamba sold for $212,500 in New York in 2009, still the record price paid for a Dutch instrument. After Jacobs's death in 1704 Rombouts continued in his style, but moved further from his stepfather's methods throughout the years of making Stainer-inspired instruments. For instance, his archings became higher and fuller, particularly in his cellos (**photo 6**) and he started to use spruce for his corner-blocks instead of the poplar or willow used by Jacobs. Another change of material is found in the purfling: Jacobs used a softwood type for the white purfling strip early in his career, but after Rombouts began assisting him he switched to maple. Rombouts continued to use maple as well, but his edgework is sharper and his purfling mitre joints run more through the middle of the corner (**photo 7**).

The golden age of Amsterdam was already in its decline by 1700 but it seems that in the last two decades of his career, Rombouts was the city's most productive maker, in terms of both instrument ▹

PHOTO 4 Linen underneath the linings

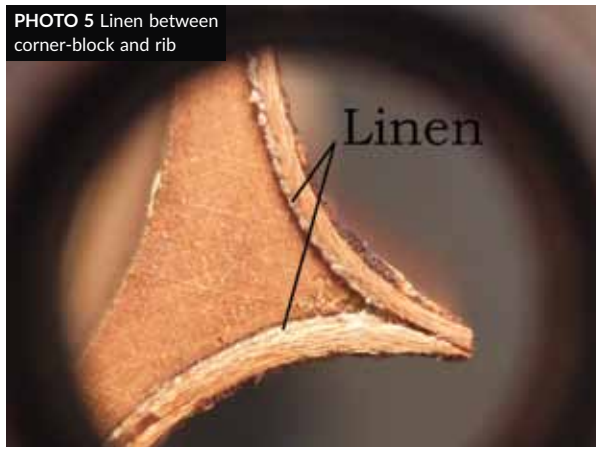

PHOTO 5 Linen between corner-block and rib

PHOTO 6 The arching on this Rombouts cello demonstrates how high and full it can be

PHOTO 6 COURTESY GUDRUN KREMEIER

VIOLINS WERE OFTEN DEPICTED IN THE HANDS OF DRUNKEN MUSICIANS, OR IN BROTHELS

PHOTO 7 Corner details of the 'Jacobs family' instruments. Left–right: Gijsbert Verbeek; Hendrik Jacobs; Pieter Rombouts

numbers and variety: after Jacobs's death he made viols, cellos, violas, violins and pochettes. It could be that after 1704 he was simply one of the few violin makers left in Amsterdam; the workshop founded by his closest competitor, Jan Boumeester (1629–81), closed down in that year and its inventory was sold off to an assistant, Jan Vos, who carried on making instruments on a smaller scale.

Rombouts married Magdalena Kruijskerck on 1 November 1707, a union that brought him into wealthier circles. The couple received a dowry of 2,250 guilders and a trousseau of 500 Carolus guilders. To put this into context: in 1711 Rombouts bought a house with his father-in-law for 4,400 guilders, which they refurbished and then sold on. In the following years Rombouts made several similar business deals. When Magdalena died in 1750 she left more than 53,000 guilders in her will.

Apart from Jacobs and Rombouts, the careers of most of Amsterdam's 'golden age' makers are represented by only a few instruments – sometimes less than a handful. Nevertheless, these are some of the finest instruments of the era. The early life of **Cornelis Kleynman** (1626–86) might give some answers as to where some of these makers received their training. Kleynman was born to potter Wessel Frerixsz and Dirckje Cornelis. Two and a half years later his father died and it was not until 1645 that his mother remarried. Her new husband was Francis Lupo (c.1582–c.1659), a maker of citterns and violins, who was descended from an Italian family. It seems obvious that Kleynman received his training from Lupo, as they both lived in the same street before his mother's second marriage. Jacobs lived nearby and their early work has a good deal of resemblance. Hence, he is also assumed to have been one of Lupo's pupils.

Kleynman certainly took on apprentices himself; his son David is registered as a violin maker, and there is a notarial deed of 6 January 1660 in which Kleynman promises to train one Philip del Mot for four years and to pay him 15 'stuivers' per year, going up to one guilder and 10 stuivers in his fourth year. In return, del Mot agreed to serve as his journeyman and promise not to work for anyone else but Kleynman in the two years after his training.

The work of the aforementioned **Jan Boumeester** is among the hardest to recognise, although a few recurring elements are typical: he is the only luthier of the period who never used whalebone for his purfling; his instruments tend to have long corners; and his f-holes have slender wings. Apart from these details, his style changes frequently, which might suggest that he had several assistants. They were probably still working under the Boumeester name when he passed away in 1681. One of the purest surviving examples of the Dutch school, a violin from 1683, still bears Boumeester's name (see page 46).

Boumeester was one of many makers to have a workshop in the vicinity of the 'Oude Kerk' (Old Church), also a favourite district of musicians. (It is known nowadays as Amsterdam's 'red light' district.) Another family, that of **Gerrit Menslage** (1606–61), ran a particularly busy workshop there, given the evidence of the surviving inventory and the number of employees. An inventory has been found detailing the property of Menslage's widow (and Boumeester's cousin) Grietje: a total of 253 instruments were to be found in the house and workshop, including violins, flutes and harpsichords, as well as pegs, violin parts, different types of ▹

Above and below Body and back of a violin by Willem van der Sijde (c.1663–c.1692) 'the most idiosyncratic of all the Amsterdam makers'

Right and below
This inlaid violin from 1683, which bears Jan Boumeester's name, is one of the best surviving examples of the Dutch school

Left Front and side views of another Boumeester violin, this one from c.1680. The f-holes hasve particularly slender lower wings

JAN BOUMEESTER'S MAKING STYLE CHANGES FREQUENTLY, WHICH SUGGESTS HE HAD SEVERAL ASSISTANTS

moulds, and skeins of horsetail for finishing instruments in the white. This important inventory shows that the shop did not focus on making stringed instruments alone. On this same list we find the names of several other makers, including that of Jacobs, who is listed as owing the Menslage family 19 guilders and 10 cents.

The work of **Willem van der Sijde** (c.1663–c.1692) is definitely the most idiosyncratic of all the Amsterdam makers. At first glance it has a muscular look, but careful study of his instruments reveals the confidence and precision with which he made them. His violins are best known for their strong edgework and characteristic broadly spaced f-holes that have a style of their own within the Dutch school, adding to their unique appearance. Sijde always took great care with his fluting, edgework and the shape of his corners; they are well rounded and carved but a little smaller and slender, with a sharp-pointed, straight purfling joint. As can be seen in **photo 8**, some of the mitre joints in his inlay are not as precise.

Even Sijde's construction is different from that of his contemporaries: he inserted lower, upper and centre bout linings into the corner-blocks. Afterwards, when he cut the inner shape of the blocks, he gouged through all the lining mortises, leaving them exposed (**photo 9**). Just like most of the Amsterdam makers, he seems always to have used willow or poplar for his blocks, and spruce for his linings. Another typical feature is the deeply cut throat in his scrolls (see image below).

We know very little about Sijde's life; in a 1684 notice of marriage he is registered as a 'seafarer' but the woodwork of his earliest-dated violin, dated 1691 (**photo 10**), is already of a superb standard. One of the very few things that is known about Sijde is that in 1692 he was asked by musician Nicolas Martin de la Vigne des Roaiers to confirm, in front of a notary, that two plum-striped violas da gamba were indeed made by Jan Boumeester.

Finally, the life of **Gijsbert Verbeek** (1642–1717) is one of the many question marks surrounding the Dutch school. He lived just a little further up the road from the Boumeester workshop, so he might have worked for them but no evidence has been found to this day. We do know that he married Jaepie, daughter of Jacobs's sister Maritje, in 1669. Throughout Verbeek's life, his profession was listed in official documents as 'violin maker' – but we still know of only three violins by his hand. Why are there so few examples, particularly given that his work is of the same high standard as that of Jacobs? His instruments are very similar to Jacobs's, but his varnish has a more Venetian appearance.

In 2001 a 1682 Verbeek violin was discovered, which is now part of the Dutch Musical Instrument Foundation's collection. Because of its pure condition, and most importantly its pristine label (**photo 11**), two more violins were identified as the work of Verbeek soon after.

We have many examples of work by several Dutch luthiers. But from archival research we know of many more stringed instrument makers for whom we have no surviving examples at all. According to the archives there were more than 50 makers active in the Netherlands between 1600 and 1850, of whom we only know their names. Some of them are the more famous makers' sons or apprentices, such as David Kleynman, Philip del Mot, Jan Vos, Hendrick Ravekens and the Beeringer family. A Jan Vos violin appeared at a London auction some time at the end of the 1970s but it has since disappeared. These 'source instruments', such as the 1682 Verbeek violin, are key to current research projects, and if found, they could help to fill the gaps and add to the intriguing story of Amsterdam's makers. ●

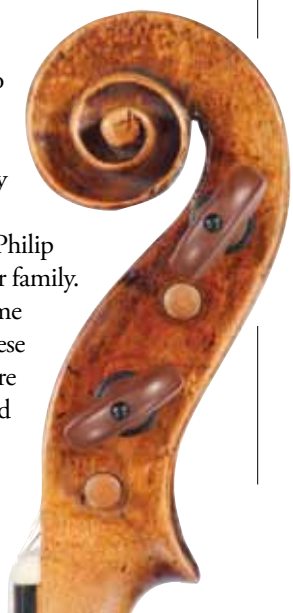

PHOTO 8 Corners of a violin by Willem van der Sijde

PHOTO 9 Internal construction of the above violin

PHOTO 10 Willem van der Sijde label from 1691

PHOTO 11 Gijsbert Verbeek label from 1682

Hubert de Launay is currently researching early Dutch instruments (violin and viol family), with a view to publishing the results in the future, together with John Milnes, Andreas Post and Serge Stam. Please contact him if you know of any original and rare examples that might be interesting to study: info@hubertdelaunay.com

ALL BOUMEESTER PHOTOS ANDREAS POST. SIJDE PHOTOS CATHY LEVESQUE