

Female luthiers: And justice for all?

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In light of the #Metoo movement, women from all walks of life have been reporting incidents of sexist behaviour in their workplaces. Is a violin workshop any different? Femke Colborne discusses the question with a range of female luthiers – and gains a grim perspective of the industry



Wanna Zambelli (front row, in dark shirt) in June 2018 with the students of her last year of teaching at the Cremona Violin Making School. The gender balance is more equal than when she started 44 years ago

Gudrun Kremeier is, by any standards, a highly successful violin maker. Born in Germany and now based in the Netherlands, she runs a thriving business and is active in several international associations. But there is something, she believes, that makes her success even more notable: the fact that she is a woman. She recalls an incident from

her time as a student in Mittenwald: shortly after she graduated in 1992, the school appointed a new director. One of his first comments was that it would be a great idea for the school to attract more female students, because they would only go on to have babies and quit the profession, meaning less competition for the men. 'I was really shocked, but that was how it was,' she says. 'The reputation of girls was not very high. I was a bit annoyed. I thought, why do you judge me by my gender? I want to learn in the same way as my male colleagues.'

Stories like Kremeier's are not hard to come by. One anonymous source told me that she has frequently encountered challenges related to her gender – all the way up to sheer sexual harassment. For example, she recalls a particularly troubling incident from her time as a violin making student: 'One of the teachers made a lot of very sexist remarks. He was often hitting on the women and making comments about their appearance. Once, I asked him a question, and he said, 'I might answer that if you come over to my house and my workshop,' wink wink. I said no, and he got quite angry with me. He took me aside and said, you know, when someone makes a suggestion like that, you shouldn't just say no.'

She has a whole inventory of anecdotes from more recently in her career: 'At one conference, I was with a group and we were chatting about something neutral when a guy brought up the subject of my "tits", a propos of nothing.' At another event, a man started speculating about her vagina out of nowhere. At a competition, in a feedback session, one of the judges started by critiquing her instrument and ended by critiquing her personal appearance. 'I've spoken to other women and they have these problems too,' she says. 'In a professional setting, when you get a zinger like that, you feel stripped of your identity as a professional person and reduced to a bag of physical attributes. Your worth is reframed to just that. It takes mental energy to shrug all of that off.'



Lynn Hannings was discouraged from bow making after a disturbing incident in an elevator

It's impossible to say whether attitudes like these might have discouraged other women from entering the profession, or prevented them from realising their potential. But one thing is clear: women are still very much in the minority in the world of lutherie. Of the 160 current members of the International Association of Violin and Bow Makers (EILA), only seven are women. And although there are no official figures on the number of men and women working in the profession worldwide, anecdotal evidence suggests that men still vastly outnumber women, especially at a higher level. Does the world of lutherie have a problem with sexism, and if so, should something be done about it?

Stories like the above are certainly not hard to come by – and for some makers they can be life-changing. When bow maker and double bassist Lynn Hannings was studying with William Salchow in New York as a teenager, a 'well-known man in our field' subjected her to what can only be described as sexual assault in an elevator. 'He was quite aggressive,' she recalls. 'I was a young person and he was a man who was highly respected. I was shocked and scared.' When she reported the incident to her mentor, she was met with 'a weak laugh'. She felt unsafe continuing with her training and decided to leave New York.

Hannings relocated to Maine, where she set up a repair shop and spent years working as a bassist with local orchestras. She eventually found a new way to continue her studies with Salchow, becoming his assistant when he started teaching at the University of New Hampshire Summer Institute. But she still wonders what might have been if it weren't for that one traumatic incident: 'I might have stayed in New York, opened a shop of my own, studied more fine bows and entered more competitions. My main desire was to be the best bow maker I could be, and I felt really thwarted in that.'

Stories like these paint a pretty bleak picture. But are things different today? There are certainly more women in the field than there were 50 years ago. Before the 1970s, it was virtually unheard of for a woman to be a luthier – notable exceptions like Carleen Hutchins aside. Most of the women interviewed for this article reported being very much in the minority when they were studying, and having no female tutors at all. Today the gender balance at student level tends to be more equal. Hannings reports that about half her students are women, an observation that is echoed in other parts of the world – including Cremona. According to Wanna Zambelli, who taught for many years at the Cremona Violin Making School before retiring this summer, the gender balance there is also fairly equal. 'Nowadays there are quite a number of women who have decided to be violin makers,' she says.

'I got asked whether I would or could continue working professionally having babies at home' - Ulrike Dederer

It is also true, in lutherie as in other professions, that gender discrimination and sexism are no longer tolerated in the way they once were. Especially in the wake of the #MeToo movement, with sexism entering the public discourse to a level that has never been seen before, women in all walks of life have begun to feel more empowered to speak out about incidents when they have felt bullied, intimidated or discriminated against. For Hannings, this has been especially important: 'The #MeToo movement has empowered me to talk,' she says. 'At the time, I felt embarrassed and ashamed. If it had happened today I would have taken action immediately. I'd have called a lawyer or the police. I'd have had counselling. At the time, I just hid it. We know better these days that these things can be life-changing, professionally as well as personally.'

However, in spite of the growing number of women entering the profession and an increasing willingness to call out sexist behaviour, problems still remain. Janine Wildhage has been running her own shop in Berlin since 2007. She studied in Cremona in the 1990s and reports that even then, the gender balance among the students was quite equal and she experienced no problems with sexism: 'I heard that some of the teachers made sexist jokes, but in my class, that was not the case. Some teachers were known for that, but for me it was not really an issue.'



Photo T. BERTELSEN / © MICHELANGELO FOUNDATION

Ulrike Dederer

But Wildhage notes that the gender balance is much less equal when it comes to luthiers working at a higher level. 'There are a lot of women working in restoration, but fewer actually running their own shops. At the start it's 50:50, but when it comes to running a shop there are still a lot more men.' Women often become stuck at a lower – and lower-income – level of violin making, she says, meaning they feel dissatisfied and are more likely to leave the profession. She also points out that there are fewer women involved in the certification and business sides: 'Dealers are still mostly men, and auctions are still dominated by men.'

Others tend to agree with this assessment. Fellow German Ulrike Dederer, who also studied in Cremona and now runs her own shop in Zurich, says: 'There are many women trained in violin making. The question is why we don't see or notice them. To be noticed, you have to run your own business, make new instruments in a considerable number and be present at exhibitions and public events. These are all things many women tend to avoid.'

'If someone is not really in this world, they usually imagine a violin maker to be an old man with a beard' - Janine Wildhage

There is also the question of children. In most Western societies, women are still expected to bear the brunt of childcare, meaning they have less time and energy to devote to their professional lives. 'When a woman has children, the situation changes significantly,' Dederer says. 'I got asked whether I would or could continue working professionally having babies at home – that's something that would never happen to any male colleague becoming a father. I think these comments – from men and women – were considerate and didn't mean to discriminate, but they showed the attitudes of society about the role of motherhood and fatherhood.'

Zambelli, who in 1972 was the first woman to qualify as a luthier in Italy, reports a similar fate for many of her female students in Cremona: 'I know for sure that several among my former female students – belonging to different nationalities, and in some cases much more talented than some male colleagues – came up against many difficulties because they had to meet their family's needs, sometimes to the detriment of their profession. There is no doubt that family responsibilities and tasks do not help women in this career.'



Photo: David von Becker

Janine Wildhage

Indeed, the general gender balance in the city of Cremona appears to confirm this theory. Yael Rosenblum, an Israeli luthier who runs her own shop in the city, says that there are a very healthy number of women studying at the Violin Making School. But she estimates that when it comes to the city's violin shops, only about ten per cent

are run by women. She believes this is partly because it will take time for the next generation to filter through, but she also shares a more troubling observation: 'Many of the makers here work with dealers. Dealers will buy an instrument because of the reputation of the maker, and if it's a male name, it's easier for them to sell it.' This is one of the reasons she sells directly to musicians, rather than working through a dealer: 'I was a professional musician before I became a maker, so they trust me and they know we speak the same language. The gender question is secondary. But if people don't have a connection to the maker, they are more likely to buy an instrument made by a man.'

This ties in with a more general issue around gender perceptions: that many people still expect luthiers to be men. Female luthiers routinely report customers being surprised to discover that they are female. As Wildhage puts it: 'If someone is not really in this world, they usually imagine a violin maker to be an old man with a beard, like Santa Claus.'

'The shared love of our instruments can join male and female masters equally'
- Wanna Zambelli

Kremeier reports that just last week she encountered a customer who was surprised to see that it was she who would be doing the work. My anonymous source also says that people routinely expect her to be a man when they meet her in person after being in touch on email: 'It's funny, especially because there is a picture of me on my website.' And Hannings has had similar experiences: 'It happens all the time. People call the house and say, "Can I speak to the bow maker?" I say yes, and there is a long silence. Then they say, "No, the bow maker."'

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Some concrete efforts are being made to change perceptions and make women feel more welcome in the profession. For example, the Oberlin Violin Makers Workshop has introduced a code of conduct focused on addressing sexism and gender discrimination. And efforts are being made to address the gender imbalance among EILA's members. Olivier Pérot, a French luthier, was appointed as president of the association in May 2017. All of EILA's written material is produced in both English and French. Until recently, the French exclusively used male pronouns. The first thing Pérot did as president was to change all of the official letters to include women as well. He has also launched a recruitment drive for female members: the association welcomes nominations every two years, with the next round set to be voted on as The Strad went to press. Pérot has invited seven women to put themselves forward, and six have accepted.



Wanna Zambelli in the 1970s; in 1972 she became the first woman to qualify as a luthier in Italy

Pérot admits that EILA has not been as quick to adapt as it could have been. 'The association was created in 1950, only by men. At that time, it was a male world. It's the same in virtually every profession – men have been in control for centuries. But things are evolving slowly. For me, since I became president, this is one of my priorities. We are making a lot of effort to put the subject on the table. What's happening now is a normal effect. Lutherie is a

conservative area – we have been doing the same thing for 300 years. In the next generation, there will be more women – that's normal.'

Marilyn Wallin, an erstwhile governor of the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers and president of the Violin Society of America, agrees that gender perceptions are deep-rooted and go back several generations, so that change will be slow. 'Sadly, this issue will not go away any time soon,' she says. 'Women only got the right to vote over here 100 years ago – not that long, in the greater scope of things. Sexism in the trade is as deeply rooted, as is sexism across western culture. Going in, I thought violin making would be less sexist than it is because it is in the arts, where there is often more open-mindedness than in other areas. I was wrong.'

However, there is a tangible sense of optimism that things are at least moving in the right direction. For Zambelli, there is no reason why women should not become increasingly visible and accepted in the profession: 'In my opinion, the most important thing is the great hand-crafted quality of our instruments. This shared love can join male and female masters equally. I am convinced that instrument making, if performed with true passion and deep dedication, can be an activity of great fulfilment and gratification. It has indeed been that to me for over 40 years. What can reward you more than giving harmonies and emotions thanks to an instrument completely modelled by your hands from simple pieces of wood?'

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