

THE READ VIOLIN

How a Montreal violin-maker with no publishing experience to speak of orchestrated the production of an encyclopedic work about instrument repair and conservation



Tom Wilder in his Montreal studio

When professional luthier Tom Wilder began documenting the theories and practices of violin conservation and repair for a three-volume set of reference books, he never dreamed it would take a decade to produce, or cost \$1.2 million of his own money.

His Montreal shop, Wilder & Davis Luthiers, became a temporary publishing house for *The Conservation, Restoration, and Repair of Stringed Instruments and Their Bows*, a charity project that aids the International Pernambuco Conservation Initiative. (Pernambuco is the endangered Brazilian tree from which almost all concert bows are made.) At 1,600 pages, including 1,000 photos and 300 technical drawings, plus a CD-ROM containing forms for documenting instruments, the book is formidable, but it's the rigorous editorial process Wilder implemented that's most impressive – though he now confesses, “I bit off more than I could chew.”

Wilder's foray into publishing began in 2001 at a meeting of the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers. Members took turns sharing practical advice, which was then considered to be a radical act: specialized violin-making and -repair schools have existed for only around 30 years, and “the old guard doesn't want to exchange trade secrets,” Wilder says.

A suggestion to publish the collected tips as a fundraiser for the IPCI was at first rejected. Wilder persisted, sending out a call for abstracts to 5,000 international organizations, professionals, museums, and conservation institutes. He received 250 abstracts in six languages in response, which were evaluated by an international jury.

That's when the bulk of Wilder's editorial work began. Often, the abstracts were submitted by craftspeople with little writing experience. Freelance editors – his biggest expense – had to rework articles through hundreds of drafts. “None of the editors came from the violin world, which in retrospect was a good decision,” he says. “I took too much for granted. They would ask lots of questions.”

While one volume is dedicated exclusively to conservation theory, the other two provide instructions for specific repairs, like recipes in a cookbook. Drafts often came back with missing or disordered steps and inconsistent terminology. Some repairs even had to be recreated in Wilder's studio for photographs. With an editorial team of more than 25 people, plus 121 writers, Wilder admits the process became difficult to control.

“It was like making an opera. It took a lot of different skills from a lot of different people,” says Aurèle Parisien, a former McGill-Queen's University Press editor whom Wilder brought on, six years in, as director of publishing and executive editor. Parisien established formal editorial processes and organized the final 150 articles, which were at various stages of completion.

“It's a massively huge reference work – the sort of thing that's usually only undertaken by Pearson or Oxford, which have entire departments for developmental editors,” Parisien says. “We did it with a virtual team out of a violin shop. It was as scholarly as anything that's come out of [the large houses].”

Wilder, who has a master's degree in communications and art history from McGill University, also paid close attention to visual details. He commissioned chapter title pages from Montreal artist Vida Simon, whose miniaturist sculptures used found objects from Wilder's shop. A creamy, coated stock was custom-designed by San Francisco's New Leaf Paper, using the highest grade recycled stock available.

The result is a beautiful, elegant product, though Wilder expresses concern about its \$1,400 cover price, especially given the tight budgets of many cultural organizations: even the Smithsonian Institution had to organize a fundraiser to purchase its copy. Out of the initial 1,600-copy print run, 100 complimentary copies were given away and 200 hundred were pre-sold.

About 100 more have sold since the book launched in late May, mostly to institutions such as Yale University and the Royal College of Music.

Although it's too early to gauge the book's success, or to know whether

Wilder will ever reclaim his personal investment, he's happy and relieved he saw the project through. And as Parisien points out, beyond its life as a charitable initiative, these books stand “as a conservation of a tradition of violin-making itself, preserving it for the future.” – Sue Carter Flinn



At three volumes and 1,600 pages, the book comes with a \$1,400 price tag