

Thomas Meuwissen



Igor Oistrakh and Thomas Meuwissen | photo © Mirjam Devriendt

‘Creating new instruments that tune the rich legacy of the past to the needs of today’s musicians, reconcile tradition and science, craft and arts, history and personality.’

THOMAS MEUWISSEN



Biography

Thomas Meuwissen is Belgian and since 1987 has concentrated on making violins, violas and cellos. From his base at the Royal Conservatory in Brussels he has over the years built up an international clientele.

Fascinated by sculpture and architecture, he initially took an art course, where his love of materials and craftsmanship combined with creativity gradually took shape. After preparatory studies in Belgium he opted for a course abroad, at one of the best institutions of the day, the Newark School of Violin Making in England, and after three years he graduated there.

In the years that followed he perfected his skills in the workshops of Premysl Spidlen in Prague and Frédérique Chaudière in Montpellier, among others. Since 1993 he has been the 'violin maker in residence' at the Royal Conservatory in Brussels, where his presence is also highly valued from an educational point of view. For The Queen Elizabeth Competition for violin, he gave exhaustive television commentary on the instruments played by the finalists.

His instruments are much appreciated by soloists and orchestral musicians both at home and abroad (The London Philharmonic, L'Orchestre de Radio France, The Belgian National Orchestra, the Vogler Quartet, Tim Vogler, Paul De Clerck, Diederik Suys, Thamos Adamopoulos, Harro Ruijsenaars, Igor Oistrakh and others). In 1999 he was a winner of the Concours de lutherie et d'archeterie de la ville de Paris.

Workshop

Thomas Meuwissen's workshop is housed in the Royal Conservatory, at the very centre of Brussels. Brussels is a lively city of culture at the heart of Europe, with an overwhelming range of top-quality concert venues (Palace of Fine Arts, La Monnaie, Flagey, Conservatory, Queen Elizabeth Contest, etc.). It is close to such musical cities as Antwerp (deSingel, Flanders Opera), Ghent (Handelsbeurs, Opera) and Bruges (Concert Hall). Paris, Amsterdam and London are within easy reach.

Meuwissen's work is stimulated by his intensive contacts with the upper echelons of the musical world. The fact that so many stars pass through means that fascinating instruments are also entrusted to this workshop for essential adjustments.



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VIOLINMAKING TODAY

- **Tradition and innovation**

I concentrate mainly on making the instruments of the string quartet. I am working on my own style in sound and form, on the foundations of existing violinmaking traditions. Creating exact copies has never been an aim in itself, only a very instructive stage in my career as a violinmaker. While drawing inspiration from the example of the classical masters, I am seeking a form of contemporary violin-making. The 16th and 17th-century traditions of Cremona and Venice obviously play a major part. I also have a particular affinity for old Flemish violinmaking.

I combine this knowledge with modern techniques and the results of recent scientific research into the history of violinmaking and the analysis of sounds and materials. All this contributes to the quest for the richness and magic of top-quality instruments.

The study and copying of old masters

The detailed study of old instruments gives me an insight into the working methods of the early masters. This study is underpinned and enriched by an extensive library of specialised literature, a large database of photographic material, plaster casts and measurements. High-quality instruments which spend some time in my workshop for adjustment and care are objects of careful study. I also study renowned collections throughout the world and visit international auctions. But it is the making itself, the creation of copies, that remains the ultimate way of learning from past generations.

Violinmaking today

Violinmaking at the present time is very much alive and diversified. More and more violin-makers are specialising in restoration, bow-making or new instruments. This trend towards specialisation has stimulated violinmaking enormously over the last 20 years, and standards have risen significantly. Leading soloists no longer hesitate to buy contemporary instruments. They play them in concerts, do recordings on them, and grant them a permanent place alongside their older loves.

Thirty to forty years ago the profession of violinmaker had virtually died out. The tradition of high-quality instruments was lost in the course of the 19th century and the making of new instruments amounted to no more than an endless flow of commercially-produced instruments made by and for no one in particular. The increase in authentic performance practices in the sixties led to a sudden renewed demand for new instruments. In addition to the need to convert instruments back to their original state there was also the call for copies of baroque instruments. Authentic early instruments became increasingly expensive. It was often their rarity and historical value for which one paid, and not so much their remaining tonal potential. But in any case, this fact also meant an increase in demand for new instruments. The standard of specialised courses improved and knowledge of instruments from the past was exchanged. Violinmaking once again aroused international interest: competitions, associations, colloquia, exhibitions and publications were born. Nowadays a new generation of violinmakers is appearing. They are characterised by a high degree of specialisation, with their own tradition and mark of quality in the building of new instruments. Musicians are returning to contemporary instrument-makers. Alongside historical instruments, new making has now created a place for itself in the music world.

- **Views on the construction of new instruments**

Each instrument is a unique creation

Each instrument is a unique creation that arises out of intensive dialogue with the musician concerned.

I prefer to work on commission because then I can take a more purposeful approach. In this way each instrument is a personal creation tailor-made for the musician. After all, musicians make specific demands on their instruments: they want a particular sound, dark or bright. A specific timbre, measurements, the look of the instrument, can all be created so that they suit the musician's taste and preferences. Consultation, advice, cooperation and trust are crucial elements for me. There are always test instruments in my workshop which the musicians can try out.

Timbre and sound quality

When building new instruments I endeavour to create a balanced instrument with the correct balance between the four strings. The instrument must have a good playability and a direct and focused sound. Its rich spectrum of timbres allows for refined nuances when played. It has an open sonority, rich harmonics and considerable power so that soloists will effortlessly stand out against orchestral playing. What is more, it brings with it a valuable sound potential that will develop even more over the years as a result of the musician's playing.

Aftercare · after-sales service

An instrument's life only truly starts after it has been bought. No high-quality instrument is completely ready when handed over to the musician. It is like a newborn child and over the years will continue to develop an identity and timbre defined by its owner and player. In cooperation with the violinmaker, the musician can in the first few years adapt the instrument to suit him. This is why I like to keep track of the instruments I make when possible. For the first two years, maintenance of the instrument is free and I encourage musicians to bring the instrument in regularly to discuss its development and thereby improve it and keep it in perfect condition.

Every instrument has a two-week approval period. Only then does the musician have to decide whether to buy it or not.

- **Tonal architecture, models and material**

Tonal architecture

In the whole making process, sound is paramount. Every instrument is the result of a combination of years of craftsmanship in traditional violinmaking and knowledge of the most recent research. In violinmaking the lucid approach to sound taken by science provides a breath of fresh air.

The study I made of the effect of varieties of wood, model, arching and even varnish on the sound of an instrument focused my understanding of the physical properties of the old masterpieces. At the same time I was stimulated to develop new working methods and tools in keeping with the latest scientific findings. This allows me to create instruments that satisfy the demands of today's individual soloists. The result is a unique style, the hallmarks of which are evenness of tone, ease of response, direct and focused sound, open sonority, rich spectrum of

timbres and considerable power that allows soloists to stand out effortlessly against orchestral playing.

Models

My choice of models is based on the instruments of the Cremona school of the 16th and 17th centuries (Amati, Andrea Guarneri, Guarneri del Gesù and Stradivarius) and the cello-makers of Venice (Goffriller and Montagnana). Another major source of inspiration is the Flemish instrument-makers of the same period (Hofmans, Willems and Bourbon).

I aim for perfection, but a living and organic perfection. What makes the old masterpieces so attractive is the life of which they can tell and the history that has left its mark on them. They are endowed with a spontaneity and richness of sound achieved by their makers' instinctive abilities.

I am attracted by both rather more roughly built instruments full of energy, power and suppleness, and by highly-refined violins that radiate class to the finest detail. In my work I try to achieve a synergy between the two. Without ignoring the demands of perfect proportions I allow sufficient elbow room for artistic expression.

Materials

Wood • The pine and maple used for these instruments is specially selected and comes from Bosnia and Northern Italy. Although aesthetics play a part in this selection, the main criteria are the physical and acoustic properties of the wood. It can only be used after it has dried for years in optimal conditions. Having a large stock of wood enables the instrument-maker to always choose the right piece for each particular job.

Varnish • Historical research combined with detailed chemical analysis provides priceless information about the ingredients and processes with which the great violin-makers of Europe worked until 1750. Unfortunately much of this knowledge was lost in the 19th century. The varnish and the varnishing methods I employ are a reflection of the scientific reconstruction of these traditions. This means that after a time the newly-built instrument takes on a natural and durable patina just like that of the earlier instruments.

As in all the instruments from the classical period, I am once again using an oil-based varnish, one I have developed in cooperation with a chemist. The properties I aim for are suppleness, transparency, texture, colour and durability.

The varnish has an aesthetic function and emphasises the quality of the wood and the violin-maker's work. It also serves to protect the instrument. Although the varnish is not the great secret behind a good sound, it does have an influence on the resonant qualities.

Depending on the way the varnish is applied, when the instruments are completely finished that they may look like true replicas, have a slightly aged look or appear brand new with a completely intact coat of varnish.

REFERENCES



‘Today there is an important group of violin makers whose instruments offer a real alternative for those of the great masters of the classical period. Thomas Meuwissen is in my opinion a valuable representative of this generation. He possesses a great knowledge and empathic power, artistic craftsmanship and a confident instinct for the material.

While playing his cellos I was convinced of the happy matching of power, elegance and playability as well as the beauty of the sound.

I recommend all my colleagues who are interested in new instruments, to get in touch with this remarkable violin maker.’

Valentin Erben, cellist
Alban Berg Quartett



‘Besides playing on my old Italian violin, I am also playing often on my wonderful Meuwissen violin which has a beautiful, flexible sound, a deep G-string and a brilliant E-string. My colleagues and audiences highly appreciate the instrument. I have seen and tried several of his violins, which were all made with real mastery and have a full, nice, round sound.’

Igor Oistrakh, violinist



‘I don’t hesitate to call him one of the major talents in violin making of our time.

The wonderful cello he built for me bears witness to his unique gift to combine the great heritage of the old Venetian master with the skills of today, all this resulting in an instrument that shows its quality in sonority as well as design.

I will follow his development with keen interest!’

Harro Ruijsenaars, cellist
ex first solo cello Concertgebouw Orchestra
Professor in the Hague and Göteborg



'I know Thomas and his violins for some years now. His talent and dedication to violin making is very impressive. The violins that I have seen and played had a very full, warm and juicy sound, each with its own personality.

Bravo!

Vadim Repin, violinist



'Thomas Meuwissen: enthusiastic and determined, dynamic and balanced, sincere and sympathetic.

Seriousness and love for his trade, respect for tradition and individuality, expertise and creativity fully show in his unmistakable talent for making new instruments, but also in his approach to the instrument of illustrious forebearers.'

Viviane Spanoghe, cellist

Cello soloist

Professor at the Royal Conservatory in Brussels



'My Meuwissen viola offers me all I need for my work as a soloist in the orchestra and for chamber music. In this instrument I have found the ideal partner to fully explore my musical expression. It confirms my belief that new making can be as rewarding as the work of the old (Italian) masters.'

Diederik Suys, violist

Soloist of the Opera de la Bastille



'I have always been struck by Thomas' drive, his love and passion for the trade, his great professional approach. Over the years he has developed his undeniable talent meticulously and with care.

His work carries the traces of this mental approach and his strong personal involvement. Excellent craftsmanship ... Captivating!'

Sigiswald Kuijken, violinist

Baroque violinist soloist

Founding member of La Petite Bande



'I have seen several cellos built by Thomas Meuwissen from different years. They all show superb individual quality. Excellent craftsmanship, beauty of shape and varnish as well as a flexible sound, convince completely.

The instruments respond easily to the player, the dynamic ranges are wide. The sound is full-bodied, projects and carries in a concert hall.

If the player has musical fantasy and technical ability, he will find all the colours he wants to produce. Bravo!'

Maria Kliegel, cellist
Cello soloist
Professor at the Hochschule für Musik in Köln

'Thomas' understanding of the working style of the old Italian masters is reflected in the subtle nuances of his work. I believe his instruments stand out amongst modern makers for their conception and beauty.'

Christopher Reuning
Violin expert, Boston

'Thomas Meuwissen instruments have both the style and power of one of the finest modern makers. Beautifully crafted, these are instruments that always work.'

Sean Bishop
Dealer in contemporary instruments and musician, London

BUYING AN INSTRUMENT

The choice of an antique, contemporary or tailor-made instrument depends on the musician's personal preference. For this reason several instruments made in the workshop are always available in addition to a limited but high-quality range of antique instruments and bows (see instrument gallery).

The strength of contemporary violin-making lies in the direct contact between maker and musician. This is why Thomas Meuwissen prefers to work on commission. Confidence, consultation and co-operation are of crucial importance when creating a tailor-made instrument that satisfies all the musician's desires, such as range of sound, size, model, style, varnish, finish, etc.

Since the musician is able to follow the building process from A to Z, the purchase of a new instrument is not a leap in the dark but a joint project in which the expertise of both parties is of importance. In addition to this there is a two-week approval period for every new instrument. Only after this does the musician take the final decision to purchase or not.

This is not the end of the line however. Two years of free maintenance after purchase enables the violin-maker, where possible, to keep track of the instrument and to continue to refine it and keep it in top condition. An instrument is made by its maker but is shaped by the musician who plays it and will continue to develop its identity and timbre over the years. This makes it essential to extend the cooperation between violin-maker and musician for the first few years after purchase.

NEWS

Labro

This Summer Thomas Meuwissen will be working in Italy. He has set up a second workshop in a small village called Labro in the Abruzzi mountains, about 100 km north from Rome.

In the quiet of these surroundings he will be making two instruments, one violin and one alto, for the Etienne Vatelot competition that will take place in Paris in December 2004.

Another future project of Thomas is the making of an exact copy of the Szerdahely violin Guarneri Del Gesù made in 1736.

CONTACT

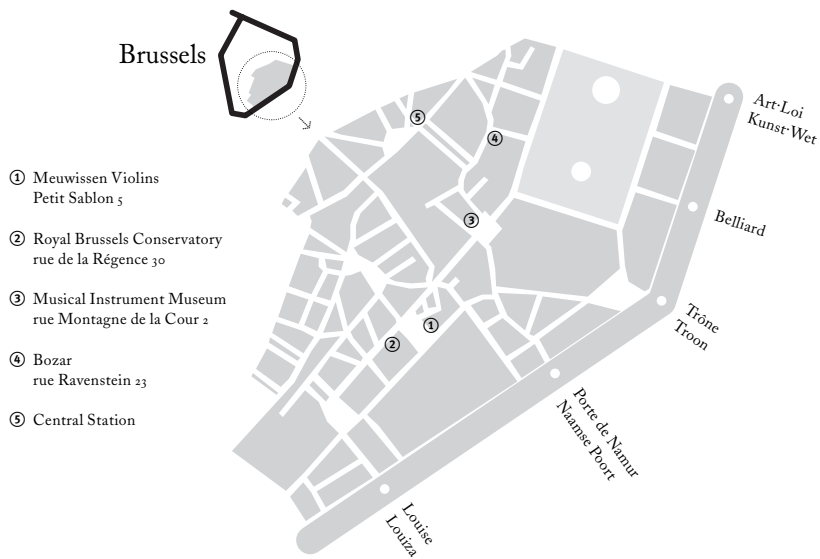
If you wish to contact us in relation to the buying or ordering of an instrument, please send us an e-mail using info@meuwissen-violins.com or by calling or faxing us on +32 (0)2 511 66 74.

Address:

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The workshop is open Tuesday to Friday from 9 AM to 12 PM

During July and August the workshop is open on appointment only.



- 1 Meuwissen Violins (Petit Sablon 5)
- 2 Royal Brussels Conservatory (rue de la Régence 30)
- 3 Musical Instrument Museum (rue Montagne de la Cour 2)
- 4 Bozar (rue Ravenstein 23)
- 5 Central Station

