

IN TUNE

Linda Carr
meets a local
constructing violins
in his Castlemaine
workshop.
Photography by
Jeffrey Richardson

Deep on a bush block in Castlemaine, an internationally-recognised, Australian luthier spends many hours crafting violas, violins and cellos from spruce imported from Europe. Seated in his captivating workshop, master violin maker Rainer Beilharz explains how this came about.

"I was 18, my father was a string teacher in Bendigo and we were taking some instruments to a violin maker in Melbourne to be fixed. My father asked for a job on my behalf and that's how I came to it," laughs Rainer. "Ultimately, I went to Germany to





work and stayed there seven years. By that stage it crystallised for me that making new instruments is what I wanted to do."

Through the large, uncurtained windows of his workshop we look over a valley of yellow gums. Why European spruce?

"The timber comes from special dealers who probably have been doing it since the time of Stradivari (1665), selling spruce from particular regions in Germany. European spruce has the best strength to weight ratio – there's nothing better for instruments, especially for the front plate of a violin," explains Rainer.

Outside, the yellow gums stir in the breeze. Would Australian wood be suitable for hand-made instruments?

"Not really," he says. "Firstly, any Australian timber that would be suitable is quite dark and traditionally violins are light coloured. Also, it would be hard to get it thin enough with adequate strength. Strength enables the violin face to flex for resonance."

Rainer details the long construction process – from cutting the sensuous shape



of the front and back plates, shaping the sound post, through to placing the bridge and finally threading the strings. One new violin takes about six dedicated weeks to complete.

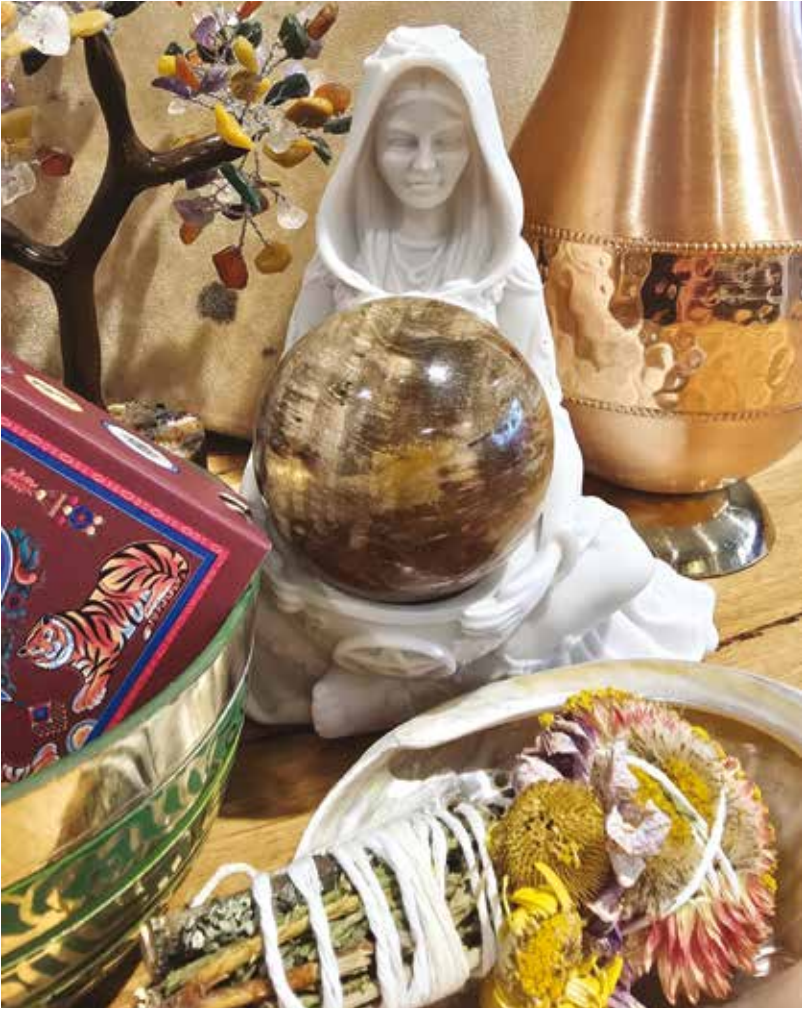
"There's a lot of tedious things we do all the time for violins but you have to learn to give things the time they need. Some steps can be completed quickly but you need to make sure that it is done properly, especially when you are on your own. For example I dye strips of willow wood for the side inlays of the violin and I have to watch the mixture carefully because if it boils too much the colour will be ruined. It all needs an extraordinary amount of time."

One assumes then that Rainer spends many days in his workshop waiting for things to reach the right level of perfection, for vanish layers to fully dry and willow strips to bend to the right shape. His eyes wander to a keyboard standing open, ready to be played.

"I'm a keen amateur singer," says Rainer. "I practice my choir music here."

This is no surprise. A rich musical life is part-and-parcel of a master craftsman's existence and being able to play the instrument you are making must surely be critical to testing the final product.

"Yes. As a maker you need to know what the strings feel like under the bow. Do they respond as the strings gets shorter up



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the fingerboard, is the sound even? You must be sensitive to the resistance under the bow. Playing is probably the best way of doing that. But I can also do acoustic testing via sound radiation. The machine gives me a measurement. It's like a check that I am not kidding myself. But I do know when the violin is right."

Rainer's smile highlights a tempered assessment of his own well-honed skills. He has received numerous awards including three certificates of merit and four silver medals at Violin Society of America competitions.

"In my family we were all forced to learn to play when we were kids. For the times, I think we were quite good. Today, the kids of the same age who are considered something special, are amazingly good compared to me back then. These days I only play when I finish making a new violin."

The final part required to play the violin is the bow, the production of which is a different profession altogether and stems from other origins. Whereas the standard design of a violin goes back to 17th century Italy, the modern bow was designed in 18th century France using horse hair for the strings.

The majority of violin work is for repairs as the instrument is fragile and needs a lot of maintenance and Rainer is one of the few luthiers who works solely on the construction of new instruments. Dedication to his craft and a desire to promote the world of the violin in our region led him to organise the Violin Makers Conference, in Guildford in 2003, 2006 and 2012.



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