Matthew Farley: Viol Maker

Our occasional series featuring individual viol makers has up till now focussed on well-established names such as Jane Julier, Richard Jones and Michael Plant. By way of contrast, the following article introduces us to someone who is just starting out on his career as an instrument maker, whose name will probably be unfamiliar to most of us.

Matthew Farley was born in Tennessee in November 1974. He spent his childhood in Oklahoma, and his teens and early adulthood in Atlanta, Georgia. He studied Literature and Fine Arts at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia, leaving the United States in May 2001 to pursue a career teaching English as a foreign language. He has been living in Europe (first Poland, then Italy) ever since. He exhibited for the first time in Greenwich in 2011, his last and best exhibition of the year!

How have you ended up living in Italy?

My wife, who's Polish, was offered a position as a researcher in a laboratory in Rome, and I 'followed' her there. I thought, 'Why not? The teaching qualifications that I've got should support us well enough over there.' I found, however, that pay for teachers in Rome was no different than in Warsaw, despite the cost of living being *much* higher. Suddenly I discovered that what had been a comfortable income in Poland wouldn't cover even the rent on our apartment in Rome. So I spent a year or a bit more teaching, feeling increasingly discontented with how little teachers were valued and compensated. There are just too many of us native English speakers in Italy for there to be much demand for us.

How did you come to start making viols?

I was teaching at an American university with a new campus in Zagarolo, out in the suburbs of Rome, and I had this student in one group who was really talkative and personable - and always with a bit of wood dust on his jacket. That was Marco Salerno. We got to talking in between classes, and I asked him what he did. Once he explained, I was really keen to see his workshop - and once I set foot in it, I knew I wanted to make instruments like him.



Matthew Farley working on an instrument

And was that your first foray into the world of viols and early music?

Pretty much so. I mean, music wasn't absent from my home growing up. My sister played viola in the state youth orchestra when I was little, and my father has been an avid harmonica player for years, and me - I got interested in making music when I found an LP of Big Bill Broonzy in the trash outside my dormitory. I immediately got a guitar and started learning how to play country blues by Big Bill, Mississippi John Hurt, and guys like that - but viols and early music were something that my wife introduced me to when we were dating. And then, actually making them - that possibility had never occurred to me - ever! But there the possibility was.

My wife graciously agreed to let me start an apprenticeship with Marco, and I began working for him a few days a week. As I gained some experience and skill, my duties increased. Marco was always setting new challenges in front of me: jobs requiring more careful planning, a better eye, a more refined touch. At the same time he was helping me to plan and prepare a small workshop of my own in Rome: picking out basic tools, getting some 'apartment-friendly' machines, and the like.

I worked directly under him for three or so years, taking part in the construction of over one hundred instruments, and I still do some occasional piecework for him, when a bit of carving needs to be done, or some pegs need to be turned.

What language did you and Marco use to communicate?

Marco's English was already quite good when we met, certainly much better than my Italian – even now! - so it seemed natural to work together in English, if only for safety's sake. Sometimes matters of language would come up while we were



Woodworking machinery wheeled onto the terrace

working, like the difference between 'used to' and 'get used to,' and we might take a short break for a language lesson here and there. And Marco has a great ear for language sounds, so during those three years he adopted a lot of American pronunciations – he 'flaps' his t's like I do, saying 'ledder' instead of the British 'letter.' It was funny when we were in Greenwich how many people commented on his American accent!

Do you have your own workshop now? And how about tools?
My workshop is currently located in what used to be the living room of our apartment, and during working hours it spreads out onto the terrace a bit. Since we're up on the top floor of our building, I have a nice view of my neighbours' terracotta-tiled rooftops, and on a good day the breeze blows so that I get a whiff of pizza or cookies in the oven of the nearby bakery. So each morning I wheel the few machines I have out onto the terrace, do the carpentry I need to do out there, and then bring the prepared pieces in so I can get to work on the actual luthiery. Inside I have my workbench, moulds, and hand tools: planes, chisels, gouges, knives, scrapers and such. Some of these I bought from retailers specialising in woodworking and luthiers' tools, but with the internet being what it is, I was also able to find a lot of good deals on new and used tools on ebay. I got nearly all of my chisels there. In fact, my father, who's never been very handy himself, has gotten a kind of vicarious thrill finding tools for me in online auctions. For Christmas this year he bought me more old planes than I could reasonably bring home in my luggage!

Do you have to clear up the workshop so that you can use it as a living room from time to time?
We try not to have guests over during the week so that I don't have to do a top to bottom cleaning of the workshop at the end of each day. But we do have guests and get-togethers periodically, and I try to put everything up and away to be as inconspicuous as possible – and a lot of things simply have to go out on the terrace. Then I pray it doesn't rain on us till the party's over.

Where does your wood come from?
Some of it I can get from shops in Rome dealing in small pieces for hobbyist woodworkers. But for getting large quantities of spruce, maple, poplar and the like, I deal with a wood seller in the north of Italy: Rivolta. They can supply good quality



Workshop in the living room of Matthew’s apartment in Rome

wood by the pallet-load if necessary. In my workshop, I don't have much space at all for stacking wood. I find that there's a good amount of room for storage under our bed, though.

Do you play the viol yourself?
I do! But not very well yet, I'm afraid. I take lessons off and on from a neighbour of mine, Sabine Cassola, who lives just a couple of streets over. She's a fine player and a very helpful teacher. And as my sense of playing the viol develops, my understanding about how the instrument can best work grows and changes, too. You know, I'd go so far as to say that with viols one really needs to be a player, at least on some basic level, to be a good maker. Marco has always explained it to me like this: viols are so much less rigorously ruled by measurement as compared to the violin family; so without all those fixed measurements and standardization to fall back on, you have to really understand how the instrument needs to work. And that's not just true of viols, but for really all of these early music instruments - particularly when you're basing a 'real-world' instrument on the information you can glean from a period painting, as we often do.

Do you make instruments other than viols?
At the moment it's just bowed instruments like medieval fiddles and rebecs, but I also learned the basics of making plucked instruments like guitars, lutes, harps, and gitterns while I was an apprentice. As well as this, I've been doing some research into the early music of Poland and have gotten interested in bringing a few of their lyra-style instruments back to life. They seem to be direct descendants of the early European fiddles, much like the Calabrian lyra, and could likely get us quite close to an 'ancient sound.' I plan on having a go at recreating a particularly attractive one, the suka biłgorajska, sometime this year.

What do you feel about being commissioned to make specific instruments?
Commissioned instruments are both really exciting and stressful to work on. I mean, when I come to an exhibition with instruments I've already finished, and when a musician comes to my stand, plays an instrument and likes it, there's this sort of 'fortuitous coincidence' that I happened to build the thing that they were looking for, and we can both be happy with a job well done. But the job is done -the instrument is built. Commissions, on the other hand, require me to get a handle on what the musician is 'dreaming of,' which can be hard for them to explain sometimes. There's a kind of communication gap that we have to try to bridge, and that can be a little scary. Miscommunication can be frustrating for both parties. But just the communication aspect of it can be really exciting.



Matthew Farley treble viol

In the process of the commission I am entering into a kind of dialogue with the musician and we're both learning something about the work we're trying to do. The musician is sharing information with me about what she wants from the playing experience, and I am getting to share with her something about how instruments work in the abstract. There's an opportunity for new ideas and new understandings to come out of that.

How about pricing – how do you price your instruments?

The first guitar I bought cost one hundred dollars and it was a pain to play. But it was a start, and my enthusiasm carried me through. Then the first *good* guitar I bought was a bit less than one thousand dollars. I look back on that and appreciate the fact that there are companies out there making instruments that make getting started in pursuing a musical interest financially feasible. There needs to be room in the world of viol making for something solidly in between the high-end, wait-six-years-for-it, 'super viols,' and the glossy but dodgy cheap junk that you sometimes run across. I'm trying to set prices that make it possible for students and enthusiasts to have a quality beginning for a reasonable price. I'd like for most players to feel free to skip the one-hundred-dollar, 'testing-the-waters' level and get acquainted with an instrument that works well and sounds good without the need for a long wait or a bank loan. We'll see if I can find my niche there.

To give you some idea, I currently have a treble viol for sale at a little over 1500 Euro (about £1200), and bass viols from around 1700 Euro (about £1600). For the time being the prices are quite low because I'm just now striking out on my own and I'm trying to encourage more musicians to try my instruments so that I can get more of my viols and fiddles out there in the world. That being said, my pricing is transparent. I don't have adjustable scales based on what I think a musician can afford. I list all of my prices for my instruments on my website, along with photos and details of each model.

What qualities do you think are important if someone is to become a good instrument maker?

I've thought a lot about what 'character' was being built during my apprenticeship. I assume that there was something to do with character going on, as there was some pain involved in the process. The 'too-long-didn't-read' list would be: *patience* and *honesty*. Let me explain.

In the course of building so many instruments with Marco, lots of opportunities for making mistakes came up - at the beginning because I didn't really understand how a certain tool worked, for example. Later though, carelessness would sometimes creep in, especially at those times when the reason for following a certain procedure wasn't clear to me, or I didn't understand the exact 'destination' I was trying to reach in carving a neck or a soundboard. Then there would come the moment when Marco would give me some feedback on problems with my work. Those moments - and he was typically very diplomatic about it all - could be extremely humbling, sometimes even painful for me. I think all of us have this innate sense of being sufficiently clever and sufficiently competent in general, and it hurts us to be confronted with specific evidence to the contrary. And if you submit to being trained by a master in a skill, you have to face these moments - to speak one-to-one with your master and learn that you've done something wrong, that your current level of work is sub-standard. Ouch. In the first year I met a lot of such moments. I found that part of you wants to protect this sense of your competence and deny that there's anything wrong with your work - and sometimes that part is really strong. But you have to choose between this false sense of competence, or instead submitting yourself to your master, admitting the shortcoming and learning the lesson. I think that most schooling today, at least in the States, has dispensed with this master-pupil relationship. Students assume that since they have 'paid' for the lesson, they really ought to have at least a passing mark. If they fail, which is less and less common nowadays, it's because the teacher is a lunkhead, not because the student himself is incompetent. So, *honesty*: a luthier has to be honest with himself, admitting when he has made a mistake - not holding that belief in his own competence in higher regard than actually producing good work. That gets even trickier when you don't have your master with you, keeping you accountable and responsible.

By *patience* I don't mean this image that some have of the luthier, slowly and endlessly removing wood molecule by molecule with his file and scraper till he reaches perfection. In my book that's not exactly luthiery - that's drudgery. I mean patience with yourself as a craftsperson. Patience with yourself paired with honesty about your work enables you to face instances of failure as instances only, not complete and total failure. Patience gives you the ability to put a mistake aside and start again with new insight. Mistakes can be valuable, you know. It's like Marco always used to console me, 'Maybe this piece isn't good for an instrument, but it'll be good fuel for grilling sausages.'

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If any VdGS members happen to be in Rome, Matthew would be very pleased to meet you and to show you his instruments.