

# A Tale of Two Scrolls

## Helen Michetschläger and William Castle are challenged by a swap

**Helen:** Some months ago, in one of our regular telephone conversations, William Castle and I had a discussion about our approaches to work and the models of instruments we make. We formed the idea of spending a day together working on scrolls - but with a difference. We would make a scroll in a style usually made by the other, using the other's techniques and working under each other's guidance.

**William:** My excitement for this project was tempered by the challenge. Helen usually makes Brescian models of scroll which, to me, having confined myself to Cremonese and Venetian styles, seemed to be ugly things (the originals, not Helen's, of course!) Confronting this prejudice was just a part of the challenge. The day before Helen's arrival I roughed out the outline and cut down the sides of the pegbox. The first practical challenge came with the first turn. Helen does not use a fishtail template but draws on each scroll individually using measurements. I attempted to do this using a flexible ruler but the curves did not work out very well at first, forcing me to look harder. I chamfered back to the line with a knife, as normal, before using a chisel or gouge. By the time I had picked up a gouge for the first time the next problem appeared; the volutes of a Gasparo scroll are shallower at this point. To make it easier to see the line of the first turn, I usually start undercutting the volutes as I go. This also means the

volute is half done by the time I have cut the turns, and it means I can gouge into it without worrying about cutting into the 'dowels' when the side view is already finished. I only realised just in time that this would not be possible with a Brescian model.

**Helen:** On a rainy spring day I drove to William's house in Shropshire, swapping my usual suburban outlook in Manchester for a field of lambs and daffodils outside the windows. An unexpected side-benefit was that, for once, I had sharpened my scroll gouges before starting work. William had also tidied up his workshop! I had spent a while looking at different heads by Peter Guarneri of Venice and had chosen a model from a Strad poster because it had very clear photographs and good measurements. Like William, I had already cut out the profiles and roughed out the shape of the pegbox and the first turn. Before we started work, we took a good look at the photographs of both heads and similar ones, discussing the main characteristics of the work, as well as looking at other examples by the same makers which we had made ourselves. It was surprisingly informative to look again at familiar models - I quickly realised that I was going to be learning as much about Gasparo as William was!

**William:** When Helen arrived the kettle was switched on and the scrolls

were brought out. It was immediately apparent how clean and precise Helen's work is and that I should have left more wood on the front side of my pegbox throat! Then I had to decide how to do the undercutting on the dowels - whether to tackle that now or complete all the turns first? Well I didn't think those Brescian roughnecks would have held back or done things twice! So I undercut the first turn exaggeratedly because, of course, the second turn at this stage came right out to the full scroll width. The second turn was soon completed, having taken care to stop some distance before the eye. Usually, I would finish the side views, put the chamfer on and finish the voluting, leaving everything except the first half to three-quarter turn from the gouge. But Helen, following Brescian ideas, puts the narrow chamfer on after the fluting is done, leaving the central spine down the back relatively high. So I did the same. After Helen had rounded the edges with abrasive paper it did resemble a Brescian scroll, recognisable as my style of work but different.

**Helen:** In the meantime I was nibbling away at my Peter of Venice scroll rather more cautiously. At William's suggestion, I had flattened off some of the over-roundedness I'd made on the outline, and altered the shape of the pegbox. One of the significant differences, I discovered, was the depth of the undercutting of the volutes in the Venetian model and the characteristic gouge marks in the final turn. With a guiding hand from William, I became more confident about taking out the wood.

So what did we learn? Looking at familiar models with a fresh eye helped us to look more closely and to work less habitually. Although we both found it a bit odd to be working with someone else, rather than on our own, the incentive to get as much done as possible while we had the other there for guidance helped the work to flow, and also helped us to gain confidence of making in a new style. Witnessing the way in which another maker approaches their work generated a host of new ideas ranging from the



*Helen's Venetian Style Scroll*



holding of tools to the order of work and the whole approach to the task in hand. In tackling unfamiliar models, we became acutely aware of the habits we had formed in our work and where we could try to break out and look afresh at what we do.

In the end, of course, each of the new scrolls was recognisably our own work. As I thought he would be, William is a natural maker of Brescian models! I am hopeful that his long-held antipathy for the style is breaking down and that he might, some day, make a body to go with his striking new Gasparo head. As for me, I've already decided to take up the challenge and the following week after our time together I was making a mould for my new Venetian model violin.



*Brescian style scroll by William*

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