

A cello by Henry Strobel: What's special about it?

The owner of this cello asked me to write down some interesting details of how it came to be. The design, materials, techniques, etc. These are mostly already presented comprehensively in my book, *Cello Making, Step by Step*, and this is the short version.

The size and shape owe much to Stradivari and Sacconi, but I drew it all up from scratch and freely, personally sculpted it. It has been built many times by readers from the book, and has proven to be an excellent design.

The heroic maple in the one-piece back, the sides, and neck grew on a mountain near Sweet Home, Oregon, very slowly, and quite unlike any Oregon maple I have seen, unlike like the ordinary *Acer macrophyllum* (bigleaf maple.) This is primarily responsible for the acoustic excellence of this cello. It is so flexible because of the high amplitude of the “flame,” which exceeds the thickness of the ribs. It is beautiful. Lon Tyler, a logger from Sweet Home, found this huge tree with a uniform “fiddleback” figure throughout. His mother-in-law, Mary Johnson, premier cellist of Salem, Oregon, told me about it and bought the first cello I made from it. We made several large and small instruments from it, including Deborah Ward's seven-eighths cello (also in the book) and her twin sister's viola. All had a big, refined sound from the start.

The requirements for the front (soundboard) are different than for the back. The wood needs to be *light* and *stiff*. This wood, *Engelmann spruce*, was purchased from famed cello maker, Christopher Dungey, who felled it in southern Oregon. See its fine grain in the sound hole photo, hand scraped, unsanded, and unvarnished. After application of the water/spirit ground this wood takes on a ridged and furrowed look as the softer, lighter spring wood expands leaving the darker, narrower, winter wood lower in between. This is simply a matter of style and does not affect the sound.

Now about the varnish. So much nonsense has been written about the “secrets” of varnish. It is not that complicated. Its purpose is to protect the wood and make it look good. It should be durable and transparent, light and flexible, adding no more mass than necessary. The color is in the varnish – not stained into the wood. Three coats are probably enough. Robert Lundberg, the foremost American lute maker in Portland, Oregon showed me how to make this varnish, which I cooked from walnut oil and pine resin, colored brown with iron nails, and thinned with spirits of gum turpentine. Such a formulation was doubtless used by early makers of instruments - and furniture.

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This is the cello I made as I wrote
Cello Making, Step by Step

