Stradivari's 'Gibson' viola

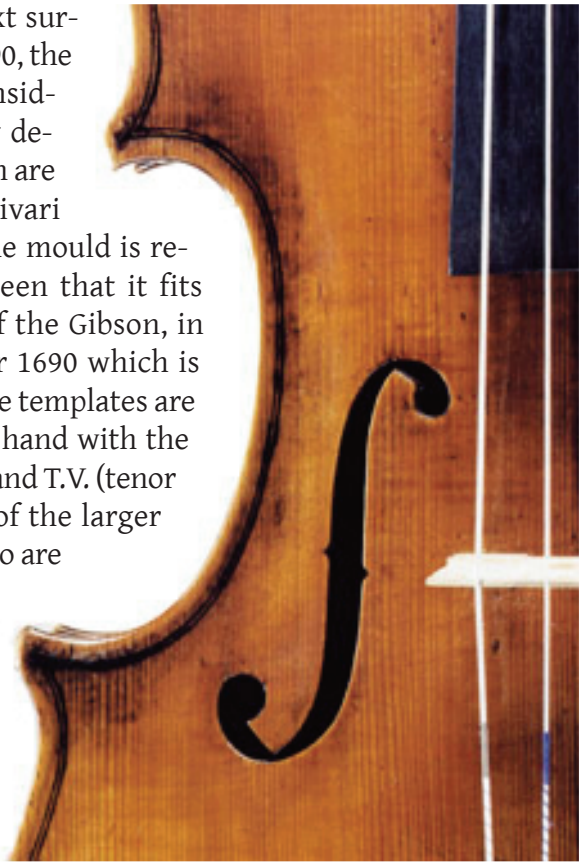
One of the best preserved examples of Stradivari's viola craftsmanship.

Roger Hargrave describes the instrument's characteristics.

Exactly how many instruments of the Stradivari family have survived to the present day is difficult to assess. The Hill Brothers in 1902 (Antonio Stradivari. His Life and Work) sensibly listed only those instruments which they knew personally to exist. Doring in his book How many Strads? was hampered by World War 2, which restricted information from Europe, as he was putting this work together in the United States.

To date it seems likely, despite a few obvious errors, that Herbert K. Goodkind's Iconography of Stradivari, published in 1972, comes closest to the mark. Goodkind attributes 725 surviving instruments to the Stradivari family. It becomes immediately clear, however, from all of the worthwhile sources, that only a very few Stradivari violas have survived. Hills list 10 examples, Doring 11, and Goodkind a very optimistic 18.

That Stradivari made more violas than have survived seems certain from the writings of earlier biographers, but they can never have been a major part of his production. The first known example, the 'Mahler', was constructed in 1672. It most definitely belonged to the Amati tradition and, though similar in length to the majority of violas which followed, it was much wider. By the time Stradivari's next surviving violas appeared in 1690, the modelling had changed considerably. There were two new designs, the templates of which are still preserved in the Stradivari museum. (The outline of the mould is reproduced here. It can be seen that it fits quite well on the outline of the Gibson, in spite of the date of October 1690 which is written on the mould.) These templates are marked in Stradivari's own hand with the letters C.V. (contralto viola) and T.V. (tenor viola). With the exception of the larger tenor viola, of which only two are known to have survived, Stradivari's viola designs remained relatively uniform until the end, so that the design of his last known viola, the 'Gibson' c.1734, closely resembles those contraltos built in the 1690s. This was in marked contrast to his violin designs, which changed dramatically and several times over the same period.



Although the design of the violas was to remain the same, stylistically they changed considerably. In this respect the 'Gibson' is quite obviously a later work and it displays many of the features which one would expect to find on almost any late violin. In common with practically all of Stradivari's late instruments, it is difficult to distinguish the work of the sons from that of Antonio himself. Although there are definite signs of an old man's hand having been at work, it should be remembered that by the 1730s not only was Antonio very old, but Francesco and Omobono were also getting on in years.

There is something about a late Stradivari, however, that says more about the man and his work than the finest pieces from his golden period can. It is not just simple craftsmanship that is required to build an instrument which, despite the presence of a shaky hand, is as full of vigour and vitality, both tonally and visually, as the 'Gibson'.

The original label of the 'Gibson' is missing and the date 1734 is the date to which the Hill brothers ascribed the viola in 1902. In spite of the Hill's opinion, a colour plate of the viola appears in Fridolin Hamma's Meisterwerke italienischer Geigenbaukunst where it is dated 1728. This date, which also appears in other catalogues, seems to be the result of a false label. In recent years, however, there has been no reason to challenge the date set by the Hills and there can be no doubt that the 'Gibson' is the last of the surviving violas by the Stradivari family. A comprehensive history of the 'Gibson' may be found in Doring's How many Strads? and it is also mentioned in an excellent chapter about Stradivari's violas in the Hill book.

In keeping with the other instruments featured in this series of posters, the `Gibson' is in an excellent state of preservation. This is unusual enough for any classical Italian work, but for a viola it is almost miraculous. For this reason I was prepared to accept the fact that the photographs had to be taken with the bridge in place and that some important measurements could not be taken.

A modified Reinert caliper was used to take the approximate thickness of the belly, reaching as far as was practicable. These measurements are reproduced here. It was not possible to take all of the necessary inside measurements from the viola, since the instrument has not been opened for several years. I have therefore included Stradivari's thicknessing system according to Sacconi, taken from I segreti di Stradivari. It can be seen that the actual thicknessing of the belly bears some similarity to Sacconi's diagram, the area around the f holes in particular being slightly thicker than the rest of the plate. Nevertheless, Stradivari varied his thicknessing according to the quality of the wood and in this respect all such measurements can be used only as a guide. Furthermore, it should be noted that the measurements given by Sacconi include extra wood around the

edges to allow for the later working of the purfling channel. For a more complete picture Sacconi's book should be consulted.

With a fibre optical instrument, normally used for medical purposes, it was possible to examine the inside work of the Gibson, in minute detail. The four corner blocks and the endpin block are original and have not been cut back as often occurs. (The block sizes may be gauged from the mould.) The marking out for the positioning of the f hole nicks (as described in the `Ex Maria Muir Mackenzie' STRAD, poster December 1985), can be clearly seen. The presence of such markings proves that the belly has not been reworked. There are one or two minor cracks, no patches on either of the plates, and a very few small studs, of considerable age, protect the centre joint. The linings are sturdy, measuring 8.75 mm in the C bouts. They are of the same white wood as the blocks. This may be willow or poplar, as described by Sacconi, but it strongly resembles lime in appearance. The C bout linings are certain to have been let into the corner blocks in the normal Stradivari manner. The rib thicknessing was measured in the C bouts through the f hole and was found to be approximately 1 mm, which corresponds with Sacconi's suggestion of 1 mm or slightly less.

Generally, the inside work is very clean with only a trace of the gouge where the blocks were cut back; few, if any, scraper marks are visible anywhere on the plates. There is now no label, genuine or otherwise, in the viola (anyone interested in Stradivari's labels should consult the Hill book on Stradivari).

The Hill brothers had some rather uncomplimentary things to say about Stradivari's viola heads: `. . . With the introductions of the smaller sized viola (C.V.) it was necessary to diminish proportionately the head; and strangely in contrast with that fine sense of symmetry, which Stradivari so frequently displayed, we here see a comparative failure the scroll being too large for the box which it overhangs, and the whole being stunted and ill proportioned . . .. The viola head of Stradivari is formed like those of tile violoncello, and is distinguished from that of the violin by the cheeks protruding instead of being flush where the neck emerges from the head . . . it is unsuitable for the viola because it inconveniences the player's left hand'.

These comments do not apply in the case of the 'Gibson', whose head is cut without shoulders, in the violin style. As a result it is more in harmony with the body of the instrument than any of the five other Stradivari violas I have seen. It also avoids the usual problems which shoulders present to the player. The head has all the appearance of an enlarged violin head, but the turns somehow run truer. (Many violin heads have a tendency towards the oval in the turns of the scroll itself). It is also cleaner and generally lighter looking than most late violin heads, despite some obvious `late' features, such as the squareness of the chin and the Guadagnini type pinholes around the eyes. The volutes are relatively shallow and flat in cut, increasing in depth only on the last turn into the eye. The volutes are completely free of tool marks but, as we would expect from a Stradivari head, traces of the gouge may be seen upon the vertical surfaces of the scroll. The fluting is relatively clean with only the suggestion of scraper marks down the black of the pegbox. The fluting is deeper than normal at the chin, whereas over the front of the head it is perhaps slightly shallower. The chamfers, strong but not too wide, finish the head perfectly, and traces of the black paintwork, which formally picked them out, are still very much in evidence. The head wood is of extremely fine growth, cut exactly on the quarter. The flame, which is of medium width, is shallow. Overall this is an outstanding and very beautiful head.

In common with the shoulderless pegbox, the outline of the body is also friendly to the player, with the wellrounded upper bouts allowing easy access to the higher positions. Generally, the body is bolder looking, with a much stronger edgework than the earlier violas. This, together with the lighter cut of the head, gives the 'Gibson' a stylistic balance which is, in my opinion, unique among Stradivari's violas.

As may be derived from the drawings the arching of the belly rises steeply under the fingerboard and tailpiece, becoming relatively flat along the top. The scooping of the purfling channel is marked but not deep. Likewise the fluting of the soundhole wings is shallow, especially when compared to the other violas. The back arching has a somewhat deeper channelling than the belly especially in the corner areas. Perhaps because of the slabcut back the cross archings are slightly distorted. This should be taken into account when these arching. drawings are being used. Overall both archings are full and very powerful in appearance, a feature probably accentuated by the strong edgework and corners. On the back, the edgework is softer than one would normally expect, but this is almost certainly the result of the slab cut wood; like the head the back wood is of extremely fine growth, but the beautiful velvety flame is more pronounced. With the exception of the typical knife

cut chamfer on the underside of the edgework, there are no other tool marks to be seen on the outside of the body.

The purfling is uneven in thickness and the blacks are not quite so intense as would be normal for Stradivari. There are no waverings in the flow of the line of the purfling, but the strings, as may be seen from the photographs, are quite roughly finished. The belly inlay appears to have been filled with black mastic in the top and bottom bouts, where the channel was perhaps cut a little too wide.

Once again I have reconstructed the left f hole, wobbles and all. It should be used in conjunction with the photographs and measurements. Although the soundholes deviate somewhat from the classical Stradivari form, the knifework is confident and clean and, as would be expected on any fine Cremonese instrument, the longitudinal runs of the f sand the top and bottom circles are cut almost at right angles to the surface of the plate. The set of the left hole is more vertical than that of the right and its bottom circle is set slightly lower. The circles themselves were obviously cut with the same cutters as were used for the violin holes, since they are of a similar diameter. Any distortion to these circles is due to the joining of these circles to the main body of the hole.

The wood for this two piece belly is cut on the quarter. Curiously, however, the two sides do not match each other exactly. They are similar in appearance and they are almost certainly from the same log, but they were not cut from the same wedge. Generally the belly wood is of uneven growth, while the reed lines seem to be particularly hard and strong.

The ribs have a narrow soft flame which runs vertically all around the instrument. They were obviously not taken from either the back or the head block, whose flames are much wider. The bottom ribs are cut on the quarter, whereas the C ribs and the top ribs change towards the slab: The top rib was almost certainly one piece before the neck was changed, but the bottom seems always to have been made from two pieces. There are traces of black line on the end of the rib corner, however this is unusual for Stradivari, and it may be a later addition.

The varnish is a strong orange colour, over a light golden yellow ground, which is slightly darker on the head and the belly. It is rich, warm and strongly dichroic, especially on the slab cut back. There is no sign of any craquelee: As usual the area underneath the fingerboard has not been varnished.

THE STRAD wishes to thank the owner of the 'Gibson', Habisreutinger of Gersau, for his kind permi sion to reproduce this article, and as usual Geigenbau Machold of Bremen, West Germany, for their help in its production. At the moment the 'Gibson', which was said by Doring to be `long famous for its acoustic properties', is on loan to Yossi Gutmann.

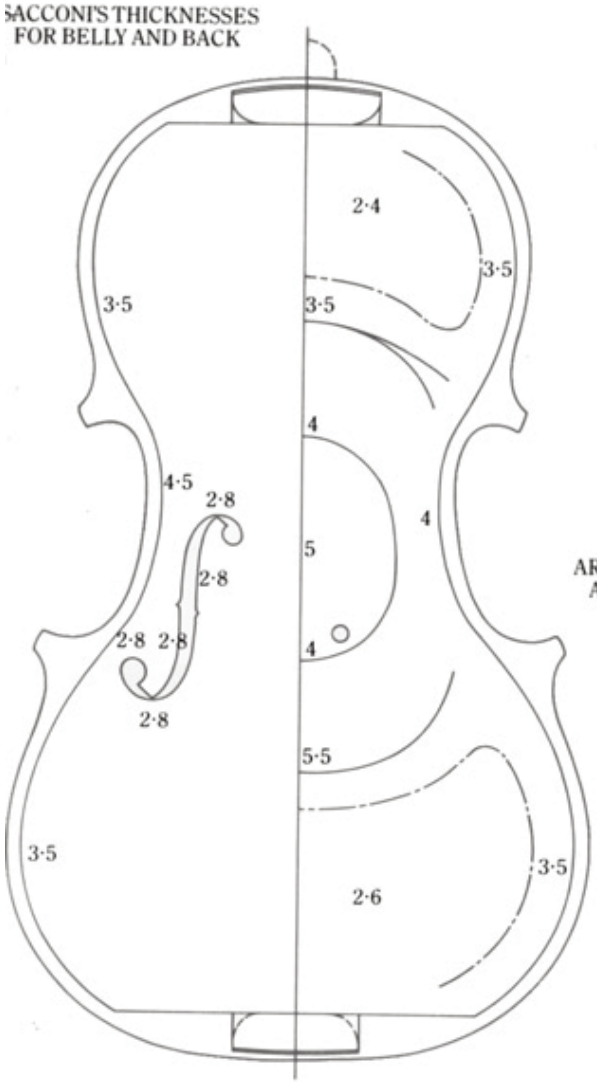
ANTONIO STRADIVARI 1734
THE 'GIBSON' VIOLA

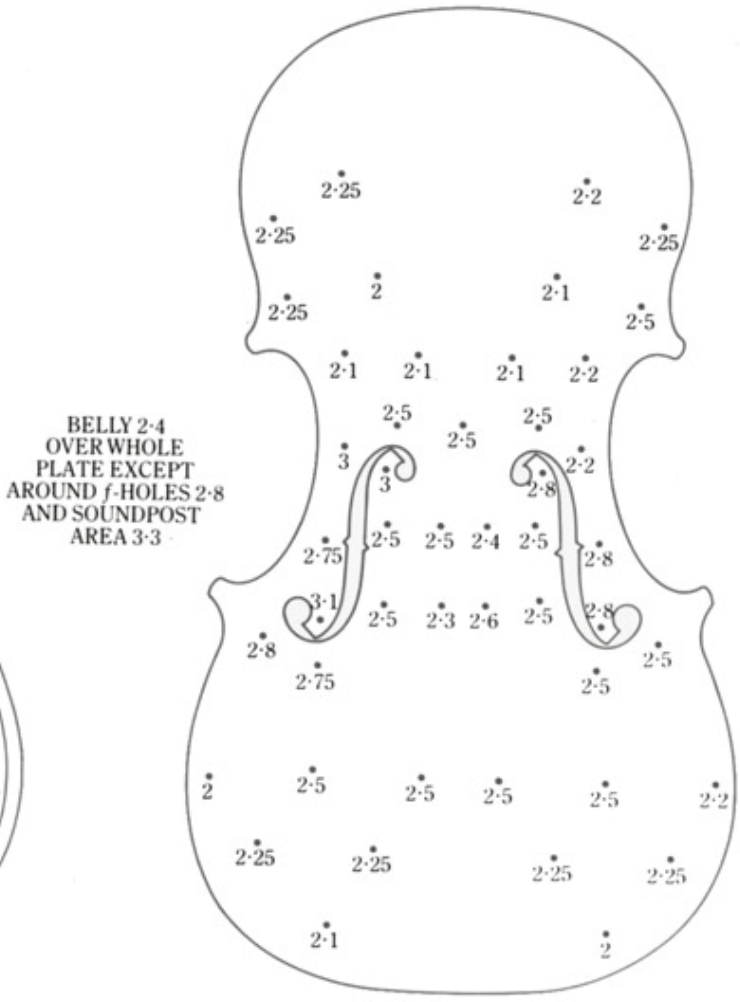
Measurements	Back	Belly
Length (over arch)	411.5	412.5 mm
Upper bouts	185	186 mm
Middle bouts	127.5	130 mm
Lower bouts	240.5	239 mm

Stop length taken from the left side of the neck to nick 221 mm
Approximate thickness of the edges, taken from the back only:
Corners 4.75 to 5 mm
Centre bouts 4.8 to 5 mm
Upper and lower bouts 4.75 mm
Button thickness 4.5 to 5 mm
Overhang of the edge from the rib outline: approximately 2.5 to 3 mm at the centre bouts, and 2.25 to 2.5 mm around the top and bottom bouts.

Rib heights	Left	Right
Neck root	35.5	35.5 mm
Upper corner	35.75	36.75 mm
Lower corner	36.5	37 mm
Endpin	36.5	36.5 mm

Purfling: the distance from the edge is 5.1 mm approximately. The total width varies from 1 to 1.5 mm. The width of the whites is approximately 0.75 mm.
The outline is accurate to 1 mm over the length. The thicknessing measurements of the belly are viewed from the outside of the plates. The head and f-hole drawings are only facsimiles on which to mount the measurements. All measurements are in mm.


SACCONI'S THICKNESSES
FOR BELLY AND BACK
2·4
3·5
3·5
3·5
4
4·5
2·8
4
5
2·8
2·8
2·8
2·8
4
2·8
5·5
3·5
2·6
3·5


BELLY 2·4
OVER WHOLE
PLATE EXCEPT
AROUND f-HOLES 2·8
AND SOUNDPOST
AREA 3·3
2·25
2·2
2·25
2·25
2·25
2
2·1
2·5
2·1
2·1
2·1
2·2
2·5
2·5
2·5
3
3
2·2
2·8
2·75
2·5
2·5
2·4
2·5
2·8
3·1
2·5
2·3
2·6
2·5
2·8
2·8
2·75
2·5
2·5
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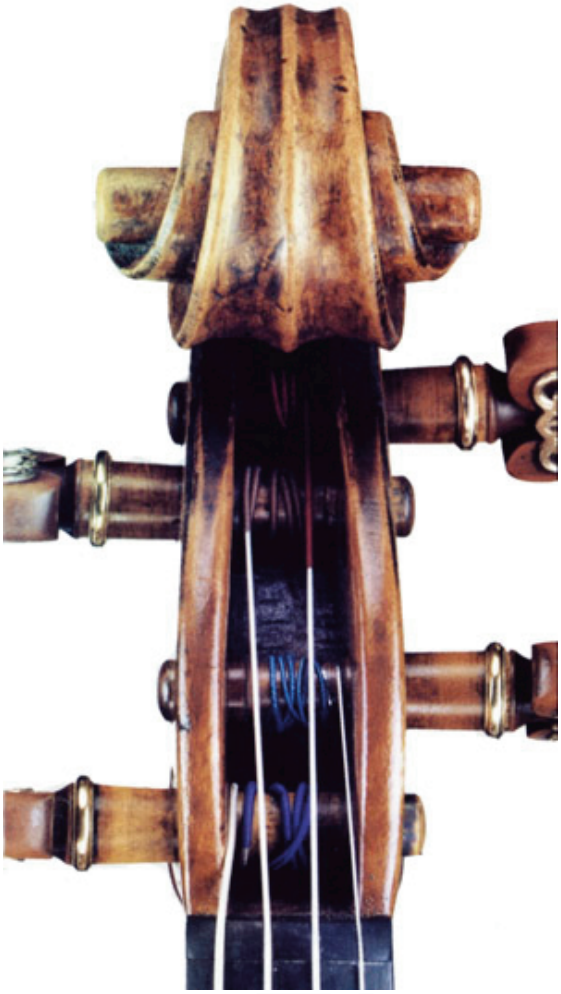
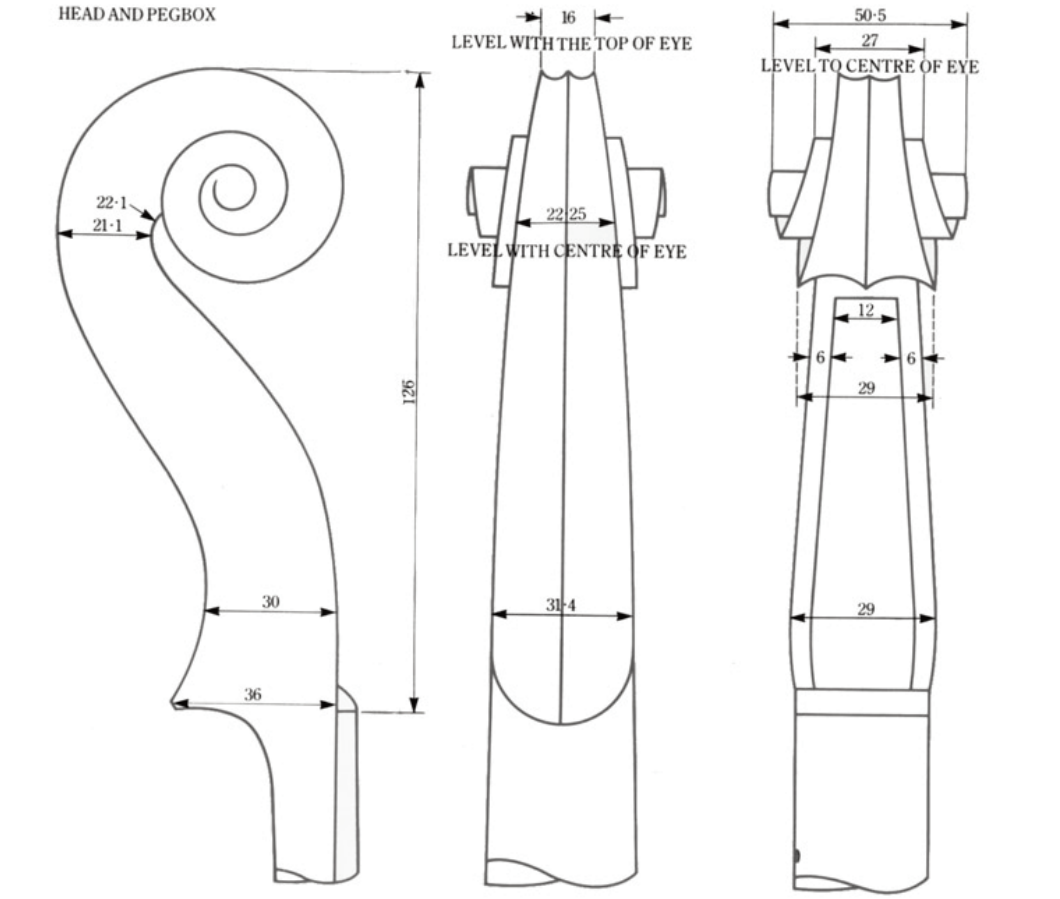
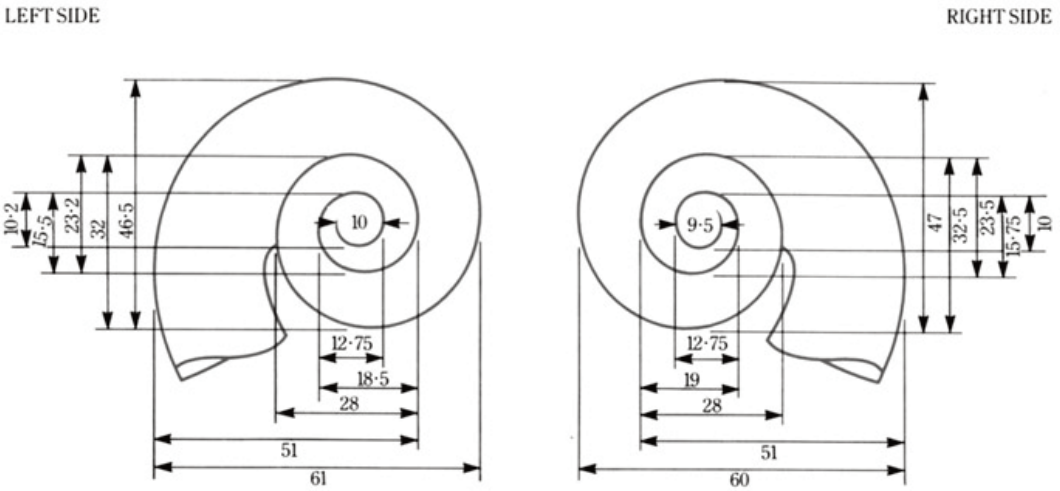
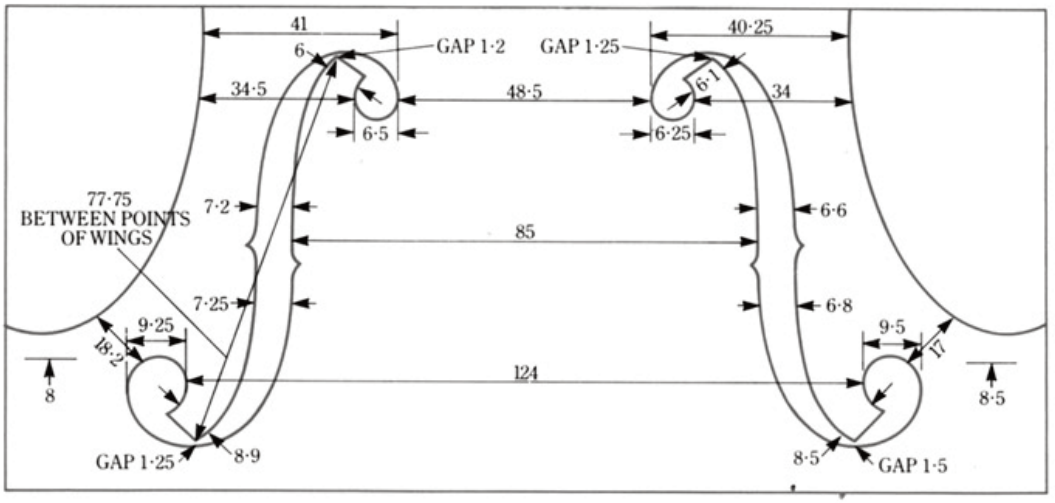
2·25
2·25
2·1
2




HEAD AND PEGBOX
16
LEVEL WITH THE TOP OF EYE
50·5
27
LEVEL TO CENTRE OF EYE
22·1
21·1
126
22·25
LEVEL WITH CENTRE OF EYE
12
6
6
29
30
31·4
29
36


LEFT SIDE
RIGHT SIDE
10·2
15·5
23·2
32
46·5
10
12·75
18·5
28
51
61
9·5
47
32·5
23·5
15·75
10
12·75
19
28
51
60


41
6
GAP 1·2
GAP 1·25
40·25
34·5
48·5
6·1
34
6·5
6·25
77·75
BETWEEN POINTS
OF WINGS
7·2
6·6
85
7·25
6·8
9·25
18·2
9·5
17
8
124
8·5
GAP 1·25
8·9
8·5
GAP 1·5