

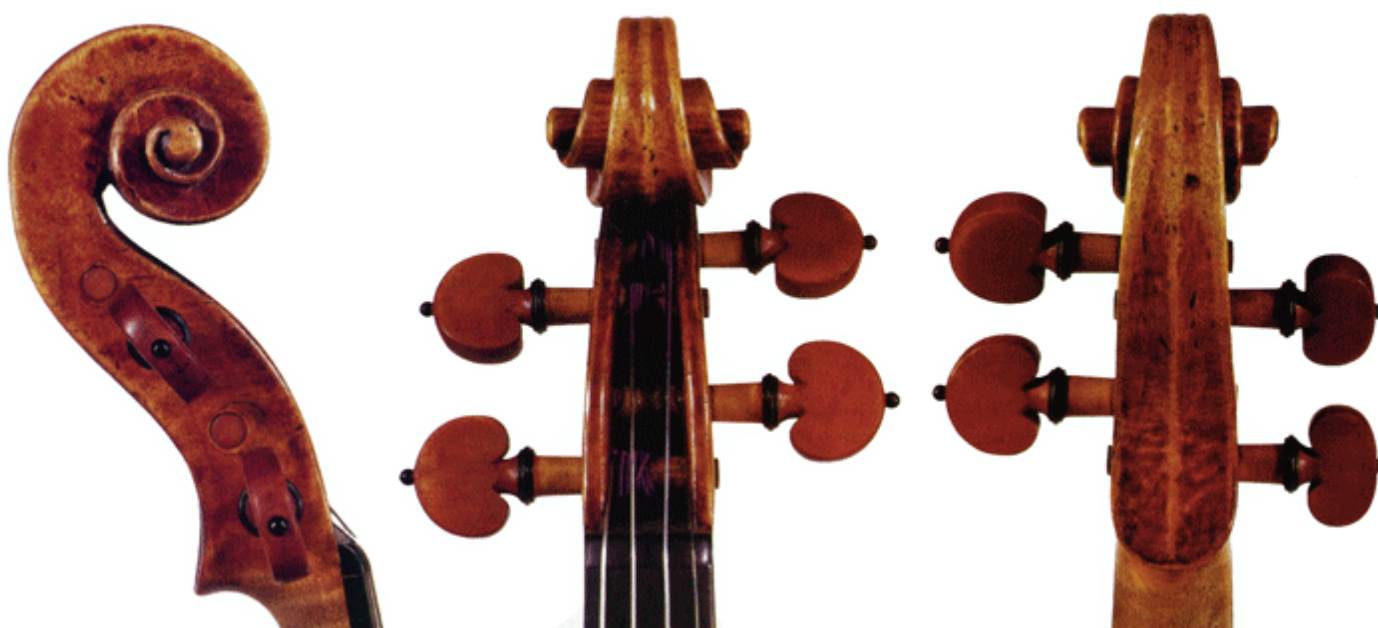
# Seeking Mrs Guarneri

**Last month Roger Hargrove asked whether the painter Sofonisba Anguissola was involved with Amati's great Charles IX instruments. Now he reassesses another forgotten woman of Cremona, Katarina, the wife of 'del Gesu'**

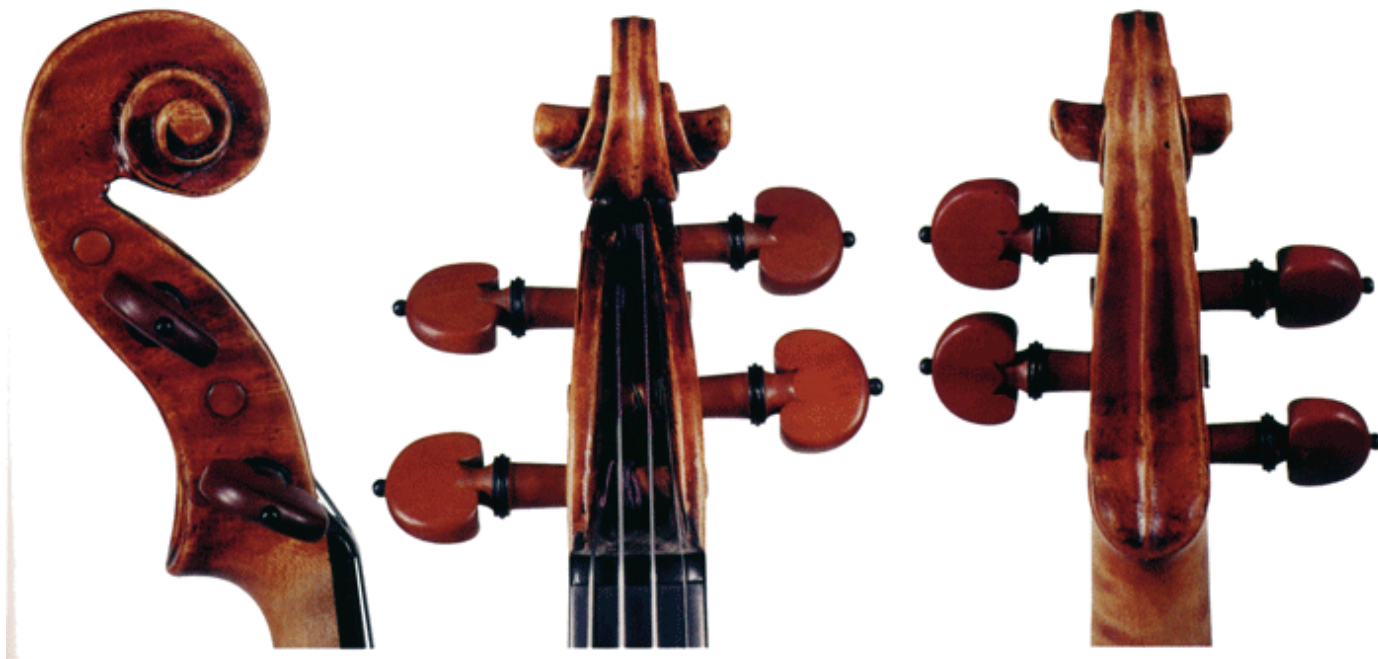
Accounts handed down from Carlo Bergonzi II, the grandson and namesake of the great violin maker and contemporary of Giuseppe Guarneri del Gesu', imply that the wife of 'del Gesu' assisted him in his work. Most sources have paid scant attention to this, since many of Bergonzi's opinions have been contradicted by subsequent research. Nevertheless, although not giving her name, Bergonzi correctly reported that she was of foreign birth.

In fact, Katarina Rota was born in Vienna between 1699 and 1701 and died sometime after 1748. Although her father is mentioned in some documents, her parents had both died by the time of her marriage. She is likely to have arrived in Cremona with

the Imperial Austrian army, which was stationed in Cremona from 1707 onwards. On several documents Katarina's first name was Italianised to Catarina and her family name was sometimes recorded as Roda. She was known as Catarina Guarneri after her marriage in 1722 to Giuseppe Guarneri 'del Gesu'. After her second marriage she was probably known as Katarina Horak. It is Katarina's marriage to 'del Gesu', however, which has recently created so much interest in this virtually unknown woman. A Florentine connoisseur, Giovanni de Piccolellis, mentions a 'Caterina Guarnieri' who is said to have assisted the Guarneris, and who was known for the manuscript labels found in her violins. Nearer to our time but, crucially, before the identity of the wife of 'del Gesu'



The 'Plowden' of 1735. Its head is considered typical of Giuseppe 'filius Andrea' Guarneri, with its heavy, 'comma' eye and Stradivarian throat work of 'del Gesu' himself



ABOVE the 'Leduc', posthumously labelled 1745. Even the deliberately abraded surface does not detract from the delicacy and flair of the form: assumed to be the work of 'del Gesu' himself

was known Horace Petherick's account of the maker's life contains the following speculation and discovery:

Whether Joseph Guarnerius at any time made violas and violoncellos is an inquiry often made without eliciting a satisfactory reply. With regard to the viola there is what might be referred to as indirect evidence. Some years back, when in London, I was informed of a viola which might interest me, and being in the neighbourhood my informant kindly sent for it, and I was able to examine it. The ticket inside in legible characters was as follows:

KATARINA GUARNERIA FECIT

CREMONE ANNO 1749 I.H.S

A continental dealer who happened to be present said that he had met with two violins abroad with similar tickets, and having a fine tone.

Although Petherick is not always reliable, remarkably, and very convincingly, he records the name Guarneri in its female form and Katarina in its Germanic form (the Italian version would have been Catarina) although he can only speculate as to her identity. He also revealingly states that such labels were known to the violin dealer present at the time. Unfortunately, if such labels existed the likelihood is

that they were removed from the instruments in which they were found, effectively obscuring any contribution that Katarina may have made to violin making.

Another source who has not always proved accurate, Karel Jalovec, mentions in his *Italian Violin Makers* a 'Catarina Guareneri' who, he says, died in 1658. Unfortunately, he goes on to suggest that she was the sister or student of Giuseppe and Pietro Guarneri, or the wife of one of them. Presumably these were Giuseppe 'filius Andrea' Guarneri, born after 1658, and Pietro Guarneri of Mantua, born in 1655. He records the sale of a viola labelled 'Cat. Guarneris' in Prague in 1912 for the sum of 1,000 Austrian schillings. Unfortunately, with no further records of the sale it is impossible to tell if this viola was genuine or even the same as the one known to Petherick. It had been in the possession of a violin maker, B. Lantner of Prague. This was Bohuslav Lantner, who was the second of three generations of Lantner violin maker and dealers. Lantner was trained in Hamburg, Berlin and Dresden before taking over his father's business in Prague. He died in 1917.

In November 1999 I flew to Budapest to examine an instrument which was said to bear a label of Katarina Guarneri. The circumstances permitted me to study the violin for only 20 minutes and the poor light limited the success of the photos I took and the quality of the examination.





ABOVE various views of the Katarina label from the violin in Budapest. While the label seems not to be Cremonese, it begs the questions: was it copied from an original, now lost and if so, why?

The instrument itself turned out to be of little interest. Though such a short examination hardly permitted a definite conclusion, it is extremely doubtful that it was of Italian origin. However, its importance lay not in its substance but in its label.

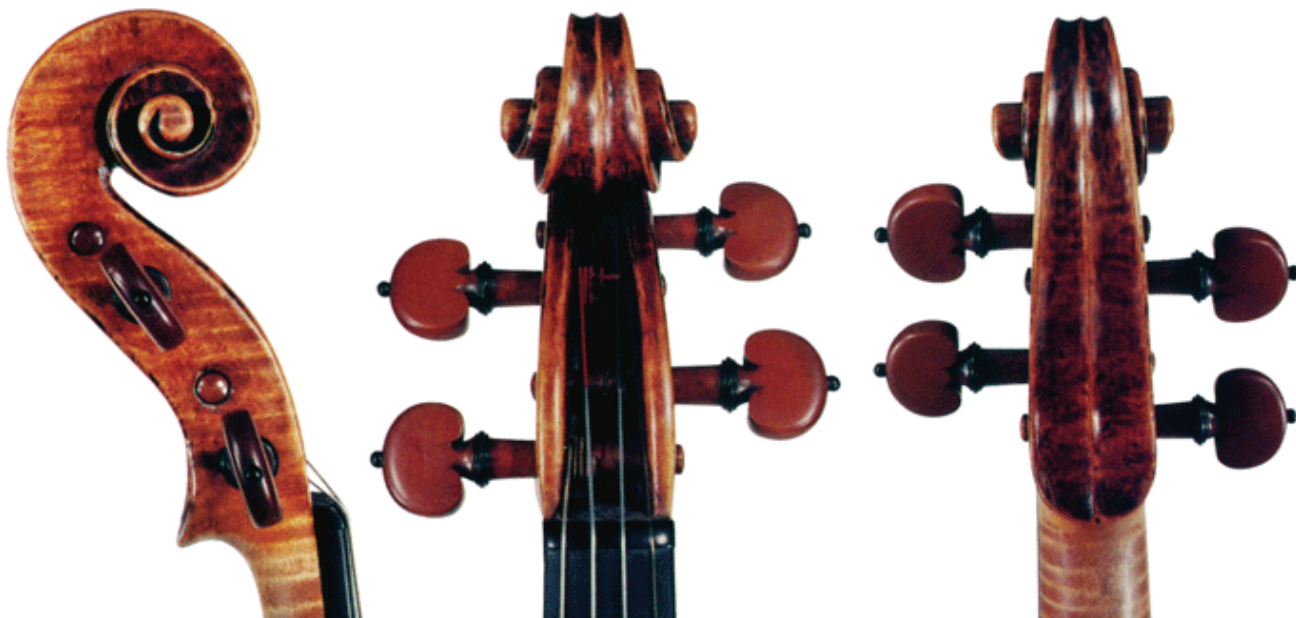
Viewed with a small inspection light, the label looked quite old and undisturbed, but it did not look Cremonese. The inside and the label were quite dirty, although the dirt appears to have been genuine and consistent with the condition of the outside of the violin. The wording was handwritten in a slightly faded black brown ink. It was written out in the style of a Cremonese printed label using similar letter styles. The date was also 'printed' in full. Although the first word, Katharina, was much obscured by dirt the rest of the label was clear to see. The complete label reads:

Katharina Guarneri  
fecit Cremone anno 1730.

There is a full stop after the date but no IHS logo. It is interesting that the name is not either as in Petherick's book or in any other reference known to me. It probably would have been correct if someone had been copying Petherick's statement of 1906.

Even though the label is probably a copy, the fact that someone made the effort to create such a label is in itself fascinating. Why not copy one of the established Cremonese masters? If the object of the label was to help with selling the instrument, then using such an unknown name would have been a fruitless exercise, and to compound the riddle this was the name of an unknown woman.

The puzzle about the 1730 label on the Budapest violin is its age. It appears to be many decades old and may even have been inserted before Petherick's original article appeared in *The Strad* in April 1905. However, if it had been copied from Petherick's article, most likely it would have had the same wording. If copied from an original, the date 1730 would have been only two years after Katarina's marriage to Giuseppe Guarneri 'del Gesu' in 1728. It has always been assumed that if Katarina had assisted her husband, it was towards the end of his life, or after his death. A 1730 date would suggest that she was working before the first surviving labels of 'del Gesu' in fact, at the time of his so called 'Nepos labels', which have now all disappeared. Instruments by both 'del Gesu' and his father Giuseppe 'filius Andrea' Guarneri



ABOVE the 1735 'King'. Is this the work of del Gesu, his father, both of them together or yet another hand? The tip of the chin has a distinctive compass pin hole

from this period are very rare and none have original labels.

Unusual variations in style, especially in a maker's late period, are routinely explained as the work of his sons or apprentices 'del Gesu' had neither. However some years ago, Charles Beare observed strong similarities between the heads of 'del Gesu' violins made in the first half of his independent working life, between 1731 and 1740, and those of the earlier instruments of his father. Possibly as a result of serious

illness, Giuseppe 'filius Andrea' appears to have retired from full time violin making in 1731, the date of his last known label. In spite of this illness, he lived until 1740, and during this time he probably returned to part time working, including making violin heads for his son 'del Gesu'. As a result of this stylistic evidence, and some circumstantial documentary evidence, it is now accepted that Giuseppe 'filius Andrea' contributed towards his son's production.

After the death of Giuseppe 'filius Andrea', Kata-



ABOVE The 'Cannon' of 1743'. Its bulbous form suggests a carver not fully comfortable with their tools. Is this Katarina's work, assisting after the death of her father in law'?



rina appears to be the only possible assistant to 'del Gesu'. After her husband's death in 144, it would have been quite natural for Katarina to continue working in the trade she knew. The comparatively early death of her husband left her alone and childless, with no other known means of support. Any partly finished instruments left in the workshop would have been an obvious source of income for her, even at the depressed values which Guarneri's work had at the time.

Most of the recent speculation about Katarina has centred around the idea that she helped her husband in his late period or that she completed a few left over bits and pieces. This theory is supported by the 1745 label in the 'Leduc' violin, dated posthumously, 'del Gesu' having died on 17 October 1744. The newly widowed Katarina remained in Cremona, at least until she re married on 28 April 1748. Her new husband was a Bohemian infantryman and it has been assumed that when his regiment left the city in July 1748, she did too. However, the 'Katarina Guarneria' label found by Petherick was dated 149, which appears to contradict that idea. It seems unlikely that 'del Gesu' would have left enough unfinished instruments to keep Katarina occupied for five years. The implication is that she was not only completing existing instruments but also building new ones.

The various reports, and the fact that details of Katarina's relationship to 'del Gesu' were unknown at the time of most of them, amount to extremely convincing, if circumstantial, evidence supporting the idea that Katarina was a working violin maker. Assuming that these instruments were made using her husband's tools and templates, this may explain some of the more unusual variations in what is considered to be his style, not to mention the dearth of authentic Giuseppe Guarneri labels. In fact, fewer than half 'del Gesu' instruments bear a genuine label.

Further questions arise over the heads of the instruments. There exists a small but significant number of 'del Gesu' heads which stylistically do not fit comfortably into either the father or son categories. In particular, the head of the 1735 'D'Egville' violin has details which imply that it may have been made by Giuseppe 'filius Andrea' and finished by 'del Gesu'. On a few of these atypical heads different working techniques have also been employed. Although having much in common with the Giuseppe 'filius Andrea' type heads, the heads of the 'Haddock' (1734) and 'King' (1735) are very wide at both the chin and the nut, and the fluting over the top of these heads

has been formed with a knife rather than a rasp. In my opinion, such heads may prove, at least in part, to be the work of yet another pair of hands. In Cremona at the time of the Classical makers, it is highly likely that various parts of the violin were prepared in batches. This may have been done by the masters themselves, by one of their colleagues or by apprentices. It would certainly have made perfect workshop management sense. Unlike f holes and purfling, heads could have been completed separately, perhaps even away from the main workshop by some unknown outworker, a common enough practice elsewhere. Although it is unlikely that 'del Gesu' could have afforded outside help, the idea of batches of heads makes sense, even in his tiny workshop.

There is a further, even more enigmatic group of 'del Gesu' heads. These belong to the period 1741-3, represented by the 'Carrodus' and the 'Cannon', both of 1743. They are characterised by their heavy, almost bulbous form. In spite of some similarities these heads are obviously different from the two main forms of 'del Gesu' head, thought to have been produced by the master himself with, or without, his father. In particular, because of their late date and several stylistic details, the instruments in this third group are unlikely to have been the product of the father of 'del Gesu'.

In the first instance, these bulbous heads cannot remotely be described as dainty, a description which more or less applies to the earlier 'Dancila' (c.1727), the 'Lord Wilton' (1742), and even the more extreme eccentricities of the 'Leduc' (1745). Furthermore, the second turns of the 'Cannon' are more prominent when viewed from the front, whereas the eye is considerably less so. From the back the final turns of the volute do not fall away as steeply. The chamfers are more heavily applied and the throat is constricted rather than exaggeratedly open. The throat also points backwards into the turns of the scroll, rather than downwards into the pegbox. However, regardless of the various similarities and differences in execution, it is the overall impression that these heavier scrolls convey which convinces me of their singularity. In spite of the wild nature of such heads as the 'Doyen' (1744), the 'Ole Bull' (1744) and the 'Leduc', these are obviously the work of someone who knows their tools and their goal. They are lightweight and freely carved. The same cannot be said for the heads of the 'Carrodus' and 'Cannon',

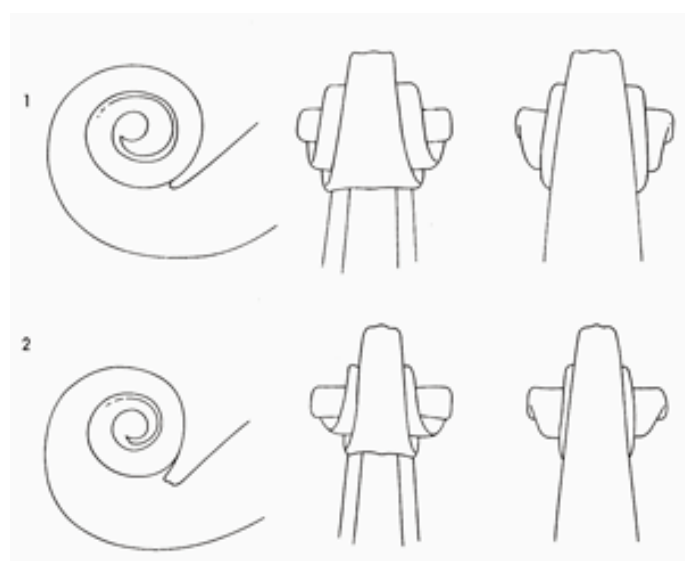
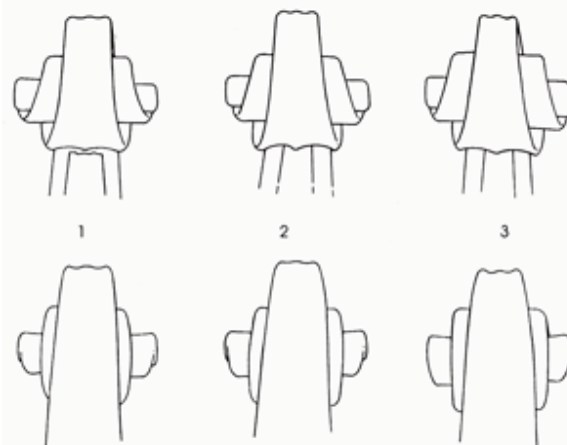
which give the impression of an unsure hand and eye. They are not ponderous for aesthetic reasons, but because the carver has not known when to stop, and has therefore simply stopped too soon – not an unusual feature of any artisan's first steps in a new direction. There may well be other explanations for the appearance of these heads, but they are certainly no more convincing than the idea that Katarina was

lending a hand.

Unfortunately for Katarina, speculation, however interesting, is largely fruitless without firm consensus or further documentary evidence. For the violin connoisseur, this inevitably means the presence of an undisturbed, original label. Authentic labels are the key to every decision made about an instrument's provenance. The only chance that her name will be recognised is if a violin with a genuine label emerges in the future. The fact that the various historic reports concern a woman maker may add considerably to their appeal, but they must remain unproven for the time being. I live in hope. P.

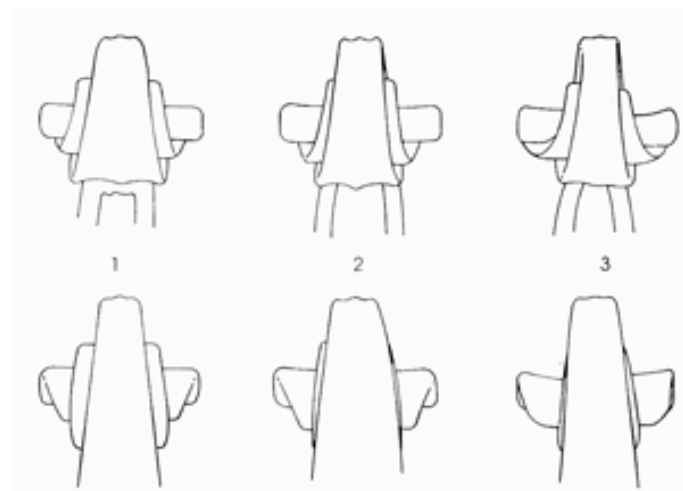
### The enigmatic heads of 'del Gesu' violins

1. heavier form, origin unknown. 2. lighter form, attributed to 'del Gesu'. Both c.1743 There are several heads on violins of 'del Gesu' which display slightly different characteristics. These heads may be the work of both father and son, or they may be the work of another hand. The most enigmatic of these are the heads represented by the 1743 'Cannon' (p.955). These are characterised by their heavy, almost bulbous, form. They appear to be hesitant in execution, as if made by someone unfamiliar with scroll carving, someone unsure of how much wood to remove and who has therefore simply not removed enough. Compare the overall size, the turns of the volutes, the throats, the form of the eyes and second turns of the scrolls and the cut of the chamfers, with the lighter form, thought to be the work of 'del Gesu' himself.



The development of the type of head attributed to 'del Gesu' 1. c.1727 2. c.1742 3. c.1744. See also the 'Leduc' (p.951) There is a delicacy about the finish of those heads now attributed to 'del Gesu' himself. From the front the second turns of the volutes are rather narrower, especially so on the later heads. This leaves the eyes projecting widely, rather in the manner of Carlo Bergonzi. From the side, the turns are more open. The throat is generally open in finish and tends to drop straight down from the front of the scroll rather than following the line of the second turn. In fact, these are the only Cremonese scrolls which display this feature. The undercutting around the volute is generally deeper, and the eye smaller, with the last turn of the volute falling characteristically steeply away when viewed from the back. In complete contrast to the work of his father, the whole appears to have been finished with abrasives which obscure much of the workings. The chamfer is far more delicate and is perhaps the most important distinction between these scrolls and those of his father. It is quite clear that the slender chamfer of these scrolls was the final task of the carving process. The fluting and undercutting had already been taken right out to the edge, and the subsequent cutting of the chamfer dropped this edge slightly below the level of the central spine running between the flutings. Also in total contrast to the heads of Giuseppe 'filius Andrea', this group of heads all have an extremely dainty aspect. However, in spite of these obvious differences, even at their wildest, these heads, like those of his father, are cut with flair, confidence and total professionalism.

The development of the type of head attributed to Giuseppe 'filius Andrea' Guarneri 1. c.1720 2. c.1735 3. c.1738. See also the 'Plowden' (p.950) Giuseppe 'filius Andrea' Guarneri was one of the finest carvers of heads in the Cremonese tradition. He produced pleasingly sculpted heads, well poised and weighted and with a distinctive, heavy 'comma' form to the eye. Viewed from the side, the final turn of the scroll into the eye is tighter than that of his son. From the front and back the side turns are more prominent. The undercutting of the volutes is less deep. The throat, though not as cleanly executed, is more in the manner of Stradivari. The whole was finished off with a deft and broadly cut chamfer, which after 1710 he frequently picked out in black after the manner of Stradivari. Tool marks are clearly visible everywhere, giving the impression that the head was finished straight from the gouge rather than being scraped or abraded.



### EARLIER SOURCES ON KATARINA GUARNERI

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Rosengard, Wen. Biddulph (1998)

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Anthony Stradivari, The Celebrated Violin Maker, Francois Fetis. R. Cocks, London (1856)

Italian Violin Makers, Karel Jalovec. Artia Praha (1952)