

A peek into lutherie workshops around the world



LUTHIER

GRZEGORZ BOBAK

LOCATION

Nowy Targ, Poland

Nowy Targ is a small town between the Gorce and Tatra Mountains of southern Poland. There used to be a violin making college here, where my father Jan learnt the trade, and there are still many luthiers based here and in neighbouring Zakopane. Also, the forests around the town used to be a great source of wood for carving – until the 1980s, when the land was designated a national park. Jan set up the workshop in 1987 and I've been running the business since 1998. I've been working here with my father and brother Maciek since I finished my studies at the Chicago School of Violin Making.

Our workspace takes up a total of 60 sq m, divided into four rooms. There are three large south-facing windows, but we actually prefer not to have too much natural light from outside, particularly when doing fine, accurate carving. Using desk lamps allows us to see the instrument outlines and edges more clearly. That said, I have the bench in the window, on the left-hand side of the picture, while Jan has the one on the right.

There are several measuring tools on the board above Jan's bench, but to be honest, I'm pretty ambivalent about them. Obviously I make an effort to follow the relevant dimensions that determine the comfort of the musician, but I always say that my favourite device is the eye. I believe that the more a luthier makes use of a ruler, the more they're limiting themselves, especially in terms of style. It's how instruments can lose their distinctive character.

My favourite tool in the workshop is the knife on the left side of my bench. It feels like a direct extension of my hand; it gives me a sense of freedom as well as confidence. It also allows me to maintain precision in my craftsmanship while I keep my working speed relatively high. ●

INTERVIEW BY CHRISTIAN LLOYD

Nigel Kennedy has a house 50 miles from Nowy Targ and I've studied his 1735 'Lafont' Guarneri many times. I've been working on this copy for him for years. It's almost ready.



This is the seal of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which I started stamping on some of my instruments in 2000. One of these, made in America, was bought by a Belgian violist who concluded that the seal was left by overzealous customs officials. I didn't correct his mistake.

The viola I'm currently working on based on a Guarneri model and I think it's horribly ugly; the f-holes look like a run-over frog and the scroll appears more like ram's horns. I don't think I've ever seen a truly beautiful viola that also has a perfect sound.

Right Through the door on the right is our showroom, which tends to become cluttered very quickly with needless and bizarre objects. Consequently, we see our customers virtually anywhere but here.



I gave these wooden callipers to my dad a few years ago, with the words: 'Absolute accuracy and exact measurements are the key to Polish violin making' – mocking the Communist slogans of the 1960s and 70s, which he remembers well!

The aquarium is an essential part of the workshop! When I look at it I'm reminded of a song from the film *Arizona Dream*: 'The fish doesn't think, because the fish knows everything.'