AITCHISON MNATZAGANIAN

CELLO MAKERS RESTORERS & DEALERS

NEWS FOR CELLISTS FEBRUARY 2026

Montagnana calling

Our February article introduces Robin's latest cello model: the Farina Montagnana. Thanks to the generosity of Ilya Finkelshteyn and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Robin studied this unaltered Montagnana in preparation for leading the 2023 VSA Oberlin workshop cello making project. See pages 2-3 for an insight into this glorious cello.

See you at King's Place! BVMA Makers' Day, 8 February

We'd love to see you at King's Place, 90 York Way, London N1 on Sunday 8 February when we take part in the BVMA Makers' Day. Come to Table 47 where you'll be able to try a good selection of Robin's Stradivari, Montagnana and Guadagnini models. Entrance is free, and the event lasts from 10:30 to 17:30.

Instagram Videos

We're enjoying making weekly videos for sharing on Instagram and Facebook, to give an insight into different aspects of cello making life, whether cooking Strasbourg turpentine in the garden or dabbing a solution of walnut crystals onto an unsuspecting cello front. Feel free to follow **aitchisoncellos** on either platform.

Alan Stevenson

We know that thousands of cellists across the world will be deeply saddened to learn of Alan Stevenson's passing. Alan told us several years ago that he had handed over his 50 year old cello and bass case making business to his long-term colleagues, Neil and Mark Haynes, who are as busy as ever, making new cases and caring for existing owners, but we had no idea that Alan was unwell. We were lucky enough to get to know Alan over the years – living close to Norwich meant that Alan and his wife Sara dropped in to see us and we had the delight and stimulation of their company as well as Alan's unforgettable stories. Alan was a very modest man, so we only learned recently that his first training was as an architect. He then became co-principal bassist in the CBSO where he met his cellist wife Sara, and where he decided that touring bassists and cellists needed better travel cases. His architectural training and 3D imagination must have been the bedrock of the inspiration behind his revolutionary fibreglass and carbon fibre cases which over the last 50 years have protected many of the world's fine cellos and basses and will continue to do so long into the future.

We learned about Alan's earliest stress test for a prototype case: dropping his own bass, in his newly designed case, onto concrete from a height of about 8 feet, alarming a specially invited group of colleagues who witnessed the fact that his bass remained intact inside the dropped case. We listened to his impassioned descriptions of the fine cellos he'd encountered and protected over the years, but he was just as pleased to make a case for one of Robin's instruments as he was for a Strad, for to him, every cello or bass was precious whether acoustic, electric or made from carbon fibre. And he was also dedicated to maintaining his cases in the best condition, always relieved when there was an opportunity to repair a busy soloist's case.

Nothing was good enough, precise enough, for him. He had tremendous drive and never let anything go, always trying to make the cases better. His patience, and that of his wife Sara, never ceased to amaze us. And when we carried out an extensive cello case survey, the answer was unequivocal: more cellists trusted and valued their Stevenson case than any other. Owners' stories abound, including the one of the cello trapped in a car that was washed away in a flash flood. Amazingly, the cello remained perfectly dry and unharmed in its Stevenson case.

Although his work lives on, and new cases are being made each week in Norwich, there will never be another case maker like Alan – the combination of his love for music and instruments, his design genius, modest dedication, absolute sincerity and honesty made him utterly irreplaceable.

MONTAGNANA CALLING: THE FARINA MODEL

If you've ever heard Ralph Kirschbaum perform live, you'll have experienced the rare depth and beautiful tone colours of a Montagnana cello which has not been reduced from its original size, as well as the amazing musical sound world of this great maestro and his long partnership with the instrument.

In the early days of cello making, most cellos were much larger than their modern descendants, as they were created to play a simple, un-virtuosic bass line and used plain gut strings. As repertoire evolved and players required instruments which were easier to play and had better treble response, so Cremonese makers like Stradivari, Guarneri and Rugeri developed smaller models which used metal wound lower strings. Meanwhile, in Venice, Montagnana and others were making cellos in a variety of sizes which were typically broader and more flamboyant in outline than the Cremonese models.

Most of the larger cellos built in the 17th & 18th centuries were reduced in size by later luthiers, the majority during the 19th century, as players and luthiers sought to bring otherwise unusable instruments back into circulation, leaving a handful of instruments in their original dimensions, some of which are preserved in museums and just a few special cases still in artistic use. Were these instruments simply lucky to have evaded surgery, or is there something special about the way they were made which meant that their owners never wanted to 'standardise' their dimensions?

We were lucky enough to hear Ralph Kirschbaum play his mighty Montagnana at a rehearsal for the London Cello Society's 'Glories of Venice' event in November 2018. It was a movingly beautiful and formative experience for Robin. Ever since hearing Ralph play, Robin hoped to make this remarkable palate of colours available to other cellists by developing a workable, large Montagnana cello model.

When Robin was asked to consider leading the 2023 VSA Oberlin cello project, he was excited to learn from a colleague about the existence of a Montagnana cello in Cincinnati which might serve as a model for the program. Most significantly, it had escaped the knives and saws of earlier generations and retains its original dimensions.

The 'Farina' Montagnana was once owned and played by the British cellist May Mukle and is now played by Ilya Finkelshteyn, principal cellist of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra (CSO). When Robin visited Ilya during the Oberlin program, he was struck by the Farina's bold asymmetry and its colourful, textured varnish. When he heard it played by Ilya, he realised what an ideal subject it would be for the project.

Tonally, it's an exceptional instrument. Ilya describes it as having both the depth and resonance of a Montagnana and the 'sizzle' of a Strad. Ilya believes that the cello's rich tonal presence has transformed the bass sound of the CSO. The joy of the Farina cello is its capacity to produce beautiful dark colours and resonance throughout all registers and yet be drawn into projecting brilliance, whenever the player wishes.

Ilya and the CSO kindly agreed for Robin to measure and scan the cello in preparation for the Oberlin project. Robin flew out to Cincinnati in February 2023 for two days of detailed measuring during a period when Ilya could spare the cello and Benjamin Ruth, project co-principal, could join him. Thanks to the support of radiologist Steve Sirr, a Cincinnati hospital agreed to carry out a full CT scan on the cello. Robin and Ilya took the cello into the scanning suite, carefully removed the set up and endpin and watched the cello disappear into the giant 'polo mint' of the scanner. Just minutes later, the cello reappeared on its sliding bench and Robin replaced the set up – and Ilya played the cello immediately, to make sure he was still happy with the adjustment.

The CT scan provided some interesting clues to understanding how it is that the Farina is such a well-

functioning modern instrument. The answer is the low density of the wood selected for the cello, combined with its unusually thick ribs (see Robin's detailed scan report in the box opposite).

On his return from Cincinnati, Robin went through his wood stock. He found that he already had some wood well suited to the Farina model. So he could relax in the knowledge that he has the ideal wood for copies of the Farina for years to come. That spring, he embarked on his first copy of the cello in preparation for the Oberlin workshop, when he would co-ordinate a large group of cello makers building a copy 'in the white' in just two weeks.

Robin took his first Farina copy to Oberlin in June 2023. Ilya and his wife kindly visited early in the program, and Ilya performed both on Robin's copy, and the original, so that everyone could hear the quality of sound they would be working towards.

After the 2023 Oberlin project, Robin had a series of commissions to complete, but last summer he had time to finish the antiquing and evolve the set-up of his own Farina copy. This cello has proved a great success, both visually and tonally. We will bring it to King's Place on 8 February along with a selection of other Montagnana, Stradivari and Guadagnini copies.

If you'd like to try the Farina copy in Ely, just drop us a line and we will find a convenient time for you to visit.

Farina Montagnana video:

Ilya performs from the first Bach unaccompanied Suite 14 minutes and 40 seconds into this interview:
www.pbs.org/video/ilya-finkelshteyn-phe9uu/

Farina Montagnana articles:

The Full Monty by Robin Aitchison; The Strad Magazine November 2023 pp.38-43

Ilya Finkelshteyn: Playing the Domenico Montagnana 'Farina' cello 1730 by Christian Lloyd. Ilya Finkelsteyn describes playing the Farina in an online Strad Magazine feature 26 June 2025. Also included in the following article:

Power and Majesty article by John Waddle and Steve Sirr The Strad Magazine July 2025 pp.24-30.

The Strad Farina Montagnana poster was published in July 2025. www.thestradshop.com/store/

May Mukle (1880-1963) playing her cello

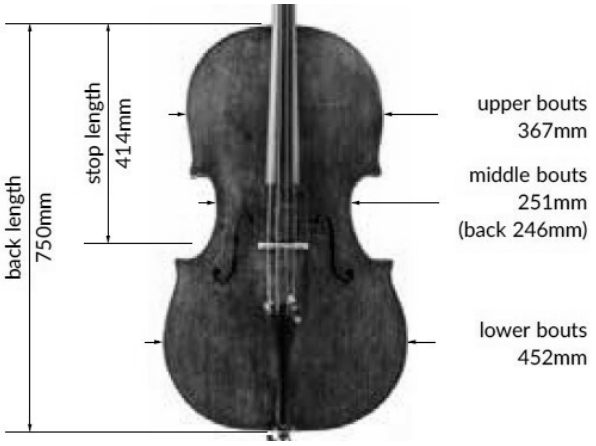
3D print of Farina made for us by Dr Harry Mairson

The CT scan *density estimates revealed that the front is light at 0.36gms/cm3, while at 0.53gms/cm3 the wood of the maple back and ribs is exceptionally light.*

In terms of design, although the Farina is at the larger end of the spectrum of surviving un-cut down Montagnana cellos, the width across the C bouts is fairly moderate and the transition at the upper corners adds significant structural stiffness.

But the biggest surprise of the measuring process was discovering that the Farina cello has very thick ribs: 2.0-2.5mm! According to all received wisdom, thick cello ribs are bad for sound. However, in this case, combined with the light wood and other vibrational freedoms inherent to the model, we believe that these thick ribs contribute to the stiffness of the cello body in an entirely positive way.

Farina Montagnana dimensions



CELLOS & BOWS FOR SALE

WILLIAM FORSTER CELLO c.1770

Length of back: 738mm String length: 670mm

£87,500

An elegant cello by William Forster with a complex, rich tone and very good projection. Fully restored. Labelled internally.
Beare receipt.

BETTS CELLO c.1810

Length of back. 730mm String length: 679mm

£78,000

A fine cello from the Betts workshop, showing the hand of Fendt Snr. In excellent condition, this cello has a rich, broad and satisfying tone and quick response.
Beare certificate.

'FARINA' MONTAGNANA COPY 2024

Length of back 750mm String length: 699mm

£42,000

A close copy of the 'Farina' Montagnana cello made from the finest materials and with antiqued dark red varnish. The tonal range extends from a broad, generous bass to a colourful treble.

AITCHISON GUADAGNINI COPY

Length of back 715mm String length: 668mm

£42,000

A recently completed copy of an exquisite Milan period Guadagnini cello, with exciting tonal qualities, powerful projection and a characteristically quick response.

DAVID RUBIO BAROQUE CELLO

Length of back: 708mm String length: 670mm

Price on application

This beautiful Guadagnini copy was commissioned by Anthony Pleeth in 1979 and played throughout his celebrated career.

PETER WAMSLEY CELLO c.1735

Length of back: 758mm String length: 690mm

£27,000

A good example of the later work of Peter Wamsley with a rich, warm, colourful tone and a crisp, satisfying, response.

C & S THOMPSON CELLO 1786

Length of back: 750mm String length: 683mm

£25,000

This beautiful cello has a deep, golden tone. The condition is very good. The cello still has its original neck, so would be ideal for early repertoire.

THOMAS PRESTON c.1790

Length of back: 742mm String length: 684mm

£25,000

A handsome English cello of great character, made for the shop of Thomas Preston (d.1834) with a lively, even and colourful tone.

SELECTED CELLO BOWS			
Morgan Andersen	83.0	G	£10,500
Hans Karl Schmidt	82.4	G	£10,500
Gregor Walbrodt	81.8	S	£5,500
Tino Lucke	83.4	S	£5,300
William Watson	83.5	G	£5,000
Mark Yakoushkin	85.0	S	£4,500
Richard Grünke	80.0	G	£4,250
Eric Lane	82.0	S	£4,230
John Aniano	85.0	S	£4,230
Bernd Etzler	83.0	S	£4,000
Brian Alvey	81.5	S	£4,000
Mark Drehmann	82.0	S	£3,660
Bernd Etzler	81.2	S	£3,200
Didier Claudel	82.5	S	£3,000
Klaus Grünke	80.8	S	£2,950
David Tempest	82.6	S	£2,950
Klaus Grunke	80.8	S	£2,920
Andrew McGill	83.7	S	£2,500
Roderich Paesold	81.5	S	£1,800
J R Silva	81.9	S	£1,550
M Francisco	82.3	S	£1,550
Valdecir	79.0	S	£1,400
J Fornaciari (Ipe wood)	81.0	S	£1,250
V Grippa (Ipe wood)	81.1	S	£1,250
S Trindade (Ipe wood)	80.0	N	£1,075

Please see our website for cello recordings and photographs.