

# Newsletter

of the British Violin Making Association

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*Medal-winning Viola  
by Ulrich Hinsberger*

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# 1<sup>ST</sup> Chinese Violin-Making Competition

## Mittenwald tutor Ulrich Hinsberger shares his shock at winning gold

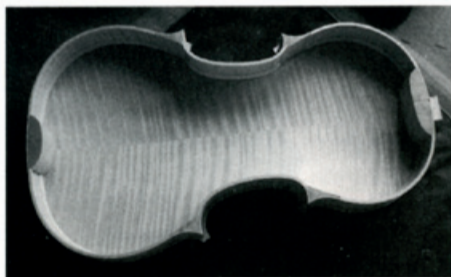
I studied violin-making in Mittenwald for three and a half years before working in the workshop of Peter Benedek in München for a year and in the workshop of Martin Koch-Löbner in Tübingen for a further two years. Then I took my masters degree in Nüremberg in 1993 and won my first competition with the instrument I made there. After that I set up a workshop with my wife Dagmar, who is also a violin-maker, in Biberach in southern Germany. We have two boys and two girls and work from our house which dates from 1834. As well as making new instruments, we also offer services such as repairs, strings and cases. I am lucky to have the opportunity to work undisturbed on new instruments, being located in the countryside with my wife and an able assistant to look after customers! I usually only make two to three instruments per year because, since 2001, I have been teaching at the Violin Making School in Mittenwald. Teaching is very important to me because I want to share my knowledge. I have also learned a lot through my students. In India there is a saying which says the teacher and student together create the teaching process and that is exactly how I feel. So there is usually a small waiting list of customers. When the order list allows I like to make two violins or violas followed by a cello.

### Entering the Competition

I chose to enter the First China Violin-Making competition, quite simply,

because I saw a flyer in the school at Mittenwald and thought it would be a good idea. And, of course, I found ironic pleasure in imagining winning as a European. But I thought it would be impossible because of the many great violin-makers in China. In a funny way, it seemed a way for me to respond to China's great expansion.

The violin and viola which I entered into the competition belong to a quartet of instruments which I constructed after the drawing method of Francois Denis. They are modelled on Stradivari, not on a particular instrument but after the moulds "Forma P". The archings of the violin were made after beautiful casts from a 1714 Stradivari, "the Dolphin".



*The gold-winning violin being made*





*Ulrich's bronze-medal winning viola*

The viola was an attempt to take the P-Form and scale it up but this wasn't very successful. Although I really loved the aesthetics, the viola was not broad enough, especially the lower bouts, to create the right sound. I knew this before the competition. The workmanship on the viola achieved the highest score in its category but its quality of sound cost me a further gold medal and I was awarded bronze. I chose to enter these instruments because I had just finished them and they were the only ones I had available. I was, however, satisfied with them which is rarely the case – my wife says I am never satisfied with my work!

Technical information	Violin	Viola
Body length	354mm	414mm
Upper bouts	168mm	197mm
Middle bouts	108mm	130mm
Lower bouts	206mm	238mm
Vibrating string length	328mm	371.5mm
Arching height - belly	15.3mm	
Arching height - back	15.0mm	
Rib height lower and middle bout to upper corner blocks	32mm	
f-holes distance between upper eyes	39.5mm	

I did not go to China for the competition. If I had known that I had a chance of winning, I would have gone straight away! Neither did I take any proper photos of the finished violin! Both my postal application and fax went unanswered. The whole flow of information was quite poor. Without the help of a very helpful Chinese acquaintance, I would not have been able to enter the competition. But I don't wish to be critical because I have heard very good reports about the

organisation. Looking at the respected judging panel, the costly medals and the media coverage, I would say they did not spare any time, trouble or expense.

As I was not present, I cannot speak very much about the judging process but the rules were much the same as other international violin-making competitions. What I can tell you is that the judging panel was one of the best (or the best) I have known: Frank Ravatin, David Burgess, Gregg Alf, Gio Batta Morassi, Mingjiang Zhu and the President, Professor Zheng Quan, each of them great makers who have won many competitions themselves. If you look at the special exhibit of the 2010 VSA you will see that three of the judges, Gregg Alf, David Burgess, Frank Ravatin have the status of "hors concours" which means they have achieved at least three gold medals in VSA competitions. I don't know the names of those who judged the sound quality of the instruments except that they were professional and respected musicians.





*Ulrich's viola achieved the highest score in its category for workmanship*

### **Winning the competition**

I actually won two gold medals for my violin and a bronze medal for my viola. The second gold medal for the violin was the "special prize" for the best instrument across all categories although I still don't know exactly why my instrument was chosen. I was very surprised to win because of the large

number of entries (193 violins, 47 violas and 34 cellos). I was also surprised because the competition was being held in China and the violin market of the world seems now to be dominated by the Chinese and there have been many Chinese winners in recent international competitions.

The beautiful medals are carved from jade with a large gold inlay bearing a motif of violin scrolls and presented in a wooden box lined with yellow silk. On the rear, is the engraving for the award. I was able to hear my violin being played at the final concert of the competition through a video link which was sent to me. My violin was then exhibited in the "World-Exhibition" in Shanghai, but I'm not sure what has happened to it now. Like many competitions, the winner has to "sell" their violin to the organisers.



*Ulrich and the finished violin*

It was on a Saturday in May that I heard that I had won. I was cutting the grass when my wife tried to hand me my ringing mobile. I shook my head and signalled that I did not want to take the call. I normally switch off my mobile at weekends. I later listened to a message from my acquaintance who was in Beijing at the awards ceremony. It was he who had taken my instruments to Beijing. He also heard my name announced at the ceremony and accepted the medals on my behalf. He said: I have very good news for you! You won the gold medal for violin and bronze for viola, congratulations!" When I heard the message, I was in the kitchen and had to sit down. I was in shock and told my family. I remember their faces at my emotionless reaction. The news only

sank in when I read the results on the internet. Then we organised a party and celebrated with friends and the people I wanted to thank for my success.

The competition hasn't really made any difference to my life. I have won medals in other competitions before and, for a time, you feel elated. Some people say it will be good for business but I am still waiting for the orders to roll in! The difference is in the contacts it brings and the respect from colleagues which can open doors. I have been working with a group of violin-makers who have won several awards in competitions. We hold workshops together in France and in Mittenwald and enjoy sharing our knowledge. For me, it's great to work with and learn from such a great group of people.