

THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

Violin making is traditionally a solitary career, so why are so many luthiers and bow makers choosing to join collectives? **Peter Somerford** talks to the founders and members of such groups around the world to discover the benefits of pooling resources, knowledge and time



The atelier that forms the HQ of Paris-based collective CLAC contains a 'gallery' of members' instruments

Luthiers who work alone have many different ways of connecting with colleagues, from joining Facebook groups and participating in online forums to attending conferences and exhibitions and being active in professional associations. But being a solo maker can be isolating, and some of the business practicalities of working alone, of finding and renting a suitable workshop space, growing a client base, marketing, establishing contacts with dealers, and travelling to international fairs, can be time-consuming and expensive. Some makers have decided that forming collectives offers both social and commercial advantages. They've found that a small group of like-minded individuals can provide camaraderie and support, an environment for sharing knowledge and expertise, the drive to organise events, and the ability to pool resources, such as splitting the rent on a showroom, or sharing a workspace.

A strong sense of community was a priority for violin maker Melissa Collins, one of the founders of the Salt Lake City (SLC)

Violin Collective, a group of seven violin and bow makers who all graduated (though not in the same year) from the city's Violin Making School of America. The collective puts on instrument exhibitions at local art galleries, featuring demonstrations by professional musicians, and organises regular public forums to discuss technical aspects of making. 'The camaraderie is one of the best things about the collective,' says Collins. 'Making violins can often be quite isolating, so coming together for events and forums, connecting with the local string playing community, is very fulfilling on both a professional and social level. We also go up to the mountains usually once a year, to find trees for tonewood.'

'Especially now, with the Covid-19 situation, it's good to feel you are not alone,' says violin maker Youenn Bothorel, a member of the Collectif de Lutherie et d'Archèterie Contemporaines (CLAC). A group of nine violin makers and two bow makers, CLAC has members working across France and beyond – Bothorel is based in Dublin – but it has a permanent atelier in Belleville, Paris. This comprises a 'gallery'



Members of CLAC with the cello they made for the Philharmonie de Paris, based on a c.1710 Gofriller in the Musée de la Musique collection

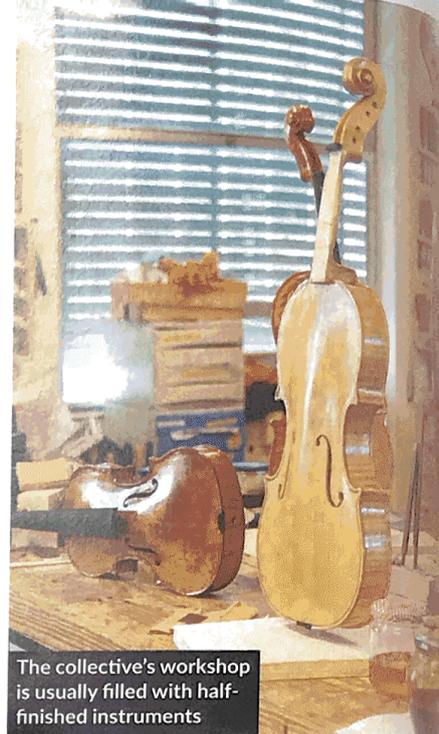
where musicians can come to test out instruments, and a small workshop for making sound adjustments. The members hold conference calls every two weeks to discuss various projects, and take it in turns to staff the Belleville atelier to welcome musicians by appointment. 'At the gallery, players can try out instruments one after another in a quiet setting without any pressure,' says violin maker and CLAC member Valentine Dewit, whose workshop is in Angoulême, south-west France. 'Customers have lots of choice, and we are all happy and proud to talk about the work of a colleague.' The atelier also serves as an informal meeting place for CLAC members.

Italian collective Liuteria Toscana goes a step further in having a large shared workspace in Florence, complete with a try-out room and storage space for a wide selection of instruments by members of the collective. Liuteria Toscana is composed of teachers and graduates of the nearby Scuola di Liuteria Toscana 'Fernando Ferroni', which was founded in 2014 by violin makers Fabio Chiari and Francesco Algeri.

M. GUTHREUND

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The Florence workshop serves as a base for Algeri, for Emanuele Abolaffio, a founder member of Liuteria Toscana and also its sales manager, and for British luthier Paris Andrew. But it also welcomes other members of the 19-strong collective, who drop in to use the benches, borrow tools, get advice or simply work alongside other people. 'Being surrounded by other luthiers is refreshing if you've only ever worked alone,' says Andrew. 'I can watch a master maker of 30 years' >



The collective's workshop is usually filled with half-finished instruments

experience working next to someone who's only recently graduated, sharing information and ideas. It's also very sociable. We share meals out and go on day trips together. It's a friendship group as well as a working environment.'

Collectives without a permanent showroom or dedicated auditioning space have turned to events and exhibitions to get members' instruments in front of musicians. On a different scale from the gallery shows in Salt Lake City are the festival-exhibitions that the Ekho collective has organised during the 2015, 2017 and 2019 editions of the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels. Currently a group of four Belgium-based violin makers and two France-based bow makers, supported by a lawyer and an administrator, Ekho was formed in 2014 with the aim of increasing the profile of contemporary making in Belgium. Ekho's Brussels events have exhibited instruments and bows by up to 50 makers, and included concerts, workshops, and masterclasses by the Danel and Zemlinsky quartets. The collective has also organised smaller exhibitions during music festivals.

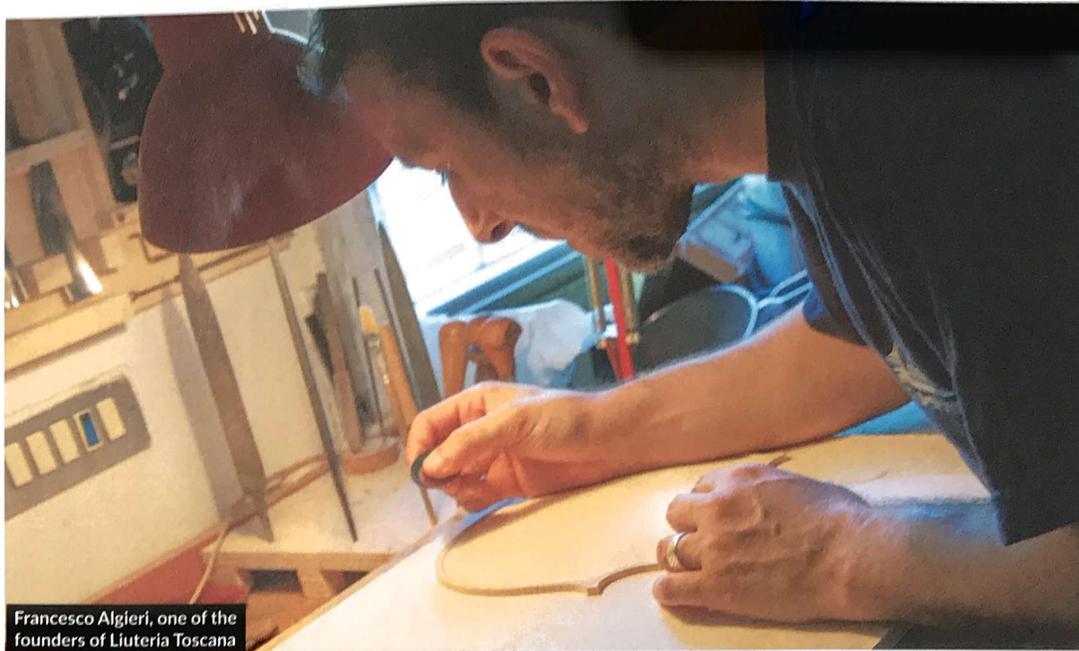
Ekho's president, violin maker Catherine Janssens, says that trust and integrity are key when representing colleagues' work at events: 'To be able to present work from other makers means they have to trust you. To give your work to someone else to show and sell, you really have to trust that person.' It's an attitude echoed by CLAC bow maker Marie Chastagnol, who says that a guiding business principle of the collective is: 'When selling an instrument or a bow, every member acts fairly, putting aside his or her own interests.'

Professional integrity and a sense that every maker shares similar values is something that CLAC and the SLC Violin Collective have formally enshrined in their organisations. The former created a charter when it formed three years ago, and the latter drew up a code of ethics, which is available on the group's website and includes a commitment to 'disclose final sale prices to all pertinent parties'. Violin maker and SLC Violin Collective member Jordan Hess says:

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'Communicating transparency to musicians is extremely important. The code of ethics was integral to forming the collective and remains very much a part of who we are. We spent a lot of time discussing it, and everyone brought their different perspectives to it. Collectively we were able to come up with a much more comprehensive code than any of us would have been able to on our own.'

This pooling of ideas is reflected in the sharing of knowledge and expertise, and in the principles of openness and exchange that underpin the collective model. The sharing is often informal, such as CLAC members interacting via phone, email and a dedicated online platform, and Liuteria Toscana's more experienced makers offering advice to younger members at the collective's shared workspace. The SLC Violin Collective takes a more formal approach with its technical forums, which the group has striven to open up to members of the public as well as students from the violin making school. Makers from the collective have given presentations on topics ranging from acoustic analysis and bridge tuning to varnishing and restoration techniques. 'The forums always open up discussion, and that's the best part about them,' says Hess. 'When I've presented, I've always felt like I came away with a lot more just from the discussion afterwards.'



Francesco Algeri, one of the founders of Liuteria Toscana

Besides the educational benefits, there are practical day-to-day advantages of being part of a collective, from pooling reference materials to sourcing and purchasing supplies and equipment. ‘We do group-buying of wood, tools, pegs, bridges and other accessories,’ says Liuteria Toscana’s Abolaffio. ‘It means our luthiers can get all these things at a good price, and we ensure constant availability, so they don’t have to source directly. If we sell instruments internationally, Liuteria Toscana will manage all the paperwork, customs and shipping, removing those administrative responsibilities from individual makers.’ CLAC shares resources such as instrument photos and posters. ‘We’re also working to make a collection of reference moulds and books available to every member,’ says Dewit.

If there is one activity for which a collective seems ideally suited, it is a group making project. CLAC members came together in January 2019 to make a cello for the Philharmonie de Paris based on a c.1710 Matteo Goffriller instrument in the collection of the Musée de la Musique. For Bothorel, the project encapsulated the collective’s spirit of openness and exchange: ‘It was an extremely rich experience. We had time working, eating and living together. We were able to study the original cello, and had access to the museum’s research lab. And because the making was done in public, we could share our work with a wider audience.’ The project had an additional, philanthropic dimension, with the cello set to be loaned to a talented young artist for two years. Members of the collective, including the two bow makers, have done other occasional collaborations, but don’t work on each other’s instruments. ‘We agreed not to touch one another’s work,’ says Chastagnol, ‘except when a string needs changing or pegs greased. Every maker has their own technique, their personal approach, and we all respect that.’

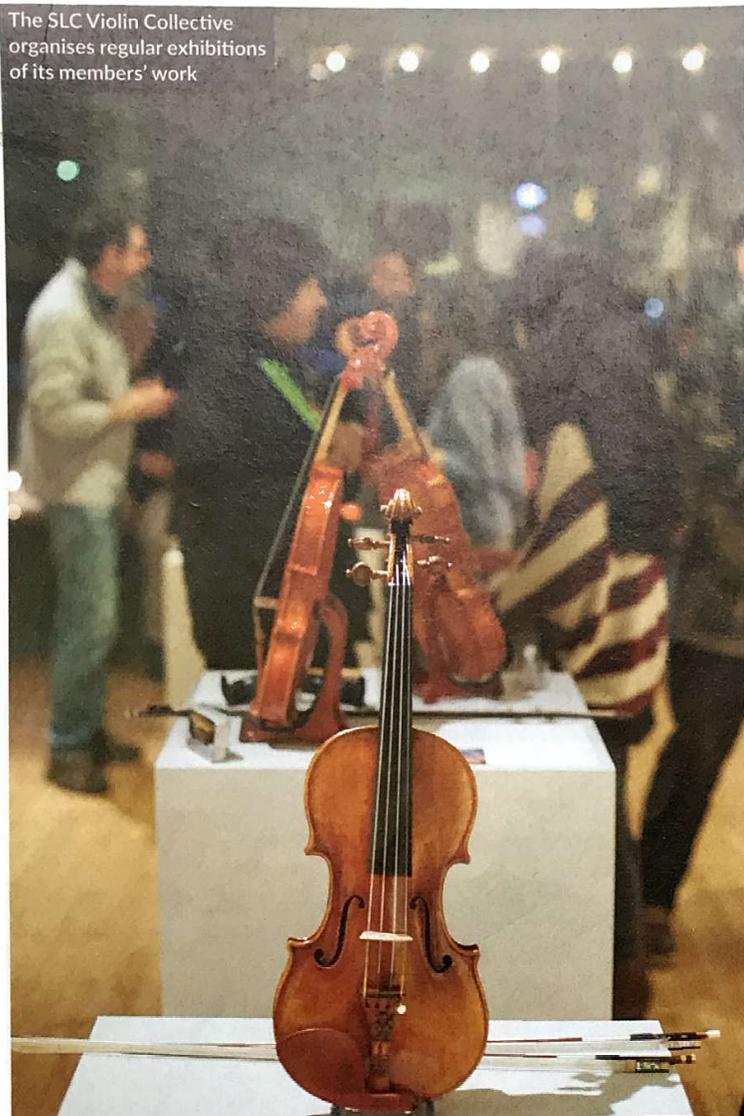
Beyond public events and exhibitions that generate interest in members’ work, and a centralised gallery or atelier that makes it easier for musicians to try a wide range of instruments in one place, the business focus of a collective can include growing an



Paris Andrew works on a violin back

international presence, as evidenced by Abolaffio’s sales role at Liuteria Toscana. ‘An individual luthier cannot afford to have a stall at every major trade fair around the world,’ says Abolaffio. ‘It’s not just expensive but it also takes time away from making. With a dedicated sales manager, the collective can be represented at all the international shows, we can visit dealers abroad, and meet overseas musicians.’ The size of the group also means that Liuteria Toscana can offer services such as rentals and instalment-based payment plans of the kind that clients might expect of full-scale shops. ▸

The SLC Violin Collective organises regular exhibitions of its members' work

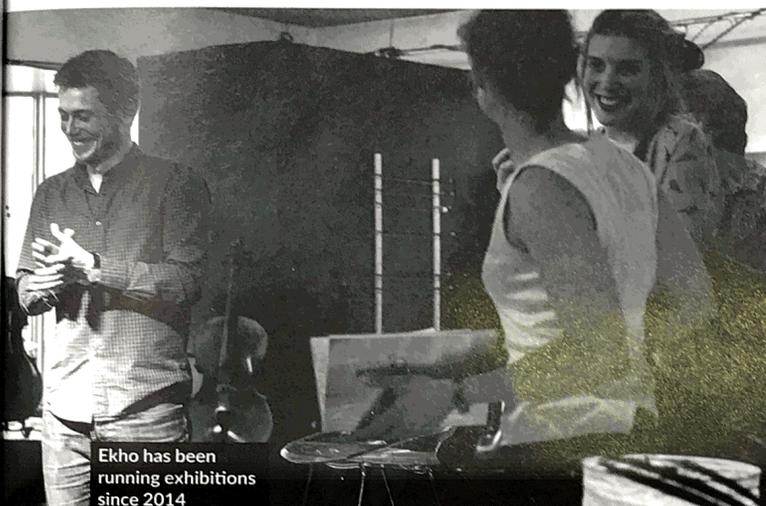
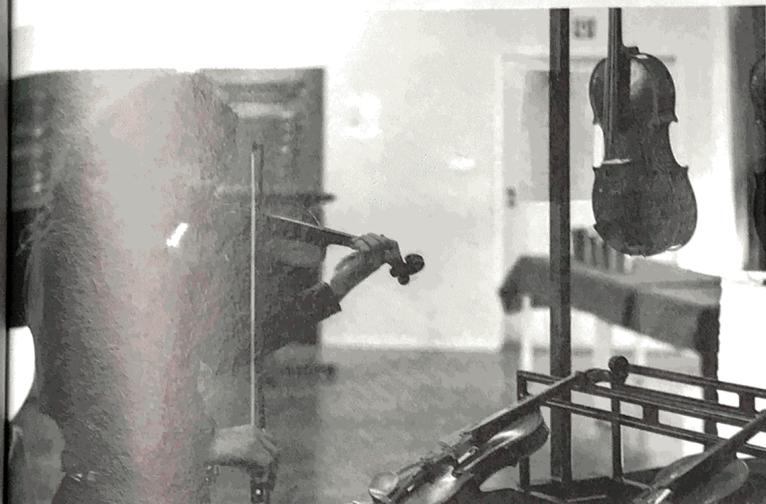


'IN A COLLECTIVE, YOU HAVE TO HAVE 100 PER CENT BUY-IN FROM EVERY MEMBER TO BE SUCCESSFUL'
 – ALFRED RORDAME,
 SLC VIOLIN COLLECTIVE

Smaller collectives demand commitment from each member, with makers sharing responsibilities for organising and publicising events, forums or exhibitions. Establishing a collective in the first place warrants careful planning and attention to detail, says Bothorel of CLAC. 'When we first started meeting together, there was a lot to discuss about our legal status, the technicalities of our association, insurance, and so on. That all took a lot of time.' Violin maker Alfred Rordame, a member of the SLC Violin Collective, says: 'In a collective, you have to have 100 per cent buy-in from every member to be successful. In a way it's the most difficult organisational structure you could possibly have, but we think that it can be very effective.'



On top of the time commitment, members may find themselves putting money into the collective without getting any direct financial benefit. As Dewit puts it, 'I spend more being a part of CLAC than I've earned out of it, but then I've gained in many other ways.' Ekho's major exhibitions require a financial outlay as well as a significant time investment, says Janssens. 'For years, we didn't earn any money putting on these exhibitions because all the benefits went back into organising more. Now, when we sell instruments, we take a commission of between 10 and 20 per cent. This money goes into the Ekho funds, and we don't pay ourselves anything. But indirectly we achieve a bigger profile as makers because more people encounter our work.'



Ekho has been running exhibitions since 2014



A collective must also decide how, or if, it wants to grow. It may have specific membership requirements that limit numbers, or levels of experience. Contrast Liuteria Toscana, where graduates of the Florence school are immediately offered membership of the collective – apprenticeship opportunities in Italy are rare, notes Abolaffio – with the SLC Violin Collective, which requires prospective members to have at least one year's experience working in a shop. 'We would love to see people who come out of the Violin Making School of America join us,' says Rordame, 'but not just as a de facto, automatic graduating move. We would be more like an alumni club then.' A practical reason for not growing too big, says CLAC's Bothorel, is simply to keep a strong team who get on well together, and not introduce competing personalities. He jokes: 'We want to continue our conference calls, which can be argumentative enough as they are!' More seriously, Bothorel suggests that collectives should consider the diversity of their make-up: 'We felt from the start that it was important to include both men and women makers.' He adds that having two bow makers in the collective is another important element of diversity, although Dewit says she would appreciate one or two more bow makers joining the team.

Avoiding any sense of hierarchy in a collective is also important. This is easy enough when all the members are

around the same age and experience level, but what if makers are at very different stages of their careers, like in Liuteria Toscana? 'As people, we are all on the same level,' stresses Abolaffio. 'If I have questions about making I naturally go to the master luthiers rather than the recent graduates, but the masters don't impose aesthetic choices.' Andrew adds: 'There are no rules. We are very free in our individual styles, and we're encouraged to go in our own direction.' Personal reputations can grow within the collective, she argues, while at the same time the collective serves to uphold standards across the whole group. 'No instrument is put up for sale until it's been tested by professional musicians, who ensure the sound and set-up are the best they can be. This level of quality control, along with all our wood being graded and certified, and all workshop processes documented, helps in a sense to protect individual reputations.'

The power of a collective ultimately goes further than its members, concludes Ekho's Catherine Janssens. 'Many makers have been supported by the sales and exhibitions we've done, and the personal reputations of makers across Belgium have grown. In the last five to ten years, violin making has taken a big step forward in quality, and has caught up with bow making in its appreciation by musicians. And I think it's in large part because of collectives like Ekho that contemporary making is reaching this level.' ●