

A message from Gregg Alf:

Good afternoon,

It's a pleasure to be with you here in Prague. Because this competition is different from others that I've attended, I would like to share a different kind of message that I believe is quite important for the future of our craft.

So, when I thought about what I wanted to share with you today, it wasn't how to varnish more evenly, or carve more precisely, or graduate your plates to the last micron. You don't need that from me. You're already technically well-prepared—and more than capable of figuring out what you're still learning.

What I want to offer instead is something different—something I believe will matter much more in your future than anything I could teach you about purfling.

The thought I want to share today is this: your future as a violin maker won't depend on perfection—but on the depth of personality you're able to put into your instruments. That has always been true, but now more than ever, for reasons I want to explore with you now.

Last year, I traveled to China for a different kind of violin-making competition. And the work? Beautiful! In some cases, shockingly good—technically flawless. But after the competition, as I stepped off the stage to greet some of the contestants, I asked a simple question: “Why do you love making violins?”

Despite their impressive command of English, many makers were at a loss to respond. So I asked again in a different way: “Why do you want to make violins?” Still nothing. Some of the most technically skilled makers I met had no idea. But there were others—and when they spoke, their faces lit up. They talked about their favorite soloists, their childhood memories of music, the joy of seeing a young player try one of their instruments. I knew instinctively: these are the makers who will last.

So I'm asking you now—not rhetorically—Why do you want to make violins? This question matters.

Because violin making, to me, is not just a craft. It's a way of being. It's not just about a trained eye—it's about a cultivated life. The way you cook your food, the way you listen to music or sit in silence, the way you care for your tools, the way you care for each other. These things matter. I've seen it at work. A maker who lives with attention, humor, gratitude, depth—that person makes different corners. Different scrolls. Different varnish. The wood remembers.

Your relationships show up in your edgework. Your inner stillness shows up in your arching. Your curiosity shows up in your choice of model. That's why the best makers I know are not just skilled—they're full of presence. And that presence is what gives their instruments life.

Now, I should probably say a word about myself. I'm Gregg Alf. I've been doing this for a long time, and yet, as I stand here today, I still feel like a student. I've made violins in lots of cities where I didn't speak the language. I've ruined my share of tonewood in the name of craftsmanship. And I've had the privilege of making instruments that helped musicians fly.

The best ones, though—the ones I remember—were never the ones where I tried to impress anyone. They were the ones where I slowed down, listened, and made something as a gesture of love.

So, what's my point? There's nothing new about saying your humanity, your presence, your sensitivity—are what will matter most in your future as a violin maker. Especially if you hope to stand out not just for skill, but for meaning. That has been true since the time of Stradivari. But now, a massive new force is entering our lives—and it's going to rewrite the context for all of this. It's going to make everything I've just said not only more true for your legacy—but for the future of violin making as a whole.

A great shift is already happening. And if you haven't already guessed—it's called artificial intelligence. AI.

This is not just another tool. AI is not like switching from a handsaw to a bandsaw. It's more like electricity—how it changed everything. From handwriting with a quill to typing on a laptop. From smoke signals and beating drums to global video calls.

And the risk—the real risk—is not that it will replace you. The risk is that it will flatten you. That it will take all the warmth, weirdness, intimacy, fingerprints, silence, friction, grace—everything human—and render it obsolete. We're already starting to feel it. I've seen it in violin-making competitions; maybe you have too. You look across five instruments... and can't tell them apart. They're good—really good. But they feel... anonymous.

Just last week, I was in Italy, studying antique violins at the annual convention of Entente. I looked at dozens of instruments from the Torino school and could feel the difference. You could see the personality. You could feel who made each one. If someone handed you five instruments made three centuries ago by a Cremonese master—an Amati, Guarneri, Bergonzi, Strad, or Rugeri—most of us could tell who made what. Those instruments carried the mark of the person. The life. The eccentricity. The spirit. Look for that as we enjoy each other's work in the coming days!

We already know we should be making more personal work. But in this age of AI, that need is not just important—it is urgent. What once was optional now becomes critical. Personal work is going to be the only kind of work that means anything.

Now, let's have some fun!

What could be more personal than music? More personal than a song? We're going to do an experiment—right here, right now. And with your help. While we were together today, I collected ideas for a song from you based on these 6 questions:

Why do you build violins—besides money or prizes?

Who plays your violin?

A feeling while you work?

Something violin making has taught you?

Part of the violin you like the most?

What your violin gives to the world?

Then I fed your replies to A.I. so it could generate our song—lyrics, music, voice—on the spot. It took about 10 seconds for it to put it all together. This isn't a toy. This is the world we're living in. A machine is about to write and perform a song based on your suggestions. And I promise—it's going to sound great.

And that's the problem. Because in a world where a machine can do this... what is left for us? We all know that violins carved by CNC in a factory all look alike. The routed scrolls, the identical outlines, the symmetrical f-holes... cookie-cutter VSOs from an assembly line. Right?

...But what if a simple A.I. code—far more basic than this songwriting bot—was programmed to add random ‘human variations’ to those CNC coordinates, so each scroll and f-hole would come out slightly different? What then? It’s only a matter of time.

When commercial violins are made this way... what will be left for traditional craftsmanship?

What’s left is everything that can’t be faked. What’s left is your life. Your pain. Your stillness. Your story. AI will raise the bar so high that merely adequate, merely correct, merely precise won’t be enough. Half-hearted attempts at being “creative” will feel hollow.

So our work has to become something else. It has to become unmistakably ours. Honest. Candid. Vulnerable. Surprising. Personal. Every time.



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Pretty impressive, isn’t it? But it will never spend four hours adjusting a bridge because a cellist wants one more gram of pressure resistance under her C string. It will never spread varnish onto test strips with its fingers just to get the color right. It will never ask itself: Did I do something today that mattered?

But, you can.

And that’s our job now. Don’t compete with the machine. Don’t try to be as fast or as perfect. That’s not your path. Your path is to become so utterly, openly human that no machine can touch you. Let your work be unique. Let it be soulful. Let it be alive. And if you want—if you can—use spotless craftsmanship as a tool in doing so. Why not?

The work we do to develop and reward good craftsmanship is important. But you can’t learn how to write a better song than A.I. just by reading the dictionary. Read poetry. Fall in love. Learn to cook something perfectly. Sit with people in silence. Travel. Forgive someone.

Make your violin like it’s a letter to the person you most admire. Because when the machines come—and they’re already here—your humanity will be your superpower.

So I’ll ask one last time: **Why do you love making violins?**

That answer is yours to discover. But, when you do, I hope it gives shape to everything you touch. If it does, your work will last.

Thank you. I look forward to meeting you, experiencing your instruments in the day ahead.