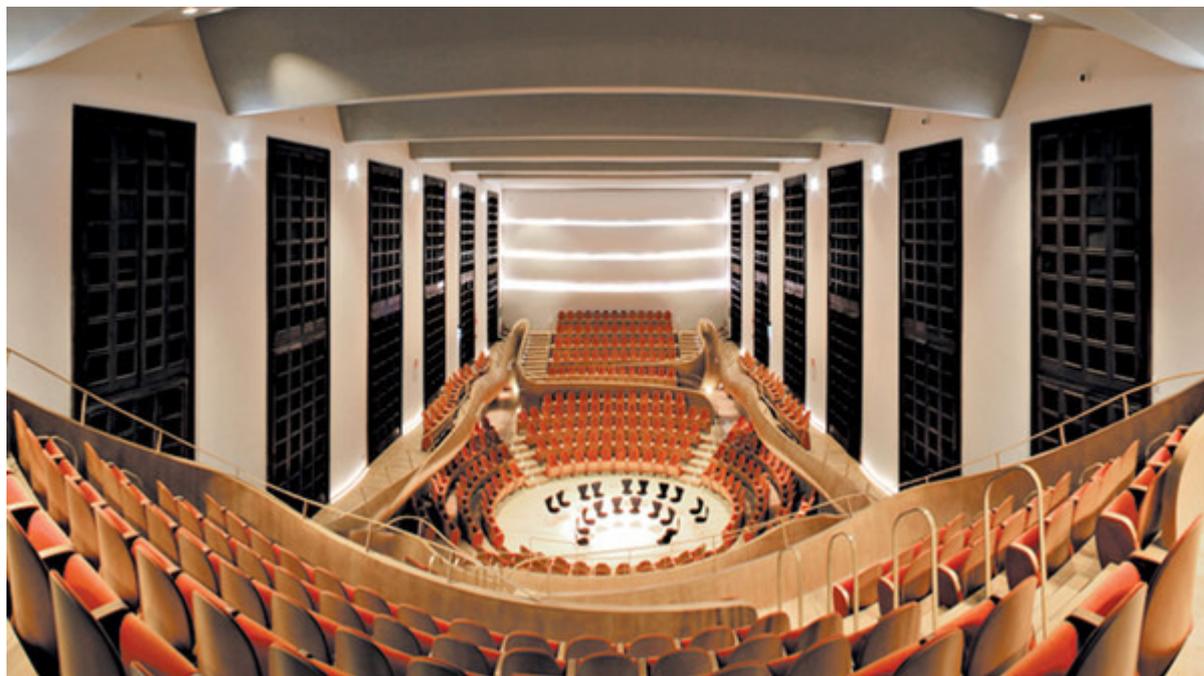


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A museum binds steelworks and Stradivari in Cremona

By Peter Marsh



On the outskirts of Cremona, the small city in northern Italy where modern violin manufacturing began 500 years ago, the Arvedi steelmaking plant is working at full blast.

The thuds and bangs of the steelworks may not sound as melodious as the instruments that made the city famous. But for Giovanni Arvedi, the company's chairman and owner, a potentially revolutionary method for making steel that is being pioneered in the plant owes something to the city's violin-making heritage – so much so that his family foundation has donated more than €10m to pay for a new Cremona violin museum, to be opened tomorrow.

“The violin was a genius solution to making music,” says the 75-year-old patriarch. “What we are doing [in steelmaking] is to use our intelligence and imagination to make progress.” He speaks of a shared interest in “a difficult challenge and respect for knowledge”.

During the 1500s, local craftsmen hit on the correct combinations of wood – fashioned to precise dimensions – to create a musical device of great subtlety. The traditions of these pioneers, followed soon afterwards by Antonio Stradivari, the Cremonese violin maker, are kept alive by 160 small violin manufacturing businesses in the city.

For Mr Arvedi, they remain an inspiring force and his work on steel production technology has been barely less exacting than their efforts.

During the past 20 years, his company has put more than €600m into funding the development

of what he calls “endless strip production”. It is a way to use modern control systems and new ideas in metals flow to combine the normally separate processes of steel casting and rolling. As a result, ESP promises to cut up to 30 per cent of the costs of constructing new steel plants.

While the first fully-fledged ESP line is making about 1m tonnes of steel a year at the Arvedi mill in Cremona, the steel process arm of conglomerate Siemens, a business partner of the Italian company, has recently landed the first ESP order from an outside business.

Mr Arvedi hopes the new violin museum will underscore what might otherwise appear to be a rather tenuous connection between the two industries. “This [museum] is making the link between the old and the new in a way that should help Cremona to thrive,” he says.

Claudio Milo, the chief engineer on the museum project, is one of Mr Arvedi’s top steel technicians. He has supervised the construction work, plus novel audio-visual technology to conjure up impressions of the work of past and present violin fabricators. Giving a tour of the museum, Mr Milo points to a line of cases housing priceless violins. “I’ve been in charge of a treasure box,” he says.

In one of Cremona’s violin workshops close to the museum, Colombia-born Giorgio Grisales, who runs a company with seven employees, says the museum will be a “business ticket” for the city. His business makes about 15 violins and other stringed instruments a year, selling for up to €25,000 each, virtually all exported.

As for the pioneering approach to steelmaking, while not everyone in the steel industry shares Mr Arvedi’s rosy view about the potential of the company’s ESP technique, others say it could trigger the biggest changes since Sir Henry Bessemer, the British inventor, proposed the ideas behind modern steel production in the 1850s. Mr Arvedi reels off a list of top steelmakers which have sent technical delegations to his plant. He also brushes off the length of time his company has spent perfecting the technology – pointing out that Cremona’s violin makers did not hit the right tunes overnight. “You have to be patient,” he says.

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