

Italian town honours Stradivari and the art of violin making

Local magnate helps fund museum showcasing Cremona's musical heritage

Lizzy Davies Cremona

For about 250 years, from the mid-16th century to the late 1700s, a little town on the banks of the river Po was a music-making capital. It was the birthplace not only of Antonio Stradivari, the still unsurpassed master luthier, but also, arguably, of the modern violin itself and of a series of craftsmen who made some of the most beautiful-sounding stringed instruments known to man.

To this day Cremona remains a hub of musical excellence, with around 200 violin-makers crafting new instruments for some of the world's most exacting customers. Last year, their work was inscribed on Unesco's list of intangible cultural heritage. And now, after years of waiting, Cremona has a showcase worthy of its illustrious heritage. Next

Saturday, in a formerly disused fascist-era arts centre, a new museum featuring some of the most exquisite violins ever made will throw open its doors.

Such is the value of one instrument, a Stradivarius from 1715 known as Il Cremonese, that when it was transported across town to its new home it was accompanied by a police escort while traffic was blocked.

The Violin Museum, the total cost of which has not been made public but is thought to be around €10m-€12m (£8.4m-£10.1m), is largely the product of one person, Giovanni Arvedi, a local steel magnate and arts patron. Not content with owning Cremonese FC, he decided in 2009 to fund the construction of a place that would show off the town's musical glories, past and present.

Under the auspices of the Arvedi-

Buschini Foundation, with the support of the local municipality and other sponsors, the abandoned Palazzo dell'Arte in the town centre was renovated and transformed into a complex of rooms housing violins such as a 1566 model designed by Andrea Amati, credited as the inventor of the modern violin, and a 1727 Stradivarius known as Vesuvius.

The museum has amalgamated several collections in Cremona and will display historic gems alongside more recent examples of great craftsmanship. Visitors will be able to watch a real-life luthier at work in an on-site studio and, if they're lucky, catch a recital in a 460-seat auditorium whose fluid lines contrast with the stark rationalist design of the building, which was constructed in 1941 on the orders of Roberto Farinacci, a senior fascist politician who organised

Cremona's brutal combat squads.

Paolo Bodini, the museum's director of violin-making and president of the international Friends of Stradivari network, said the focus and content of the museum made it a one-off. "There are very beautiful collections of Cremonese violins around the world - in London, for example, at the Royal Academy of Arts ... but nothing of this kind. Most of these collections are located in more generalist museums so they're ... kind of lost amid the huge amount of things that these museums exhibit," he said.

"We have focused on and put a lot of effort into trying to describe the history behind it - not only the object, but how the violin came to life in the 16th century, how it developed through the decades and centuries, and what is behind that. If you are able to see the

violins being made, you can see the master violin-maker at work ... you can understand more when you see the masterpiece. So in this way the museum is absolutely unique."

At a viewing for journalists on Thursday, before the Cremona-born violinist

Antonio De Lorenzi played excerpts from Bach and Verdi on the nearly 300-year-old Stradivarius, Arvedi said that although he did not play the violin or collect them, he saw in their playing a "spirituality" that was second to none.

His love and accompanying funds have been met with gratitude in the artistic circles of a country in which public funding of the cultural sector has been badly hit in the ongoing recession. "Cremona has always maintained something [of its heritage]," said Virginia Villa, director of the Violin Museum. "But certainly to get a project of this kind under way it needed someone who believed in it to lend a hand financially.

"The public authorities at the moment are not able to do this on their own. The municipality is having trouble repairing the roads and the state is having problems looking after the health service, the hospitals. There is an economic crisis which means obviously that the priorities are of a social nature. But in my opinion this is also a social priority. Because it feeds the desire for culture in all people."





A 19th-century painting, hanging in the town hall in Cremona, depicts the city's most famous son, Antonio Stradivari, at work. He died in 1737, into his 90s
Photograph: Patrick Landmann/Getty



