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(Jacques-Pierre Thibout, page 42)

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(Technique, page 88)

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(Masterclass, page 82)

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(String teaching in Korea, page 64)

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(Auction report, page 22)

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(Making Matters, page 80)

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Hybrid habits

In the past, violin making methods were not as standardised as they are today. **Geerten Verberkmoes** proposes a working sequence for the 18th-century notary-turned-luthier Boussu, which he tried out while making a replica violin

FIGURE 1 CT scan showing the longitudinal cross-section of the unaltered Boussu violin (MIM2781)

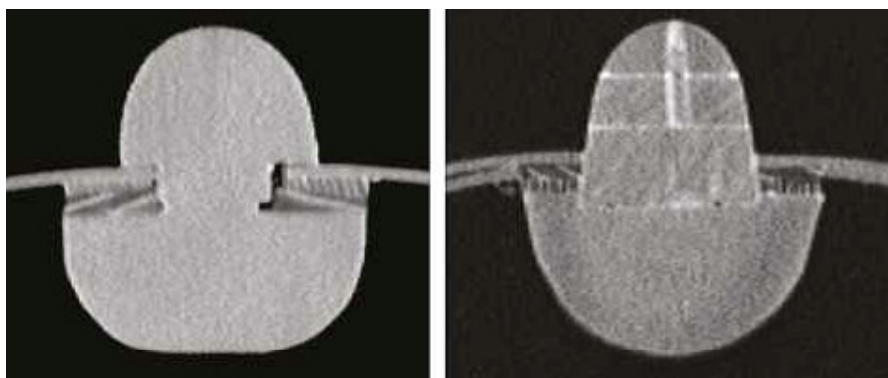
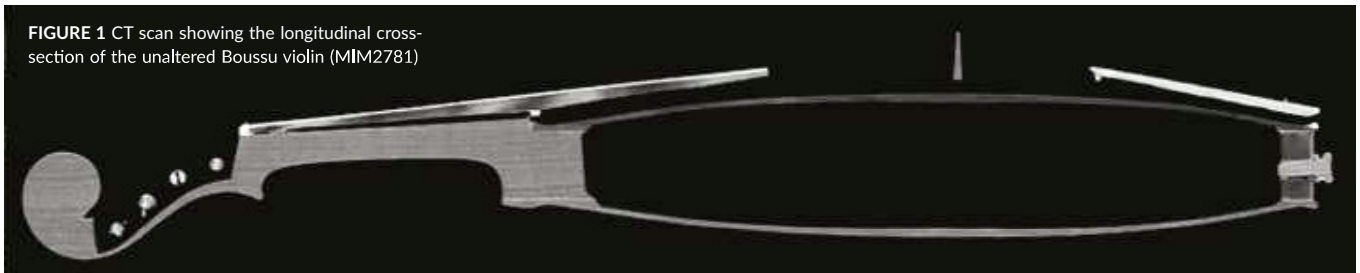


FIGURE 2 Coronal CT reconstructions for the top-block of two Boussu violins (MIM2781, MIM2784). Upper ribs are inserted into slots in the neck root and secured by wedges. Note the neck-insert modification in the right image

There are nine violin-family instruments by the maker Benoit Joseph Boussu in the collection of Brussels' Musical Instruments Museum. Of these, one violin and one cello remain in a virtually unaltered state. Little was known about Boussu until I started investigating his life and work in 2009. We now know that he was born in 1703 in Fourmies, northern France, and came from a family of notaries. He worked as a full-time notary himself between 1729 and 1748, but after 20 years he decided to make a remarkable career switch and became a luthier. He worked successively in Liège, Etterbeek, Brussels, and finally Amsterdam. He died in his native area in 1773.

From investigations into Boussu's extant instruments, including CT scanning of the non-modernised violin, it becomes clear

that the maker used a hybrid working system. On one hand, he was rooted in the 'archaic' tradition of northern Europe, wherein the neck and top-block were often made from a single block of maple (**figure 1**). However, unlike his Brussels predecessors of the Borbon and Snoeck families, Boussu did not insert the ribs into a groove in the back plate. Moreover, his use of corner-blocks and linings, as well as his refined aesthetics and workmanship, indicate that he must also have been exposed to instruments by foreign makers. This personal and composite approach suggests that Boussu was an autodidact.

The 'through-neck' construction and the presence of a small foot on the rounded integral top-block support the hypothesis of a making system without a full mould. Such an irregularly pre-shaped top-block

could never be temporarily glued to an internal mould, while the protruding neck would not allow the use of a full external mould either. Instead, Boussu likely started by marking the back's contour on a maple blank, using a half-template. After finishing the back, the rib structure could be built on to the plate, using the outline of the back as a guide for the final shape of the rib garland.

In the first stages of the proposed construction sequence, the back plate and the neck (including its integral top-block) were made. After these parts were both finished, the neck had to be glued to the back, most probably with some sort of appliance to ensure proper alignment. A peculiar detail of Boussu's violins points towards such an alignment aid. In almost all of this maker's violins, the scrolls have a very constant width of 36.0 to 36.5mm. This uniformity may have been a result of Boussu's notarial urge for precision, but might also have had a functional reason: it allowed for insertion of the scroll into a fixture on an alignment table. Then the width of the fixture opening would have been the standardised scroll width of around 36.5mm.

After having glued the neck/top-block combination to the back plate using the alignment table, Boussu could then have glued the bottom-block and corner-blocks to the back. By pre-shaping these blocks on the sides where the ribs would be glued on,

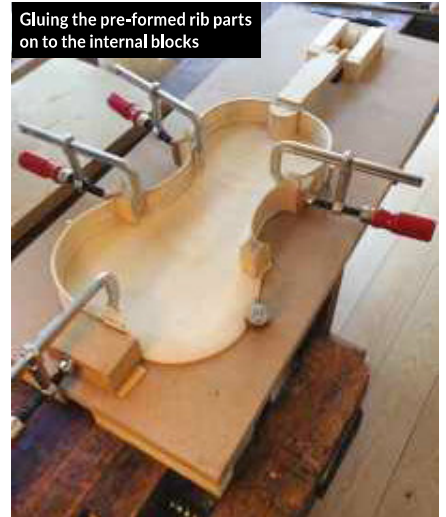
CT SCANS COURTESY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS MUSEUM, BRUSSELS. ALL OTHER PHOTOS: GEERTEN VERBERKMOES



Marking the back's contour (half-template derived from CT scan)



Pre-fabricating the rib parts on 'partial moulds'



Gluing the pre-formed rib parts on to the internal blocks



Using an alignment table to glue the neck/top-block combination to the back plate



Detail of the upper rib/neck connection, showing the wedges

the blocks could serve as guides for the rib assembling process. From the CT scan we learn that Boussu inserted the upper rib parts into pre-sawn rectangular slots in the neck root, and locked them each with two complementary wedges (figure 2).

In the earliest Boussu instruments, linings of only around 1.5 × 1.5mm are present. Owing to their small size it seems impossible to have glued and clamped such tiny strips when trying to apply them after the rib parts had been placed on the back. In addition, Boussu's linings have feathered ends, which always terminate a little before touching the corner-blocks. From these observations I conclude that the separate rib parts, including their linings, were pre-fabricated on 'partial outer moulds' – a separate mould for each of the six rib parts. Such a modular making system would be well suited for a working process performed in a small workshop with a few employees. This assumption corresponds with Boussu's high production rate (according to the exact dating and numbering on several original instruments). Between 1749 and the end

of 1752 his Etterbeek workshop produced at least 36 violins and 7 cellos, which suggests that he did not work alone. Assistants, possibly at some point including his two eldest teenage sons, may have done the preparations and easier jobs, while Boussu senior carried out the more delicate work such as carving the scrolls, cutting the f-holes and purfling. On all surviving instruments, a single, secure hand is observed in these latter aspects. The pre-fabrication of rib parts could have been an assistant's job. After the rib structure was completed on the back, the top plate and the short, veneered fingerboard could be glued on, yielding a violin ready to be varnished.

To assess the feasibility of the working sequence described above, I made a replica of the unaltered MIM violin (MIM2781), using CT image reconstructions as 1:1 scale construction plans and templates. I followed the steps proposed above, including the use of my version of an alignment table. Several steps of this 'workbench research' are illustrated here with photos taken during the replica production. The construction process proceeded smoothly, and the making sequence allowed for a logical, convenient and effective working order, with the direct

and accurate establishment of the neck angle as a particularly satisfying advantage. This reinforced the idea that Boussu worked in a similar manner. The replica showed great similarities to the original, both in overall appearance and regarding maker-specific constructional details.

In these days of more or less standardised violin making methods, it may easily be forgotten that in the past many different making systems, often region-dependent, were in use. The way Boussu made his instruments – long before the existence of violin making manuals – was the result of his personal search for solutions to challenges he faced when discovering how to make his first models. As modern makers, learning about the inventiveness of our past colleagues may broaden our horizons and even help us to arrive at new ideas and inspiration for our own practice.

A fellow maker once told me: 'Never make a violin with the neck and top-block in one piece, because you can't reset the neck in the future.' I ignored his advice, just to experience how it is to make violins in an unconventional way. ●

The CT scan was performed by Prof Em Danielle Balériaux in cooperation with Dr Anne-Emmanuelle Ceulemans (MIM), Dr Berend Stoel and the author.

Videos of the entire replication process can be found on the author's YouTube channel 'Boussu_Inside_Out'. His research on Boussu's life has been published in The Galpin Society Journal (2013) and Early Music (November 2016). Any information regarding Boussu's instruments may be sent to the author: g.verberkmoes@planet.nl