

Victor Gardener (Vittore E. Giardinieri) (1909-2006)

By Christopher Dungey

Victor Gardener (Vittore E. Giardinieri) was a master instrument maker who had a tremendous impact on players, teachers, and luthiers, including one of his most gifted apprentices, Michael Klein. To honor Victor Gardener in 2000, Klein established the Giardinieri Violin Making Program in southern Oregon near Grants Pass.

Gardener was born on July 1, 1909, in Lake Creek in Jackson County. He was the youngest of six children of Rafaele Diodatto Francesco Giardinieri and Luisa Maria D'Francesco. The couple had emigrated from Cavalese and Bolzano, respectively, towns that were at the time in Austria but are now part of Italy.

Since his family was poor and not able to buy him an instrument or lessons, Victor Gardener made his first violin with a few tools from Sears Roebuck Co. in 1928 at the age of nineteen. He married Harriet Short in 1936, and the couple had three children. With a family to raise, Gardner did a variety of jobs over the years, including logging, running a dairy farm and ranch, and designing and building earthen dams and irrigation systems. At the same time, he also designed and built exceptional instruments.

Almost all of the spruce, maple, willow, and mountain mahogany Gardener used to make instruments was from trees he found in the mountains of southern Oregon. He cut, hauled, milled, and air-dried the wood himself and purchased ebony as raw lumber. He made everything for his instruments, including the ornamentation (purfling), fingerboards, pegs, end pins, tail pieces, and chin rests. Gardener was quite unusual among modern luthiers because he was so prolific and he created his instruments from the tree to the finished product.

The master instrument maker and restorer Hans Weisshaar, who lived in Los Angeles, was the first to discover Gardener's talent. Some time in the 1960s, he visited the University of Oregon's Music Department in Eugene. Standing outside the building while it was on fire, he noticed a viola that the staff had evacuated and placed on the lawn for safekeeping. He was impressed by the bold artistic carving but did not recognize the name of the maker: Victor Gardener.

Weisshaar soon located Gardener in the southern Oregon mountains. The two men corresponded for many years, and Gardener often visited Weisshaar in California. Weisshaar and Italian violin maker Simone Sacconi talked Gardener into using his Italian name, Vittore E. Giardinieri, on the labels of his instruments.

Gardener crafted violins, violas, and cellos, but he was never able to fulfill his dream of becoming a violin player. Instead, he practically gave away his instruments so the student or family would have the opportunity of enjoying the violin in a way that he never was able to. He also taught many people how to find, harvest, mill, and cure high-quality wood. Gardener was committed to his apprentices, many of whom became award-winning artisans, including Klein, Christopher Dungey, and Carla Shapreau.

Gardener lived in Jackson County throughout his life. He made his 405th and final instrument in 1995 and died on April 7, 2006, at age ninety-six. Four of Gardener's instruments are on permanent display at the Centro Arte Contemporanea in Cavalese, Italy. Gardener Road, near the Lake Creek area, is named after the Gardener family.

Sources

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