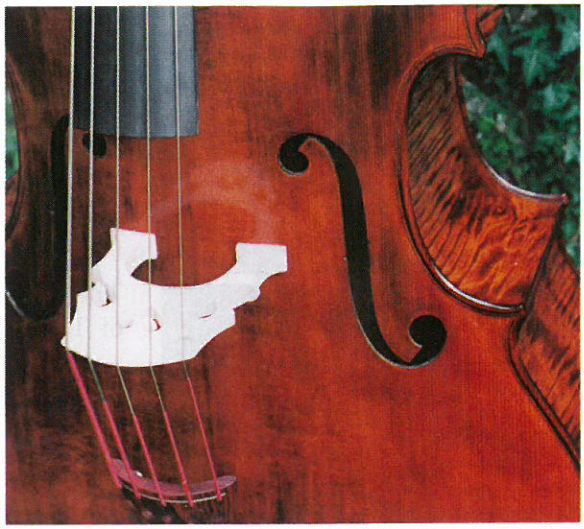


He's made nine instruments for the Chicago Symphony, but Canadian Peter Elias refuses to follow the crowd. **Naomi Sadler** finds out why

# Independent bass-line

**Few workshops can boast** as glorious a view as that of Peter Elias. Set at the top of his late 19th-century home in Aigle, at the foot of the Swiss Alps, his rooms look out on the mountains, which form a magnificent backdrop to the roofs of the town. The approach to Aigle by train from Geneva is equally exquisite, particularly if you catch it as the sun sets across the misty-turquoise waters of the lake. It's easy to understand why this Canadian maker decided to settle here in 1992 with his family.

Elias himself is quietly spoken and his clients speak of his kindness and unassuming manner. A bassist who taught himself pretty much all he knows about making, he is modest about his attainments – 'I still have many things to learn,' he says – but talk to him about his work and you quickly realise that he knows exactly what he's trying to achieve.

He is what you might call a player's maker. For him, sound and playability are paramount, and he isn't afraid to experiment with traditional models to get what he wants. Nor is he particularly concerned about what colleagues might think. 'I keep my company with musicians as opposed to violin makers,' he says. 'As I'm making a musical instrument it's the musician that I like to keep happy.' Certainly players seem to appreciate what he does: his basses and cellos are owned by soloists and orchestral musicians worldwide and he's getting a name for his violas.

Elias first dipped his toe into the lutherie pool when he needed to improve the set-up of his own bass for playing jazz. 'You can't have the strings extremely high, particularly for jazz,' he explains. 'It's best to have them close to the fingerboard. Just planing the fingerboard was enough to get me a lot of clients.' He also tried making a variety of weird instruments, including an electric double bass and a cross between a cello and a bass guitar – 'I've had my diversions,' he admits.

Having started out with rudimentary carpentry skills, Elias discovered a natural talent for working with wood. 'I've always been able to imagine the right technique,' he says, 'although sometimes I've had to discover a tool exists that I didn't know about

– that's a disadvantage to being self-taught.'

A long leap forward came when a friend needed major restoration to his bass but couldn't afford to pay a shop to do it. In desperation he asked Elias to take it apart. 'I learnt a lot from this instrument – especially the second time,' he says ruefully. 'The first time the glue I used didn't hold.' After that it was a small step to making his own classical bass, which was a copy of a flat-backed Montagnana owned by Thomas Monohan, former principal of the Toronto Symphony. Monohan liked it so much that he bought it and Elias went on to make two more.

His third instrument went to a Chicago player who knew some of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra bassists. Then two basses later, in 1987, he received a call from the orchestra manager. An accident had damaged several of their members' personal instruments and they wanted nine basses for touring and playing at outdoor events. Elias was one of several makers asked to bring an instrument for the players to try out. Each bassist could choose which one they liked best, but they all chose his. 'The section was notorious for fighting,' says Elias, 'and Joseph Guastafeste [the principal] said to me, "You know, this is the first thing we've agreed on".'

Elias puts his Chicago success down to the tone. 'They bought the instrument I brought them as the first of the nine; they decided that was the sound they wanted and I should do more of the same,' he says. 'It's a very loud orchestra and they were looking for a bass section that would envelop the orchestra with a lot of – air,' he adds, laughing. 'That's the responsibility of the bass section. The others can supply ▸

**ABOVE AND OPPOSITE RIGHT** a mid-1990s Elias bass. The model was developed from a Montagnana, but 'there's really very little resemblance to the original', he says

**OPPOSITE BELOW** scroll of a four-stringed solo bass

Main photo: Chantal Dervey

the clearness of tone, but the one thing they need from the basses is air – an envelope to the sound that cushions it from the bottom. At the same time, it has to be loud with a focus.'

Elias describes the most important part of the bass sound as the fundamental: 'the lowest note as opposed to the harmonic overtones that give the richness to the sound.' He admits that in this he differs from many French makers and players. 'The French look for a crystalline quality in the sound. I've spoken to French players who say, "you'll always have the low notes; what you need is the high part of the harmonic series to project the sound." I don't agree. I concentrate on the fundamental tone.'

Elias's quest for the ideal sound meant that the original Montagnana model had already undergone significant alteration by the time he made the first Chicago bass, in particular losing its flat back. 'There's too much that can go wrong with a flat back,' he states. 'Typically if you look at a flat-back bass, the back has turned concave, which means that the outside is trying to shrink while the inside is stopping it. There's incredible tension on the instrument that way and I became less convinced that this was how to get the best sound.'

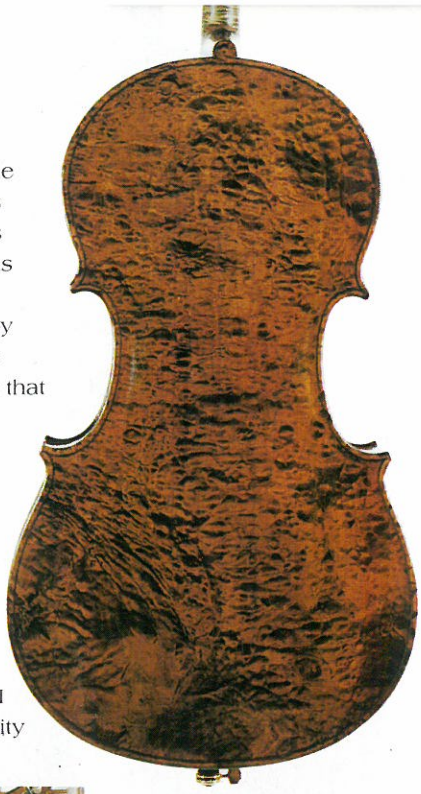
The next change was to cut down the shoulders after one client complained that they were too broad for comfort, but he then realised that the resulting loss of surface area affected the sound. To counter this he enlarged the width and length of the lower bouts. 'Generally more than other makers I've concentrated on keeping the surface area of the wood on the lower part of the instrument where it doesn't bother anybody,' he says, adding: 'In the end I hesitate to call it a Montagnana model at all because it's been changed too many times.'

Elias developed his current bass model in equally experimental fashion. He had made a bass on a Rossi model for a client and was particularly pleased with its even sound. 'Then I had a client who said, "I like this bass, but I've been playing this French instrument which has this particular shoulder and this particular playability," so I said, "OK, I'll marry the two models and see what happens".' The resulting hybrid worked. 'The high end is amazingly present,' he says. 'You can go up the G string very easily even though it's an instrument that's perfectly capable of playing in an orchestra. It's my pet model for the time being.'

## 'I'VE TOLD SOME OF THEM: "LISTEN, I PREFER DEAD MUSICIANS TOO. I'D MUCH RATHER HAVE PAGANINI HERE THAN YOU TODAY".'

Does Elias attribute his willingness to experiment to the fact that he is self taught? 'Definitely, yes. I don't know what goes on in the minds of my colleagues when they work on instruments, but I don't have any memories of a teacher telling me it has to be like this or like that. I guess I have fewer sacred cows that way.' He adds: 'Nowadays many people are very well trained, but creativity is maybe harder to come up with now than it was in an era when more people had to learn from the seat of their pants.' Given this stance, it's not surprising that he has little interest in making copies. 'I'm not here as a reproductionist,' he says. 'I'm here because I think violin making is alive and well today.'

Not all Elias's experiments have worked. 'If there's a mistake I make it's that I try things before I ask,' he admits. This was particularly true of his first cellos, made around the time of his move to Switzerland, which were oversized models with deep arching and the exaggerated lower bouts he had developed for his basses. The problem was that they sounded like basses, as he was told by Niall Brown, cellist of the Australian Quartet and at that time principal of the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra. 'He was very frank with me,' recalls Elias. 'He tried some of the experimental models I had made and he found these had too dark a sound quality to be satisfying for him. So I decided to put my creativity away and do things according to the book for a change.'



**ABOVE AND BELOW** cello made this year, with a one-piece back of slab-cut maple

**LEFT** Joel Quarrington, who has owned five Elias basses

Cello photos: Chantal Dervey

He followed the 'Duport' Stradivari for his next instruments, with encouraging results. 'I happened to make an instrument that really worked,' he says. 'I felt it really clicked and I think I've come up with a unique voice that's a bit different from the others.' He has developed the model, shortening the string length by moving the middle bouts up so that the lower bouts are slightly larger and the upper slightly smaller, but again, he says, the tone is the key. 'Once I started using the Stradivari principles and a few of my own ideas on construction I was able to get an instrument that has the warmth, the directness, the ▸

**ABOVE** Elias selects spruce with medium to wide spacing for his cello fronts. Much of his spruce and maple comes from Canada

**RIGHT** an Elias cello recently bought by Susanne Wijsman, professor at the University of Western Australia, Perth

grain to the sound that cellists are looking for.' Brown, who bought the first 'Duport' model cello, echoes this: 'The sound is a very even, mellow, yet powerful one,' he says. 'Peter has a natural talent where he seems to know how wood will sound and can consequently bring it to life without fail.'

Instinct or not, Elias knows what kind of wood he likes, and it's not necessarily the most expensive. For cello spruce he prefers a grain with medium spacing in the centre and relatively wide spacing at the edges. 'The wood that sells for the highest prices is maybe the most picture-perfect with perfect close spacing, but it's not what's used in the best instruments – the ones that have the reputation for the best sound. If you look at examples of some of the exceptional Strad cellos, the wood is really quite wide grained. And I have made some cellos out of close-spaced wood which sounded less free – they had fewer of the qualities that I look for.' He has also tried different types of wood, including mahogany and walnut. 'The walnut was very good – although maybe it didn't have quite as much definition as a maple back,' he says.

Elias is currently most passionate about his cellos, but he is also developing the upper strings, particularly the viola. These he bases on the 'Archinto' Stradivari, some quite closely; however, he has developed another, much wider model – by between 12 and 15mm in the lower bouts, he estimates – which has found favour with Jochen Greiner, professor at the Hochschule der Kunst, Berlin. The two models naturally sound different, but Elias believes all his instruments, large and small, have a certain richness of tone. 'I tend to make warm-sounding instruments as opposed to bright-sounding ones – I've tipped the balance more towards the lower strings than some other makers. It can make me friends, but some people find it an imbalance if they're used to less sound on the lower strings.'

Elias sees a bright future for modern instruments, although he still encounters musicians who don't agree. 'A player will come to me and have the audacity to say: "This sounds OK for a new instrument, but I prefer old ones." I have got to the point where I've told them: "Listen, I prefer dead musicians too. I'd much rather have Paganini here than you today!" As a musician you're allowed to live in your time. Why shouldn't an instrument maker? Is he only there to patch up your old instruments, or is he allowed to create something in his time – is he allowed to have ideas in the same way that Stradivari did – to try things, different projects?'

However, he feels that the tide is turning, partly, he believes, because the golden-age instruments cannot last for ever. 'People have always said the older the better,' he says, 'but I'm sure there's a limit to that somewhere. I'm sure at some point they're not as good as they were and, if so, it's because there's so much new wood in them. Normally plywood instruments are frowned upon, but if you repair an instrument so often that you have cross-grain patches everywhere, it's basically a plywood instrument in function. So I think there's room for modern makers to really start to be accepted as making very viable instruments now.' S

Photos: Chantal Dervey