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Craftsmanship and the teleology of mastery: An interview with an Austrian luthier

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates core professional and philosophical tensions within contemporary craftsmanship through a critically framed interview with Anna Wagner, an Austrian luthier. By situating lutherie within a theoretical framework that engages Richard Sennett's humanist praxis, David Pye's "workmanship of risk," and Tim Ingold's concept of material "correspondence," the study explores the teleology of artisanal practice amidst technological proliferation. The dialogue reveals a definition of mastery grounded in holistic process-comprehension and ethical restraint—specifically through the "less is more" axiom in restoration. The article argues that the luthier's work serves as a cultural intermediary, preserving the "soul" of historical instruments through embodied, non-replicable expertise that resists the accelerated logic of digital production. It concludes by identifying systemic challenges for material culture, particularly the validation of qualitative value and the pedagogy of tacit knowledge transfer in a market-driven environment.

Keywords: Craftsmanship, luthier, tacit knowledge, material culture, craftsmanship ethics.

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1. Introduction: The teleology of the hand

In an era defined by "vertiginous acceleration" and the digital replication of labor, the role of the traditional artisan requires renewed theoretical scrutiny. This article examines the teleology of craftsmanship—the inherent purpose and "end goal" of mastery—through the specific case of lutherie. While scholarly discourse often treats craft as an abstract romanticization of the past, this study approaches it as a contemporary, situated praxis. This article presents an edited interview with Anna Wagner, an Austrian luthier based in Graz (Annachord, n.d.) (Figure 1). The interview explores the teleology of craftsmanship in the contemporary environment, which is profoundly shaped by the rapid proliferation of technology and vertiginous acceleration. As an artisan native to Carinthia, Luthier Wagner demonstrates a comprehensive mastery of the intricate instrument-making process.

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Figure 1. Luthier Anna Wagner at work in her atelier. Photo taken by the author.

Following Sennett (2009, p. 9), craftsmanship is defined here as the “desire to do a job well for its own sake.” However, this study extends Sennett’s framework by integrating the distinction made by Pye (1968, pp. 20-24) between the “workmanship of certainty,” which is automated or mass-produced, and the “workmanship of risk,” which is artisan-led and where the quality of the result is continually dependent on the maker’s judgment.

The luthier’s craft represents a unique intersection of material science, acoustic physics, and artistic intuition. Unlike industrial manufacturing, which seeks to eliminate material variables, the luthier’s mastery resides in the ability to negotiate the inherent idiosyncrasies of organic matter—specifically the resonance and structural integrity of tone woods. As Ingold (2013) posits, “making” is an act of correspondence; the artisan does not simply impose a form but enters into a dialogue with the wood’s grain and density. In this context, the teleology of lutherie is not merely the production of an object, but the actualization of a voice that facilitates human expression.

Furthermore, the contemporary artisan operates as a vital temporal anchor. In a market-driven landscape characterized by planned obsolescence and the fragmentation of labor, the luthier preserves a lineage of “deep time.” This practice requires a rejection of the accelerated logic of capitalism in favor of the patient, iterative cycles of seasoning, carving, and varnishing. By investigating Wagner’s practice, we can discern how the artisan maintains ontological security and professional agency amidst the pressures of digital substitution and quantitative validation. To explore these theoretical dimensions in a practical context, the subsequent dialogue was structured to address the specific professional tensions that define the luthier’s contemporary reality.

2. Methodology: The interview as epistemic source

The research utilizes a semi-structured qualitative interview as its primary epistemic tool. Unlike anecdotal testimony, the interview is framed here as a “situated dialogue” (Kvale, 1996; 2007) designed to extract tacit knowledge—knowledge that is often embodied and difficult to formalize. The selection of Anna Wagner was purposive, based on her dual role as a master builder and a restorer of historically significant instruments; her practice serves as a “critical case” (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for examining the survival of the workmanship of risk in the 21st century.

The methodological approach employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, focusing on how the artisan perceives and makes sense of her material world and professional identity. The interview was conducted in a hybrid format of German and English, recorded, and transcribed. To introduce the analytical distance requested by scholarly standards, the transcript was subjected to a thematic coding process. This involved a reduction of the raw text by approximately 30% to focus on

the core theoretical tensions: technology, ethics, and mastery. Finally, the fourth section of “Discussion and Synthesis” reconstructs these codes into a thematic narrative that bridges the gap between Wagner’s first-person insights and the broader craft theories of Sennett (2009), Pye (1968), and Ingold (2013).

3. Interview with Anna Wagner

The following interview serves as a primary source for examining the intersections of material expertise and cultural preservation. To ensure the dialogue remained theoretically grounded, the structure of the discussion was deliberately organized around several key academic and professional tensions within the field of lutherie. These themes serve as a valuable pedagogical resource relevant to the curriculum of courses on craftsmanship and material culture in design studies. The central objectives guiding the conversation were as follows:

- **Defining craftsmanship and quality:** To develop a personal definition of craft and mastery, drawing on the work of Sennett (2009), and to examine how these intrinsic values are justified and validated within a market that prioritizes industrial efficiency and digital replication.
- **Technology and tradition:** To investigate the critical tension between centuries-old tradition and contemporary innovation, identifying concrete instances in which technology supports the luthier’s manual expertise (Renney et al., 2022).
- **Ethics and authenticity in restoration:** To engage with the ethical dimensions of the craft, particularly the boundary between preservation and excessive intervention (Lindley, 1977; Loomis, 2025). This includes considering how manual craftsmanship grants legitimacy to the restoration of instruments by makers like Stradivari or Guarneri (Smith, 2018; Trček, 2016).
- **The transmission of mastery:** To explore mastery as distinct from basic skill acquisition, emphasizing the role of time, patience, and tacit knowledge (Figueiredo & Ipiranga, 2015). This contrasts traditional models with accelerated, digitally condensed formats (Osman et al., 2011).
- **The luthier’s cultural function:** To focus on the luthier as a fundamental ally to the musician, contributing to the preservation of the musical legacy of historical instruments (Dondi et al., 2019; Howard, 2022).

Interviewer (Int.): Anna, your practice is pivotal for interfacing historical instruments with contemporary musicians. On the Homo Faber website (n.d.), you cite the deep importance of sound adjustment, characterizing it as a collaboration or symbiosis with the performer. How do you conceptually frame this work of restoration and setting? Does it function strictly as preservation, or is it an active modality for shaping artistic expression and ultimately liberating the instrument’s full sonic potential?

Anna Wagner (AW): For me, the process is paramount. I observe the musician intently: their technique, their handling of the instrument, and whether they achieve a genuine merging with it. This is how I transition into an ally. I must discern the precise sonic quality they seek, necessitating a deep understanding of both the instrument’s process and the performer’s communication with it.

Int.: Antique instruments, like Stradivari or Guarneri, possess an inherent authenticity and a unique voice requiring diligent preservation. When restoring a violin or violoncello, you are directly impacting the instrument’s intrinsic value. How do you delineate the boundary between a necessary repair that sustains historical and tonal integrity, and an excessive intervention? Furthermore, what distinct quality does manual expertise contribute that confers *soul* or authenticity to the instrument—an element that automated or mechanical replication cannot achieve?

AW: Less is more: that remains a fundamental axiom in restoration theory. One must avoid over-repairing at all costs. Machines lack the capacity for feeling or possessing a soul; while they are instrumental for streamlining certain labor-intensive processes, they can never supplant human skill.

Int.: You are clearly open to experimenting with new materials, yet your restoration practice remains fundamentally grounded in centuries-old techniques. At the same time, modern technology offers powerful tools for advanced diagnostics and analysis, such as scanners and acoustic evaluations. How do you integrate these technologies into your work? Do you view them primarily as instruments that enhance specialized skills—particularly in areas like diagnostics and documentation—or do you see

a potential risk that they could compete with and ultimately diminish the value of highly trained manual craftsmanship?

AW: Technology operates as a tool that assists and facilitates my processes; for instance, conducting diagnostics is markedly simpler, allowing me to filter the components of the varnish more effectively. It provides assistance, but it is not a source of competition. It is incapable of replacing my cumulative years of experience. New materials hold limited significance for restoration; the underlying methodology remains highly traditional, largely unchanged for 300 years. However, in analysis and diagnostics, they prove quite useful. The violin or cello fundamentally remains constructed of the same woods. Modifying strings necessitates a dialogue with the instrument. Carbon bows represent an innovation that requires contextual explanation. While I do not oppose inexpensive or manufactured instruments, as they broaden access to music, they can never truly compete with artisan-crafted cellos. My priority is ensuring that musical students have the finest and most comfortable instrument possible, even if the quality is inferior, because that singular factor determines their continuity.

Int.: The sociologist Richard Sennett (2009) posits that mastery constitutes an ongoing dialogue between the hand and the mind that demands significant patience. In our current accelerating environment, what are the implications of achieving this level of mastery, and what intrinsic value is jeopardized when knowledge transmission shifts toward quick tutorials instead of the protracted, tacit, and patient apprenticeship of a genuine workshop?

AW: I have to say, I possess this inherent, deep understanding of my work. In the luthier profession, you see, no manual action is arbitrary—every movement matters. I know the wood, the adhesive, and the sound that will ultimately emerge. I comprehend every step, every tool, every minute detail. And this deep comprehension is precisely what solidifies my humanity. Perhaps one day the machine will execute many tasks more effectively: measuring with greater precision, working faster, applying lacquer more uniformly. But it lacks the capacity to feel what it does. It is devoid of knowledge concerning music, the hands, or joy. It cannot grasp the meaning of sound for a human being.

For musicians, their instrument transcends the category of a mere object. It functions as a voice, a core tool, a companion—the fundamental means by which they sustain their livelihood and express their soul. This necessitates personal contact, genuine conversation, attentive listening, and a collective search for the correct tonal quality. A machine, an algorithm, or an online storefront cannot replicate this. Mass-produced products may pose a competitive threat, and their existence is positive because it democratizes access to music. However, they remain purely instrumental, lacking the dimension of encounter. Ultimately, the human element prevails: the hand that understands; the ear that hears; the joy embedded in the process of working.

Labor is more than mere exertion. It is productivity, and productivity serves as the very means to humanity. It is through the productive act of creation that the human subject develops; this constitutes the precondition for happiness. When I work, when I build, I comprehend the entire operational process. Only those who grasp the process in its totality fully develop their own potential. Productivity is the direct expression of my selfhood; it is the fundamental purpose of work. Craftsmanship makes me productive. The process itself is the meaning of my labor: it fulfills me and brings me happiness. I do not merely construct violins; I undergo self-development through this process. Market-driven efficiency models, or capitalism, compute profit and loss, but the true calculus of life transcends numerical values. The meaning resides not in the ultimate result, but in the doing itself—in conscious, comprehending action. In the workshop, amidst wood dust and sound, I operate not as a cog in a machine, but as a free individual. I construct violins and cellos, and in doing so, I preserve an essential component of humanity.

Int: To conclude, how do you define craftsmanship?

AW: Craftsmanship, like fabricating a table, can be taught. But in the luthier profession, the complexity is elevated: it is acquired through experiential process. Where did the wood originate? How do I perceive its qualities? What actions must I undertake? It requires a sensory perception of the wood fibers. The attainment of mastery is a formidable endeavor. In Japan, they frequently reference 100,000 hours of practice. Experience! The evaluation criteria are stringent. As I age, I find myself evolving further into a master, even in my interpersonal interactions: observing how someone engages with a cello. This work demands calmness and patience, coupled with serenity and profound insight into

human nature. My learning is continuous, derived from feedback and dialogues with both satisfied and unsatisfied clients.

4. Discussion and synthesis: The luthier as cultural intermediary

The dialogue with Anna Wagner reveals several critical intersections between material practice and theoretical inquiry. By synthesizing her experiential insights, we can address the academic tensions outlined in the introduction through a thematic narrative of mastery.

This thematic investigation begins with the symbiosis of hand and sound. Wagner's framing of her role as an "ally" to the musician suggests that the luthier acts as a cultural intermediary. Her expertise is not merely technical but interpretive, effectively bridging the gap between the material object and artistic intent. This relationship reflects what Ingold (2013) describes as the practitioner's "attunement" to both the materials and the human environment; the act of "liberating" the instrument's voice thus becomes a collaborative preservation of cultural heritage (Howard, 2022).

Building upon this interpretative role, we find an ethical dimension grounded in restraint and the "workmanship of risk" (Pye, 1968). The "less is more" axiom in Wagner's restoration work reflects a high-level cognitive evaluation of material resistance. Following Pye (1968), this approach exemplifies the "workmanship of risk," where the artisan's embodied "feeling" for the wood protects the instrument's historical integrity from excessive intervention. This manual legitimacy confers a unique "authenticity" that is fundamentally absent in the "workmanship of certainty" provided by mechanical replication (Lindley, 1977; Pye, 1968; Smith, 2018).

Furthermore, Wagner's practice highlights a critical tension between pragmatic innovation and technological substitution. While she displays a critically pragmatic stance toward innovation, technology is welcomed only as a diagnostic extension of the senses—such as through scanners or eye-tracking—rather than an ontological replacement for the "encounter" with the material. This perspective mirrors contemporary debates on digital luthiery, asserting that tools must serve the artisan's judgment rather than dictate the creative or restorative outcome (Dondi et al., 2019; Renney et al., 2022).

Finally, the interview situates mastery as a form of humanist praxis. Wagner's emphasis on "totality" and "productivity" echoes Sennett's (2009) framework of the self-actualized maker. By resisting the fragmentation of labor inherent in mass-production models, she positions the artisan as a free individual whose work constitutes a meaningful dialogue between the hand and the mind. Ultimately, her distinction between mastery and basic skill acquisition serves as a critical professional identity marker, one that directly challenges contemporary condensed learning models in favor of the patient maturation of tacit knowledge (Figueiredo & Ipiranga, 2015; Osman et al., 2011).

5. Conclusions and critical considerations

The preceding dialogue furnishes a robust defense of artisan mastery, yet it also exposes several systemic challenges that remain central to the field of material culture. A primary concern is the problem of value communication and validation. If, as Wagner suggests, the "true calculus of life transcends numerical values," craftsmanship studies must find new ways to articulate qualitative value—the "soul" or "encounter" embedded in the object—to a market increasingly accustomed to industrial and quantitative metrics. Reconciling the intrinsic worth of the artisan's labor with the external demands of commercial justification requires a transparent methodology that respects the non-linear nature of mastery.

Furthermore, the transmission of tacit knowledge presents a significant pedagogical challenge. Wagner's insistence on the "100,000 hours" of experiential practice highlights a temporal mismatch between traditional apprenticeship and contemporary educational structures. The transition from basic skill acquisition to profound mastery requires a level of patience and long-term reflection that is fundamentally at odds with modern, digitally condensed learning formats. Academic and professional institutions must therefore rethink how to cultivate the *temporal space* necessary for the maturation of high-level craftsmanship without compromising the relevance of the craft in an accelerated world.

Ultimately, the luthier's work ensures that authenticity remains a dynamic, embodied experience rather than a static historical fact. By acting as an ally to the musician and a guardian of the

instrument's legacy, the artisan ensures that cultural heritage is not merely maintained as a museum piece but is continuously liberated through performance. This highlights the ongoing necessity of the human element in lutherie; while technology may refine the diagnostic process, it cannot replace the sensory attunement and ethical judgment of the master. Preserving this component of humanity is not a nostalgic retreat into the past, but an essential strategy for maintaining cultural depth in the future.

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