

Kobi Levi was one of eight artists commissioned to use their own artisan skills to mark Cremona's inclusion on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list.

PHOTO CREDIT: KOBI LEVI



Cremona's creativity commemorated in Kobi Levi shoes

Traditional violin craftsmanship in Cremona in northern Italy was one of 16 cultural activities around the world to win inclusion on the list kept by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) of the brilliantly named "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" in 2012.

To mark the occasion, Cremona commissioned eight artists from all over the world to create objects commemorating the city's tradition of making stringed instruments, which dates back to at least the sixteenth century. One of the artists who took part was flamboyant Israeli footwear designer Kobi Levi

Israeli footwear creator Kobi Levi was one of eight artists commissioned by the city of Cremona to mark a moment of great significance in the history of the city and its artisan traditions.

and the shoes he made are part of an exhibition of the commissioned artists' work, which will run in Cremona's Ala Ponzone museum until September 29 this year.



The city of Cremona believes its instrument making craft is a fundamental part of its culture and its identity.

PHOTO CREDIT: UNESCO

Cremona craftsmanship

Cremonese violin makers attend a special school, based on a close teacher-pupil relationship, before being apprenticed in a local workshop, where they continue to perfect their technique, which they acknowledge to be a never-ending process. Each violin maker constructs between three and six instruments per year, shaping and assembling more than 70 pieces of wood around an inner mould by hand, according to the different acoustic response of each piece. No two violins are alike. Every part of the instrument

is made with a specific wood, carefully selected and naturally well seasoned. No semi-industrial or industrial materials are used.

Craftsmanship requires a high level of creativity, the authorities in Cremona say. The craftsman has to "adapt general rules and personal knowledge" to every instrument. Cremonese violin makers are deeply convinced that sharing their knowledge is fundamental to the growth of their craftsmanship, and dialogue with musicians is deemed essential so as to understand their needs. Traditional violin-making is promoted by two associations, the Consorzio Liutai Antonio Stradivari (more on whom later) and the Associazione Liutaria Italiana. This beautiful craft is considered "fundamental to the identity of Cremona and its citizens", and plays a key role in the community's social and cultural life.

Kobi Levi says it with shoes

Kobi Levi believes there are parallels between the art of making shoes the way he does and the traditional art of stringed-instrument production in Cremona that UNESCO has now honoured. For example, it is exceptionally interesting that the instrument makers choose specific woods for specific instruments, and also that the craftsman or woman has to adapt the rules and use personal knowledge to make each instrument, meaning that no two instruments are the same. Mr Levi's shoes are all handmade. Each part is made specifically for the pair it is intended to be used in. Therefore, like the instruments, no two pairs of his shoes are exactly the same either. And shoemaking also has its "general rules" to make sure each shoe is strong and

Violin elements in the design include waxed threads at the back of the shoe to represent the strings, F-holes cut into the midsole, a decorative toe reinforcement and a leather ankle-support strap that curls out from the back of the upper like a violin's scroll.

PHOTO CREDIT: KOBI LEVI

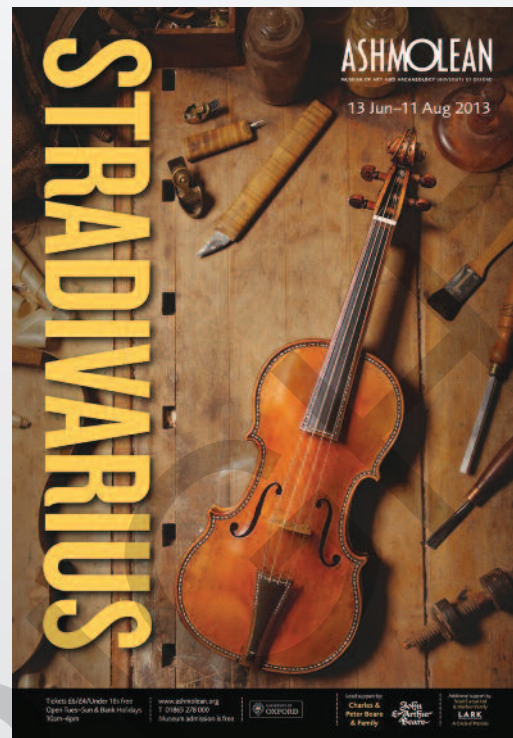


SPECIAL SOUND OF STRADIVARIUS

In parallel with the Cremona exhibition that features Kobi Levi's Violin Shoe, a separate celebration of Cremonese craftsmanship has been on show since mid-June at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. The Oxford Exhibition, which runs until August 11, celebrates the life and work of Cremona's most famous violin maker, Antonio Stradivari by bringing together 21 of his most important instruments to showcase the brilliance of his craft. Some 500 Stradivarius instruments remain around the world.

Most of the instruments in the Oxford collection come from Stradivari's so-called 'Golden Period', from 1700 to 1720. The experimentation that violin makers still employ in Cremona today and that Kobi Levi adopts to make his shoes, was an important part of what made Stradivari special, according to the curator of the Ashmolean, Dr Jon Whiteley.

"With each instrument he tried to experiment with a different balance between responsiveness, carrying power and expression," Dr Whiteley told the BBC when the exhibition opened. "In about 1700, he made a smaller instrument that swelled out more in the back and the front so that the sound-box contained a larger volume of air. And through tweaking it, and through trial and error, he reached a point at which the instruments were making a sound that matched what he heard in his ear and also had a carrying power that made them the ideal instrument for playing, say, in concert halls. The sounds [of a Stradivarius violin] fly heavenwards with an ease and a perfection and a sense of expression almost unparalleled."



CREDIT: ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM IN OXFORD.

Dr Whiteley calls "absolute nonsense" claims that Stradivarius was simply lucky to stumble upon the right wood, the spruce around Cremona, at the right time, and so produce his special sound. "Every other violin maker in Cremona had access to the same wood," he says. "That made no difference."

Instead, he says Stradivarius had the reputation of being an alchemist, someone who could turn lead into gold. "He used the same materials as everyone else but made an instrument that is perfect as a piece of craft," he concludes.

durable enough to wear and to make sure it will fit a real foot. "The creative work involves transformation and innovation regarding these rules," Kobi Levi says.

In the case of his Cremona commission, violin elements on the 12-centimetre-heeled shoes Kobi Levi created for the occasion include two parallel F-holes cut into the inside and outside of the midsole and a decorative toe reinforcement in the shape of the instrument's tailpiece. A leather ankle-support strap that curls out from the back of the upper is reminiscent of a violin's scroll and four 'strings' made from wax thread stretch between the the back of the 'scroll', down over the heel part of the upper, and across a space between the heel itself and the upper, to attach to a mini-bridge at the back of heel-base. The insole itself is shaped like the silhouette of a violin, with the upper following it. The upper and heel cover are made from calf and goat leather, and the heel is carved in wood.

Untouchable

Shoes, wood, leather and wax thread are all tangible things, but so are violins and the other stringed instruments that the craftsmen and women of Cremona make. What UNESCO has honoured the city in Lombardy for is its intangible cultural heritage.

The committee that made the decision to include Cremona on UNESCO's representative list of wonderful examples of intangible cultural heritage explained its reasons by saying: "Traditional craftsmanship for violin-making has been transmitted from generation to generation, both through apprenticeship and through formal education, playing an important role in the everyday life of people in Cremona and giving them a sense of identity." Kobi Levi's work of art aside, perhaps it's the intangible rather than the tangible aspects that link Cremonese craftsmanship in violins to the heritage and traditions of artisan shoemakers around the world. 