

“Florian thinks with his hands”

Florian Leonhard is a violin maker with a meticulous attention to detail but he has his mother to thank for a moment of spontaneity that shaped his career

Florian Leonhard’s grandfather was a scientist and as a youngster Florian thought he would follow a path into research and medicine.

His parents, Leo and Christel Leonhard, felt their son would be better suited to a career where he could combine his creative flair and obsessive attention to detail but they left him to discover that path.

The Leonhards, who lived in Dusseldorf, were a family who loved music, arts and theatre. Leo was a painter and later a professor in drawing and graphics, while Christel played the violin.

The family would join friends for musical recitals in their homes and Christel played violin in a quartet.

When Christel took her violin for repair, the violin maker noticed Florian scrutinising the instruments, trying to work out how they were made.

Christel said: “At the end of our visit he gave Florian a piece of wood and said ‘try to make the base of a violin’. When we returned to collect mine, Florian took along his first try and the violin maker was taken aback that he had managed to do it.

“Leo and I recognised his talent but it was not only that – if Florian made anything that was not quite perfect he would repeat it a second, third and a fourth time until it was right.

This was a quality he needed to develop real craftsmanship.

“He also inherited his father’s natural drawing skills and that was important in the violin school. He certainly had the assets for this profession.

“Leo would say ‘Florian thinks with his hands’ and over the breakfast table one day he suggested he might like to consider violin making as a career.

“That was it. Florian applied for the Mittelwald School of Violin Making and practised and practised to get in. He was one of 12 chosen from more than 1,000.”

Florian found there was only one other student who was ahead of him at the start of the course. The boy’s father was a violin maker so he was more experienced and faster so Florian worked late into the evenings to perfect the skills and precision needed to be a fine violin maker.

As part of the course the students went into the forest to collect wood to learn how to source wood and how to select the right materials.

Christel says she was surprised at how her son took to learning the business side of the course as ‘nobody else in the family was business-minded’.

She said: “When Florian had to demonstrate management of a workshop and dealing with finances he threw himself into it. He was a natural.

“In his last year, he told me he did not want to stay in Germany to work in a backwater workshop but wanted to work with the best violin makers, to learn more from them. >>



Florian Leonhard with his mother Christel



Florian Leonhard is development committee chairman and a Menuhin Competition sponsor
Picture: Will Tisdall

“He told me W.E. Hill & Sons were the best in the world so I said ‘why don’t we go there?’.

“We jumped on a plane and went to England. I didn’t think a lot, I had good feeling about it and I suppose we were young and unsophisticated back then!”

Christel and Florian travelled to Havençelds, in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire where W.E. Hill had moved premises from London.

Christel said: “It was an adventure and we found this wonderful place, a manor house set in parkland and a beautiful workshop. There was even a railway in the grounds!

“It was in the sticks, but I knew Florian would love it there. His grandparents lived in Alsfeld, a charming medieval town and we spent our summer holidays there walking in the hills.

“It is a magical, romantic place where there are more than 400 half-timbered houses - perhaps Florian’s early interest to maintain and renovate came from there!

“Anyway, Florian showed Andrew Hill his work and they struck up an easy conversation. At the end of it, Mr Andrew, as he was called, said ‘yes you can come to work here’.

“I didn’t believe it. I asked whether we should make a contract and he said ‘no, we will shake hands on it’. It was a gentlemen’s agreement.”

Christel said when they returned to Germany, Florian could hardly believe it so he wrote to Mr Andrew to thank him. He wrote and re-

wrote the letter half a dozen times before he was happy to send it.

Andrew Hill later visited the Mittelwald school. Christel said: “In the workshops everyone wore those green aprons so I took Florian out to buy a white linen shirt so he looked smart!”

Florian moved to the W.E. Hill & Sons’ workshop in 1985 and although he was in the countryside he spent his weekends exploring London and its theatres and museums.

He became head restorer from 1987-1989 and eventually set up his own business in 1995.

Although Florian has been making violins for 34 years it was only çve years ago that he felt that they were good enough to sell.

Christel said: “For Florian, studying violins is like forensic science. Choosing the correct piece of wood is the most difçcult thing to learn. He is always on the look out for the best quality and he chooses it by instinct for Æxibility and strength, so the sound will be absolutely right.”



Florian Leonhard is chairman of the development committee and a sponsor of the Yehudi Menuhin 100th Competition. This year he is celebrating the 21st anniversary of Florian Leonhard Violins. He has also been responsible for helping former Lark Scholar Joe Devalle secure a violin through The Stradivari Trust. See page 19