

# Culture Cruncher



## Violin-maker Carleen Hutchins' legacy resonates globally and locally

By Valerie Scher, SDNN

When most people think of violin makers, they think of long-ago legends like the Stradivarius, Amati and Guarneri families.

By comparison, Carleen Maley Hutchins - who died today at age 98 at her home in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire - was a modern marvel.

According to Hutchins' biographer, D. Quincy Whitney, she was "arguably the most innovative and ground-breaking violin-maker of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, if not of all time. Over the last half century, Hutchins has made nearly 450 stringed instruments and written over 100 technical papers," including two major studies of violin acoustics for "Scientific American."



Carleen Maley Hutchins and some of her instruments. (Courtesy photo)

And her legacy resonates at the Hutchins Consort, the 10-year-old, Encinitas-based nonprofit organization that performs on her matched instruments. Guided by artistic director Joe McNalley, the Consort is now in the process of merging with Hutchins' old educational organization, The New Violin Family Association.

"Carleen represented one of the great historical breakthroughs in string technology," managing director Drew Cady told Culture Cruncher. "When she first heard the Consort, she was thrilled to know that there was a professional ensemble devoted to her instruments as opposed to just keeping them in museums."



The smallest one is more petite than a standard violin and is tuned one octave higher. The largest one is bigger than a contrabass and is tuned an octave lower than a cello.

The result, according to the Consort, is an "acoustically balanced set of instruments that can sound truly like violins across the entire range of written music."

And you can hear the Hutchins Consort for yourself. Upcoming events include free concerts as well as

its 2009-2010 series at La Jolla's Neurosciences Institute and Newport Beach's St. Mark Presbyterian Church. Tickets/information: [www.hutchinsconsort.org](http://www.hutchinsconsort.org)

To find out more about the remarkable instrument maker, read the obituary prepared by Whitney, her biographer. Here it is:

Carleen Maley Hutchins was born May 24, 1911, in Springfield, Massachusetts, daughter of Thomas W. and Grace Fletcher Maley.

A 1929 graduate of Montclair High School, in Montclair, NJ, Carleen obtained her Bachelors of Arts degree in biology from Cornell in 1933. She obtained her Masters of Education degree at New York University in 1942. In 1943, she married Morton A. Hutchins, a chemist with DuPont. She is survived by her son, William Aldrich and her daughter Caroline "Cassie" Coons, and several grandchildren.

In addition to her commitment to family, Carleen Hutchins pursued her own passion for woodworking and creativity and became an extraordinary violinmaker. In fact, Carleen Maley Hutchins was arguably the most innovative and ground-breaking violinmaker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if not of all time. Over the last half century, Hutchins has made nearly 450 stringed instruments and has written over 100 technical papers including two benchmark *Scientific American* articles on violin acoustics.

In addition, she created a Violin Octet, a modern consort of eight finely-matched violins ranging in size from an 11" violin to a seven foot contrabass, extending tonally across the range of written music and consisting of a treble, soprano, mezzo, alto, tenor, baritone, bass, and contrabass violins.

In 1995, Yo-Yo Ma won a Grammy for his performance of Bartok's *Viola Concerto* on a Hutchins alto violin that he played as a vertical viola. In 1998, Hutchins was awarded an Honorary Fellowship from the Acoustical Society of America, the only woman of seventeen recipients beginning with Thomas Alva Edison in 1929.

The story began when Hutchins chose to be "the luthier crazy enough to make fiddles that would be destroyed," as her mentor — retired Harvard physicist Frederick A. Saunders — said when he first met this young female violinmaker. Seeking to unravel the acoustical secrets of the violin, Hutchins and Saunders performed more than 100 experiments on violins and violas made by Hutchins who inherently found herself the lone female in two male-dominated worlds of acoustical physics and violinmaking. She was a pioneer with new materials, such as carbon fiber, and in electronic plate tuning.

Though gender remained at the center of her struggle throughout her life as a female luthier, Hutchins' character most dramatically shaped her life's path. A trumpet player and biologist, at age 27, Hutchins jumped disciplines and entered the worlds of violinmaking and acoustical physics with no preparation other than her own curiosity, courage and common sense. Ironically, these personality traits propelled Hutchins into trouble almost immediately.

Violinmakers criticized Hutchins for bringing science into the workshop claiming she was "demystifying" the craft, despite the fact that by her own admission, her experiments continued to reveal even more mysteries she could *not* solve.

Luthiers criticized Hutchins for bringing openness to a world that had been shaped by secrecy since before the time of Stradivari. By publishing an international journal devoted to linking acoustical physics with violinmaking, Hutchins boldly chose to share rather than hoard information.

But perhaps her greatest legacy in the violin world is that Carleen Hutchins openly challenged the 350-year old canon at the center of violinmaking — the question of whether "old" violins are better than new violins. By welcoming comparisons between old and new instruments, she threatened the status quo of a market that placed high value and high prices on old violins. Hutchins raised the unpopular question of acoustics — suggesting that a player judge an instrument by how it *sounds* rather than by its label. By challenging sacrosanct assumptions, Hutchins forged a new paradigm, transforming the historical and social context in which she found herself.

Although she trained many of the world's greatest living luthiers, and adoption of her methods has spread worldwide, one of her most enduring struggles was in gaining acceptance for the octet of "New Violin Family" instruments that were first proposed by Pulitzer prize winning composer Henry Brant in 1957. The first performance of Brant's *Consort for True Violins* in 1965 caused a sensation in New York, and the instruments found powerful allies in Leopold Stokowski, Yehudi Menuhin, Gregor Piatgorski, faculty members of the Juilliard School, the Finkels and the aforementioned Mr. Ma. Brant's last collaboration, left unfinished at his death last year, was for the Hutchins instruments.

Despite such renowned proponents, however, until 1999 Dr. Hutchins was continually frustrated that the many attempts to form ensembles around these instruments were always short lived. In that year composer and contrabassist Joe McNalley founded the first permanent ensemble that plays on Dr Hutchins' instruments: The Southern California-based Hutchins Consort, which also has members based in New York and Europe.

McNalley recognized and overcame the pitfalls that had thwarted the previous ensembles. The Hutchins Consort, now in its tenth year, has a regular concert series in two California Counties, a large repertoire of traditional and new works, and tours nationally and internationally. A new collaboration to produce inexpensive copies of the instruments is underway to help ensure that future generations have access to the superior resonance of these instruments. Dr. Hutchins said of the Hutchins Consort "it is a dream come true."

Carleen Hutchins' other violin octets reside in: The University of Edinburgh, Scotland; Musik Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; and The National Music Museum, Vermillion, SD. Copies of Dr. Hutchins' instruments have been made in many parts of the world. Although in fragile health, Dr. Hutchins continued mentoring violin makers until her death. Dr. Hutchins' legacy extends far beyond the recognition by the scientific community to musicians, luthiers, composers and audience members throughout the world.

Valerie Scher is the SDNN Arts & Entertainment editor.