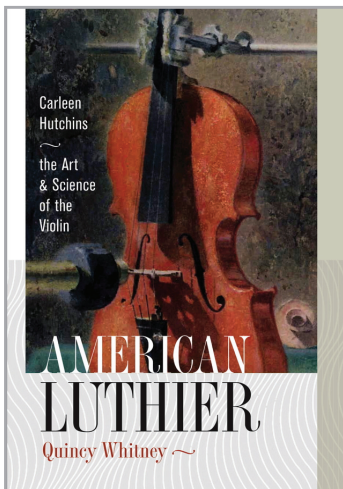


## Book Review

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– Philip L. Marston, Book Review Editor

# American Luthier, Carleen Hutchins— The Art & Science of the Violin



**Author:** Quincy Whitney  
**Publisher:** University Press of New England, Lebanon, New Hampshire.  
2016, 290 pp.  
**Price:** \$35.00 (hardcover)  
**ISBN:** 978-1-61168-592-3

*American Luthier, Carleen Hutchins—The Art & Science of the Violin*, written by Quincy Whitney (primary arts writer for the *Boston Sunday Globe NH Weekly*),

provides a biographical account of the violin maker and scientist, Carleen Hutchins. In 1997 Carleen asked Ms. Whitney to write her biography and provided her with valuable diaries and other material that has made this book such a true-to-life work. It gives an extensive chronicle of Carleen's life while providing snippets of fascinating stories related to the art and science of musical instruments, and, in particular, the role of women. For almost anyone involved in musical acoustics, Carleen Hutchins was a household name as well as an inspiration to scientists with an interest in violins. Ms. Whitney says it so well on p. 136, "Carleen Hutchins had a gift for perceiving other people's gifts, igniting their passions, finding common ground, and then providing the energy of enthusiasm that she powered like the wind." She was awarded the Honorary Fellowship in the Acoustical Society of America in 1998 "for her unique role in combining the art of violin making with the science of acoustics." This reviewer was one of those fortunate scientists to have known her and was most impressed by her selfless dedication to promoting violin acoustics. This relationship started with my Ph.D. work under Eugen Skudrzyk who presented me with several violin plates made by Carleen to study during my disserta-

tion, having received them from Carleen in the promotion of her love in life, violin acoustics. Her recognition was ubiquitous. Quincy Whitney describes the world class musicians that visited Carleen's basement acoustics laboratory at her residence at 112 Essex in Montclair—a tribute to the reach of her fame and influence.

What is wonderful about this book is that Ms. Whitney captures the essence of Carleen as a scientist and as a person. Having met and worked with Carleen, my personal experiences resonated in unison with Ms. Whitney's accurate accounts. Furthermore, the author adds fascinating "Intermezzos" or short sections throughout the book that entertain the reader with fascinating stories: histories of instruments and instrumentalists, harps from 2500 BC to organs in the Dark Ages, women as performers in the Renaissance, polyphony and the science of sound, waves and vibrations, early days of Cremona, Leonardo Da Vinci's inventions of musical instruments, Michele Todini's "cabinet of curiosities"—the Golden Harpsichord, enthralling stories of the great virtuosos and makers of the 18th and 19th centuries, and finally the most famous violin in the world that no one has ever heard—the Messiah.

As a promoter of violin acoustics as well as a violist with a passion for string quartets, we find out about Carleen's incredible circle of scientists, not surprisingly also musicians, cellists John Schelleng and Robert Fryxell and violinist Frederick Saunders. Schelleng jokingly called this "intense foursome" the "catgut acoustical society" leading to the founding of the society with this name in 1963. Under Carleen's leadership the CAS has promoted scientific research and publication in violin acoustics ever since its first newsletter in May 1964.

As a luthier we remarkably hear about a visit to Carleen from the "celebrated, internationally known instrument dealer" Rembert Wurlitzer of NYC that ended in an opportunity for Carleen to work with his master luthier Simone Sacconi from 1959 to 1963. Sacconi was a renowned expert on violin restoration and author of *The Secrets of Stradivari*. It is not surprising that 9 years later she founded the summer Violin Craftmanship Institute at the University of New Hampshire which continues to instruct luthiers today.

A great deal of the book discusses the trials and tribulations of Carleen's Violin Octet. With the Octet she attempted to bridge the gap between the violin, viola, cello, and bass with a set of eight instruments graduated from a small violin to a very large bass. Promoting this Octet became an overriding passion for Carleen who travelled over the world in the effort. Ms. Whitney describes the many tribulations from funding musicians to perform to convincing conductors like Leopold Stokowski to inject them into the orchestra. This reviewer was fortunate to perform with the Sixteen Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia on the so called "tenor," a small cello tuned a fifth higher. It was a joy to play, and played with ease. However, a colleague who played the much larger baritone cello groaned at the difficulty of playing it. It is perhaps in this last comment that the fate of Carleen's Octet rested—it turned out that classically trained musicians that spend so many hours in the practice room would mostly remain unwilling to struggle with a new set of difficulties presented

by the Octet. The author captures this so well in her writing of the history of the Violin Octet, leaving the reader a bit sad in the end. However, and moreover, one cannot forget that Carleen's greatest contribution was to the field of violin acoustics.

This reviewer highly recommends this book. It is an engaging, entertaining, accurate, and informative work, especially to those with an interest in music and acoustics. Having researched extensively Carleen's life, Quincy Whitney has done a phenomenal job.

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[Published online 10 October 2016, *Journal of Acoustical Society of America*. 140 (4)]



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