Stradivarius

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Introduction

WHEN I WAS about ten my parents bought me a violin. Comparing instruments was a way for those of us at the back of the second violins to fill the inevitable longueurs of school orchestra rehearsals. One had an elaborately carved fish at the end of its neck instead of the usual snail-shell scroll. Another was a striking, if rather nauseating, olive-green. But we had three more standard criteria to use in comparisons: the violin's age, where it was made, and the name of its maker. On most of our violins we could establish all three from the labels visible through their left-hand soundholes.

My own violin did reasonably well on our first criterion: the 1809 on its label meant it was pretty old, although, I knew even then, too young to date back to the true golden era of violin-making. Age added more to violins than just antiquity; they needed to be old to sound good. It was this that caused my second-hand damaged instrument by a nondescript maker to cost more than a brand-new one. It had a good tone, despite the small crack in its belly.

On our other two criteria, however, my violin scored rather poorly. It was made in Mittenwald, in Germany. The name meant nothing to us, although a lot of our school violins seemed to come from there. As far as we were concerned, good violins came from Italy. If we had

known enough, I am sure we would have graded towns within Italy into a pyramid with Cremona at its apex, but I don't think we had even heard of the place. We were most definitely familiar, however, with its most famous citizen. Stradivarius was the only violin-maker whose name carried any weight with us at all. That was the third criterion: your violin either carried the meaningless name of a long-dead maker or it was a Stradivarius.

One of those orchestral instruments met all our requirements gloriously: 'Antonius Stradivarius Cremonensis Faciebat Anno 1716' (or some similar date), its label proclaimed with splendid confidence. It was a fake, of course. We knew that much. But despite this the violin retained some sort of fascination; it achieved distinction just through bearing the name.

I GAVE UP the violin when I left school. In the twenty years since, I have come to understand as a listener what I never did as a mediocre player – that the members of the violin family (principally the violin itself, the viola and the cello) are indisputably the kings of all the instruments. The violin, so deceptively simple, can both portray and inspire every emotion imaginable, imitating the braying of a donkey or delivering a tune of heartrending beauty. Lyrical and expressive, or harsh and violent, it is the master of adaptability; only the human voice can match it. By comparison, the piano's eighty-odd notes a semitone apart may make it a mechanical marvel of polyphony, but where is the ability to thrill with almost imperceptible changes in pitch or volume? As for the other members of the orchestra – woodwind, brass, per-

cussion – the very names hint at the paucity of their tonal range.

Not only do the violin and its sister instruments dominate the orchestra, there remains no question of who is their most famous maker – perhaps the most celebrated craftsman in history. From Melbourne to Milwaukee, the bus driver will ask you, as you struggle with your violin case, 'Is that a Stradivarius?' His reputation for excellence is ubiquitous.

This reputation springs from the players themselves. To anyone, but most of all those lucky enough to perform on them, Strads are far more than just instruments. They are works of art, bringing together utility and aesthetics in a way that no other object can quite match. The British cellist, Steven Isserlis, borrows his Stradivarius from the Nippon Music Foundation: 'My heart leaps every day when I take it out of the case. Its beautiful colour glows.' In 1986 one of the most successful performers of our era, Itzhak Perlman, acquired the favourite Strad of an even more celebrated predecessor – Yehudi Menuhin: 'When it became available, I was the happiest violinist in the world . . . It has Stradivari's most beautiful varnish and its shape is perfection. I feel very lucky and privileged to own the *Soil*.'*

The connection the *Soil* makes between Perlman and Menuhin is typical; all the great Strads have histories that can hardly fail to inspire. Any one may have been admired by Beethoven, heard by Mozart. One of Isserlis's predecessors on his cello was Emanuel Feuermann, possibly the

* All Strads have names, often, as in this case, derived from a previous owner.

most talented cellist of the twentieth century. On a practical level, this meant Isserlis pursued adjustments to his Strad until its clarity matched what he heard on a Feuermann recording. More intriguingly, he describes teaching a masterclass in the 'Schelomo', a piece by Ernest Bloch that is now a standard part of the repertoire: 'Before I remembered what cello I was playing, I thought, hang on, my cello knows this.' It could have known it by heart: Feuermann was asked to perform the *Schelomo* so often that he grew to hate it. In a similar vein, when the Russian violinist Louis Krasner bought the *Dancla* Strad from Nathan Milstein, one of the twentieth century's greatest virtuosi, he found that his predecessor's 'playing and sonorities were, I would sense, still in the violin'. He could only rationalize it with the view that 'A Strad violin, like a sensitive animal, knows its master and, like the living being that it is, has memory and loyalty.'

Milstein explained the sale of his Strad to Krasner – he moved on to another – in explicitly anthropomorphic terms: 'My love for this violin did not diminish. It was just that after years with a sparkling, eager blonde, I came to feel that I should turn to a more sombre and perhaps quieter and more composed, sedate brunette.' The quote exemplifies a third way in which Strads transcend their status as mere objects: the devotion they both inspire and require in their players. I once naively asked a successful musician if he'd ever thought of getting a new violin. His reply came with a mixture of shock and the very faintest longing: 'That's like asking a man if he'd considered changing his wife.' Maxim Vengerov, a Russian who is probably the most admired of the younger generation of performers, is even more direct

about his relationship with his Strad: 'It is a marriage.' The violin is such a feminine instrument that the metaphor seems almost inescapable, at least for men. Women are more likely to regard their violins as an extension of themselves. One friend told me this is why she does not use a shoulder-rest. The German virtuosa, Anne-Sophie Mutter, rests her Stradivarius on her bare shoulder: even clothes are too great a barrier. The exception only seems to prove the rule. When the young Soviet violinist Viktoria Mullova took a taxi across the border from Finland into Sweden in 1983, she left her government-owned Strad on the hotel-room bed. As a result her KGB minders wasted valuable hours on the assumption that she could not possibly be defecting.

Finally, there is the most obvious and concrete way in which violinists put a value on their instruments. Vengerov's Strad – the *Kreutzer* – set an auction record of £947,500 when it was bought for him in 1998. Even that figure is put in the shade by private deals. Scarcity and the need for age have combined to drive a seemingly unstoppable rise in the prices of string instruments. What other profession faces a situation where the tools of its trade have become so expensive as to be almost unobtainable? Every maker has his price – the violin says something about its player's status, even before bow is put to string – but none commands more respect than Antonio Stradivari.

FAME, BEAUTY, history, value, the peculiar devotion that Strads inspire: it is a heady mix. And it all results from their most remarkable characteristic. More than 250 years

after his death, Stradivari's violins and cellos remain the best in the world. On song and in the right hands they are magnificent, projecting a glorious tone to the back of the largest concert hall. A violinist who is attuned to his Strad, and knows that it will do everything required of it, can relax into playing, confident that he will not have to force to be heard. Of five soloists in a recent season at London's Royal Festival Hall, four played Strads. They are the ultimate rebuke to the arrogance of the modern age: science does not have all the answers; Renaissance technology still cannot be bettered.

How can that be? The continuing supremacy of Stradivari is one of the great mysteries of our era. What made him so special? Why were his techniques not maintained by his successors? Is there any likelihood that one day he will be displaced? If the answers to these questions lie anywhere, it must be in Stradivari's instruments themselves. He made over 1,000 of them; around 600 are known to survive. Their continuing appeal is at the core of the Stradivarius legend. It is commonplace to speak of artists achieving immortality through their work, but there can be few better examples than this.

So six Strads will be the central characters of this book. They are not their maker's six most celebrated instruments; nor do all currently boast a famous player. But over the last three centuries they have been heard and admired by millions. Their lives, and those of the people they have touched, both illustrate and frame the enigma of Stradivari's inimitability. This book tells the story of five violins, one cello and a genius.

Chapter One

FIVE VIOLINS AND ONE CELLO

The *Messiah*, the *Viotti*, the *Khevenhüller*, the *Paganini*, the *Lipiński* and the *Davidov*

THE *MESSIAH*

Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, founded in 1683, is the oldest institution of its kind in Britain. From Elias Ashmole's original bequest, it has gone on to establish an enviable reputation for excellence in research and teaching, with an appearance impressive enough to match. Wide stone steps lead up to a grand, if slightly austere, classical façade. The Ashmolean may be smaller than London's British Museum, or New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, but the overall effect is similar. You feel a proper sense of awe even before stepping over the threshold. Once you do, and if you're lucky, the guard on duty at the front door will tell you the short cut: don't go up the main stairs but turn left, go to the end of the gallery, take the stairs you see on your right, and the Hill Music Room is immediately at the top on the first floor. On your arrival, as likely as not, the room will be shut, with a sign on the door blaming staff shortages and suggesting that, if you particularly wish to see the room's contents, you should try the invigilator next door.

It is an unpropitious beginning. When you manage to

get in, you will find a room only perhaps 15 by 30 feet. On hot days there will be a fan in the corner to compensate for the lack of air-conditioning. The cork tiles on the floor are scuffed about; protruding nails catch the unwary foot. Curious Old Masters with little obvious connection to music line the walls above the harpsichords and virginals that comprise the less interesting part of the Hill Collection. Elsewhere, one case contains bows, another includes a guitar made by Stradivari himself. It is plain but superbly constructed – testimony to its maker's range, but far from being the main attraction. In the middle of the room a further case is crowded with eight violins, a viola and a bass viol. One of the violins was made by Andrea Amati in 1564, part of a commission for Charles IX of France. It is the oldest surviving violin in the world, an exquisite piece of workmanship. The Civic Museum in Cremona has one from the same set, but dated 1566, that was recently valued at $10 million. The Ashmolean's example has been laid on its back to fit into the case, obscuring what remains of the gilded painting with which the violin was decorated.

Almost every exhibit in this display would be the highlight of another museum's collection, but here they are no more than also-rans to the star, the only instrument to get its own cabinet, the one that greets you as you walk through the door: the *Messiah*. There it hangs, suspended in its case, visible from every angle, pristine, its varnish as flawless as when Stradivari applied the last few drops in 1716. It is in mint condition because this, the most famous violin in the world, template for countless copies, has hardly ever been played.

THE *VIOTTI*

On 6 May 1990 Thomas Bowes gave a recital at the Purcell Room, a small concert hall in London. He was playing a violin he called the *Viotti-Marie Hall*, after two previous owners. Its looks alone were striking: the immaculate maple back had natural horizontal stripes whose effect Bowes describes as almost psychedelic. But it is the sound that he most remembers now: 'That violin was absolutely deafening to play, when you played a sort of high harmonic in G or something on the E string you would actually be slightly in pain; it was so focused; it was like a sort of laser beam . . . It gave an incredible feeling of power just to know that the smallest touch would just ping out to the back of the biggest hall . . . There was a kind of awesome perfection about it.'

Bowes's recital was billed as revisiting the 'Golden Age of the violin': the Edwardian era when musicians faced no competition from modern technology for the ears of their prosperous audience. One of the Strad's eponymous owners, Marie Hall, had been a leading English violinist in the early twentieth century. The recital consisted mainly of music that she would have played, exhibition pieces by some of the great nineteenth-century violinist-composers: Paganini, Spohr, Vieuxtemps, Ernst and Wieniawski. As for the violin's connection with Viotti, Europe's most influential violinist at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the programme had this to say: 'The *Viotti* Stradivarius of 1709 was used by Viotti until his death, when it was sold in Paris with other instruments in his possession. Viotti was perhaps one of

the first great players to fully appreciate the merits of Stradivarius. The "Marie Hall" ex Viotti Stradivarius is said to have been Viotti's favourite instrument and is reputed to be the instrument he used when he first visited Paris. It is a magnificent violin, with superb tone; a perfect Stradivarius in every respect.' It is our second violin.

THE *KHEVENHÜLLER*

Urbane and charming, with a penchant for expensive cigars and a fund of amusing stories, Peter Biddulph is everything one expects a violin expert to be. His dealership has a fine address in London's West End and its safe has played host to violins that most players can only covet. He is one of the few dealers in the world who can identify the real thing with confidence and who have the reputation to match their skill. Biddulph's habit of conducting transactions at either end of a trip on Concorde earned him, in happier times, the nickname 'the Flying Fiddle'. Nowadays he probably regrets the double entendre. A case brought by the heirs of Gerald Segelman, whose violin collection Biddulph helped to disperse after its owner's death, ended in an out-of-court settlement of £3 million. Biddulph had to sell the building that houses his London shop, although he still operates from the basement and a ground-floor reception. Nevertheless he protests his innocence of anything more serious than bad record-keeping; it was, he says, only his inability to afford a protracted case that led to the settlement.

The Segelman affair has turned an unwelcome spot-

light on violin dealers and their role as the final arbiters of authenticity and value. Biddulph could be forgiven for avoiding questions. Nevertheless he is happy to talk, over a mint tea, about the *Khevenhüller*, the third of our violins, which he sold in 2000 on behalf of one of the oldest violin shops in Japan.

The *Khevenhüller* Stradivarius was made in 1733, a late masterpiece. One previous owner describes it as 'ample and round, varnished a deep glowing red, its grand proportions . . . matched by a sound at once powerful, mellow and sweet'. In the last twenty years it has changed hands many times; this was the second time that Biddulph acted as intermediary. On this occasion it was valued at $4 million. Another dealer had shown it to Maxim Vengerov. He 'loved it', but not enough, apparently, to make him give up the *Kreutzer*; we should admire him for refusing to abandon his 'marriage' for a new paramour. Jaime Laredo, the Bolivian-American violinist, also tried the *Khevenhüller*. He too 'would have loved it' as a partner to his other great Strad, the *Gariel*, made in 1717. But he could not raise the funds. Who could afford an asking price like that?

THE *PAGANINI*

'If the Tokyo String Quartet isn't the world's greatest chamber music ensemble, it's hard to imagine which group is.' Unsurprisingly, the Quartet's publicity likes to repeat that quote from the *Washington Post*. Less definitive but almost as flattering reviews remark on both the group's succulent tone and a cohesiveness that persists

despite the numerous changes of personnel since the ensemble's formation in 1969. It would be pleasing to think that both these attributes may partly result from another fact, also repeated in every press release: since 1995 the Tokyo Quartet has played the same set of instruments, all made by Stradivari, the Paganini Quartet.

Named after the nineteenth-century Italian virtuoso who once owned all four instruments, the Paganini Quartet has a legendary status that is almost matched by the quality of its constituent pieces. Stradivari only made two or three great violas and the Quartet's, made in 1731, is one of them. The first violin, four years older, was described by Paganini as having a tone as big as a double bass; it too is recognized as a masterpiece. The cello's label dates it to 1736, the year before its maker's death, although many place it earlier. It has the reputation of being among the best works of Stradivari's last years, with perfect proportions that hark back to an earlier era of the Master's life.

In such exalted company the second violin, made around 1680, is an oddity. Stradivari's early works are generally thought to be in a lower league than his more mature output, and this violin – the 1680 *Paganini* – is fifty years older than its counterparts in the Quartet. A string quartet is a partnership of equals. The second violin should never be of poorer quality than the instruments with which it must balance. The answer to why the 1680 *Paganini* became part of the Quartet lies in its history. It is our fourth violin.

THE *LIPIŃSKI*

For 200 years the 1715 *Lipiński* boasted a succession of famous players. One of the biggest violins Stradivari produced, made when he was at his peak, its construction speaks of its maker's confidence, and the longevity of its fame is surely evidence of his genius. But for over fifty years it has figured in no performances. Since its last recorded sale in 1962, the *Lipiński* – our final violin – has dropped from sight.

THE *DAVIDOV*

No such fate is likely to befall the *Davidov* cello, made in 1712. Yo-Yo Ma, who has played it for the last twenty years, is probably the world's most celebrated cellist and he is eloquent when he describes getting to know his great Stradivarius: 'The pianissimos float effortlessly. The instrument's response is instantaneous. The sound can be rich, sensuous or throbbing at every range, yet can also be clear, cultured and pure. Each sound stimulates the player's imagination. However, there is no room for error as one cannot push the sound, rather it needs to be released. I had to learn not to be seduced by the sheer beauty of the sound in my mind before trying to coax it from the cello.'

Makers have a similar response to the quality of the *Davidov*'s workmanship. In a recent article one says: 'Antonio Stradivari made this cello to give us all a lesson in humility.' Every aspect of the instrument is remark-

able, but it is the varnish that creates the greatest impression: 'For a few precious moments towards evening the sun broke into the airy studio and the cello blazed with light. Not only did it change colour, it changed in transparency and depth and like some fantastic natural hologram it presented a different image with each new twist and turn.'

THE *Messiah*, the *Viotti*, the *Khevenhüller*, the *Paganini*, the *Lipiński* and the *Davidov*: these are our six Strads. Each has its own history. Occasionally two will cross paths, in the collection of a single owner or at the same performance, but there is only one man whose life encompasses all six: Antonio Stradivari himself. And his story begins at least a century before his birth, with the emergence of Cremona at the centre of Europe's nascent violin industry and the royal patron who helped to put it there.