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## CHAPTER 10

### The 1890 purchase, more correspondence, and players

At the start of 1890 news emerged from Paris that the two married daughters of Delphin and Jeanne-Emilie Alard – joint owners of the *Le Messie* violin following the deaths of their parents – were disposed to sell it. Fifteen original letters are held within the Hill Archives at the Ashmolean Museum<sup>1</sup> which chart the process leading up to the purchase of this violin by Mr Robert Crawford of Edinburgh.<sup>2</sup> The earliest letter, on 38 *New Bond Street* letter-paper, is from Arthur E Hill to Robert Crawford, dated 21<sup>st</sup> January 1890:

Dear Mr Crawford,

[...] I have sent you the catalogue of the South Kensington Museum Collection of instruments shown in 1872 and in it you will see some portraits of the “Messie”, much was written about it at the time in the papers and you cannot think what pleasure it will give me some day to put its history into shape. The photo gives not the faintest idea of its beauties but I can assure you it is the fiddle of Europe [...].<sup>3</sup>

Robert Crawford replied two days later, on 23<sup>rd</sup> January:

Dear Mr Hill,

[...] Many thanks for the offer of your services which I much appreciate. I am seriously thinking of buying the Messie, but I have been spending so much money during the last 6 months, close to £20,000 on my house and grounds alone, that causes [me] to be a little careful. Were it 3 months after this, I would not hesitate a second as I then will have lots of spare money but I will write you within 14 days [...].<sup>4</sup>

On 28<sup>th</sup> March 1890 Arthur Hill sent another letter to Robert Crawford:

Dear Mr Crawford,

With regard to the Messie, no offer is any good in the face of their<sup>5</sup> having agreed to sell it for £2,000, and as their customer, whom we now believe to be an American known to us,<sup>6</sup> has agreed to give this sum, unless you are prepared to give the same amount if he does not pay up, there is

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<sup>1</sup> HA:AMO (Hill Archives, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

<sup>2</sup> The Crawford/Hill letters were donated to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, in 1988, by Andrew Hill. Internal evidence indicates that some correspondence is missing from the collection. Robert Crawford’s handwriting, at times, is impossible to decipher.

<sup>3</sup> Low-resolution monochrome photographs of the *Le Messie* violin appear only in the 1873 revised catalogue of the South Kensington Exhibition.

<sup>4</sup> The official death record for Robert Crawford (14<sup>th</sup> January 1912) states that his occupation (evidently highly profitable) was that of a ‘Distiller’.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Their’ indicates the two Alard daughters, who were acting through the husband of one, Henri Croué.

<sup>6</sup> The ‘American’ was the violin dealer Victor Flechter, later (in 1895) to be accused of having stolen a Stradivari violin from Jean Joseph Bott, in New York. Flechter, initially convicted of the crime, was eventually exonerated in 1900 when the violin was discovered in the possession of a Mrs Amelia Springer. See *The Violin Times*, September 1900, pp. 181-182.

no chance of you having it. They have to all intents and purposes sold the violin for £2,000, but as the money is not forthcoming and there appears to be some difficulty on this point, your only chance, should this sale fall through, will be by being ready to at once take the violin for the same amount and be prepared to complete the purchase immediately.

Mr Crawford evidently moved quickly to register his intent to buy the *Le Messie* violin, for just a few days later two of the Hill brothers were in Paris, examining the instrument. From the *Hotel de Lille & d'Albion*, on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1890, William Henry Hill wrote to Mr Crawford:

[...] “The Messie Strad” was duly forwarded to my brother Alfred and self here, where we had come, principally to see the above violin. As I had neither seen the “Messie” or Paris, and there is a probability of the “Messie” leaving Europe the opportunity was too rare a one to be neglected.<sup>7</sup> We have most carefully inspected and tested the tone of the “Messie” on two different days and here is our opinion while our impressions are vivid.

Its power of tone is unlimited; its quality of the finest kind; but the production of the tone is rather stiff. [Delphin] Alard, we were told by his daughter, but little used the violin as he wished to preserve for future generations its fabulous newness of appearance and state of preservation.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the cause of the stiffness of production of the tone is naturally accounted for.<sup>9</sup> We are most decidedly of opinion that the violin, if it is going to be used, must have a stronger bar put in, as the present one put in by Vuillaume at least 50 years ago<sup>10</sup> has allowed the belly to sink in the G string side. The extreme high pitch in use with us would damage the violin unless the above was done.<sup>11</sup>

[David] Laurie<sup>12</sup> is not in treaty for [the violin] although he tried to secure a promise that he should be informed of any offer which might be made. An American [Victor Flechter] has secured the right of refusal until the 25<sup>th</sup> of this month, but we don't think the money will be forthcoming by then.

There is no possibility of our getting the violin to England for you to try. My personal opinion is that it is the violin for you, as it is absolutely unique.

Yours respectfully  
W. H. Hill

Thus, in April 1890, Robert Crawford was about to pay a world-record price of £2,000 for a violin which he had never seen (unless he visited the 1862 World Exhibition or the 1872 South Kensington Exhibition) nor played.<sup>13</sup> William Henry Hill had been fifteen years of age when *Le Messie* was

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<sup>7</sup> William Henry's phraseology seems to imply that a first sight-seeing visit to Paris was just as important as a first viewing of the *Le Messie* violin.

<sup>8</sup> This explanation is unconvincing. See later in this chapter for information about Delphin Alard performing on the violin.

<sup>9</sup> i.e. the stiffness in producing the violin's tone was because the violin had not been consistently played.

<sup>10</sup> Actually no more than 35 years previously.

<sup>11</sup> The pitch of the 'tuning A', during the mid to late nineteenth century in Europe, sharpened perceptibly.

<sup>12</sup> David Laurie (1833-1897) was a Glasgow-based violin dealer, and friend of Vuillaume. Laurie's reputation as a dealer was not unblemished; in 1882 he assembled a violin with assorted parts which he identified as being of Stradivari origin, and sold the resultant instrument as a 'Stradivarius genuine in all its parts'. Litigation followed (the Hills gave evidence for the prosecution) and Laurie lost the case. The resultant violin is now known as the *Court* Stradivari (see Harvey and Shapreau p. 16, and Doring p. 117).

<sup>13</sup> David Laurie's *The Reminiscences of a Fiddle Dealer* includes (after p. 171) a listing of ten Stradivari violins which Laurie had sold between 1876 and 1880: nine of the instruments fetched prices of between £350 and £500; just one was sold at £800. In 1892 Stradivari's 1731 *Paganini* viola was valued by W. E. Hill & Sons at £750, the 1719 *Macdonald* viola at £1,100. To pay £2,000 for a violin – sight unseen and sound unheard – indicates either foolhardiness or a very high level of trust in the Hills' opinions and assurances.

exhibited at the South Kensington Museum in 1872 but, by his own admission, he had never seen the violin prior to his 1890 trip to Paris. William Henry's younger brother, Alfred, was ten years of age at the time of the 1872 Exhibition and, even if he had been taken to the Exhibition by his father, he surely would have remembered little, eighteen years later, about the *Le Messie* violin. Thus, prior to their visit to Paris in April 1890, neither William nor Alfred had any personal knowledge of the *Le Messie* violin. It must be assumed that the two brothers took with them a copy of the Special Exhibition revised catalogue of 1873 (with photographs) so that they could assure themselves that the violin which was delivered to their hotel was the same as that displayed in the catalogue. Their father, William Ebsworth Hill, no doubt would instantly have been able to recognise the violin as that which had been exhibited in 1872 (or not) but he was in London and would not see the violin until after it had been bought, and brought to New Bond Street.<sup>14</sup>

Further correspondence between London and Edinburgh ensued, including at least one telegram. As the Hills anticipated, the deadline imposed on Victor Flechter – 25<sup>th</sup> April – passed without the purchase money materialising, and so, on 29<sup>th</sup> April, another letter, unsigned, was sent to Mr Crawford, indicating that he was now the owner of the *Le Messie* violin:<sup>15</sup>

You have now got the fiddle of Europe and not only must we get together its history but we must have it in print.<sup>16</sup> I should like to have it illustrated but this would cost for only a small number of plates quite thirty pounds.<sup>17</sup> It is still more worthy though of a book to itself than our Tuscan,<sup>18</sup> and would save you a lot of trouble when your friends begin to ask its history, if you could give them a book in which they could read for themselves all about it. My brother Alfred hopes to be able to leave for Paris Thursday or Friday<sup>19</sup> [...]. We are quite as anxious as yourself to have the violin safely and quickly here [...].

The *Le Messie* violin was duly collected from Paris, and handed to Robert Crawford, in Edinburgh, on Monday 19<sup>th</sup> May 1890.<sup>20</sup> On 22<sup>nd</sup> May Alfred Hill wrote to Robert Crawford from Heath Lodge, Hanwell, Middlesex: 'I hope you and your friends are admiring the famous Strad. I feel very proud that you should have trusted us with the negotiations for its purchase.' However, it seems that Crawford may have begun to doubt the authenticity of the violin, and perhaps then wrote to William Ebsworth Hill on this matter, since on 9<sup>th</sup> July 1890 W E Hill sent the following letter to Edinburgh:

Dear Sir,

The violin called *Le Messie*, lately purchased by you is a genuine Stradivarius, that is to say I should buy it for a Stradivarius, and should sell it for a Stradivarius – never for one moment doubting it being in each and every part the work of that eminent maker and of the date 1716 – I also firmly believe the label inside to be the original one put there by Stradivarius himself.

William Hill

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<sup>14</sup> It is curious that Arthur Hill did not travel to Paris despite having initiated the correspondence with Robert Crawford.

<sup>15</sup> According to Charles Beare (see Chapter 11) the financial transaction, initially using the Hills' money, was concluded on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1890.

<sup>16</sup> This sentence, repeating what was written in the letter of 21<sup>st</sup> January 1890, suggests that the writer of the unsigned 29<sup>th</sup> April letter was Arthur Hill.

<sup>17</sup> Hence, presumably, the less expensive alternative of reproducing Mr Slocombe's paintings of the violin.

<sup>18</sup> The Hills' short monograph on the 1690 *Tuscan* violin by Stradivari was published in 1891.

<sup>19</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1890.

<sup>20</sup> See also Chapter 11.

p.s. I first saw the Messie in 1862 at the Exhibition held in London that year. I next saw it at the Loan Collection at South Kensington 1872 I think, lastly a short time ago this year:<sup>21</sup> and I am more and more convinced of its unique character never during an experience of 50 years have I seen anything in the shape of a Stradivarius violin that at all approaches [*sic*] it for all [<sup>22</sup>] Beauty and preservation I think you can safely challenge [*sic*] the world to say ditto ditto!

William Hill

Perhaps W E Hill's assurances were not entirely convincing<sup>23</sup> since a letter from David Laurie to Robert Crawford (10<sup>th</sup> July 1890)<sup>24</sup> implies that the latter had initiated his own investigations into the violin: 'I hope you or your emissaries will be able to ferret out much more trustworthy information [about the violin] and give it to the violin's devotees.'<sup>25</sup> The identity of these 'emissaries' is unknown; also unknown is the outcome of their investigations (if they occurred). George A Dissmore states to have received a letter from Robert Crawford in which the latter comments on the tonal qualities of his new violin: 'It needs to be played upon, the tone is superb, full and brilliant, but not so refined as my other Strad, which has been played till half the varnish is worn off.'<sup>26</sup>

The next Archive letter – eight months later – is from Robert Crawford, dated 12<sup>th</sup> March 1891:

Dear Mr Hill,

I had [Joseph] Joachim<sup>27</sup> and [Alfredo] Piatti<sup>28</sup> down with me a long time yesterday and I am sure you will be pleased to hear that they were quite gone on the "Messie". Joachim kept playing on it for about an hour, would not let it out of his hands and he kept turning to Piatti every few minutes, what a marvellous tone Fredy [*sic*] etc. He [<sup>29</sup>] had never heard such a tone before [...]. They were also gone on the Darbrucke Strad,<sup>30</sup> Piatti would not keep away from it for the [?] and from the time that he looked at it I don't think there is a pin point on it but that he knew [?]. Joachim and he again said what an instrument and what tone. [...]

Best wishes

Yours sincerely

Robert Crawford

Five days later (17<sup>th</sup> March 1891) Robert Crawford sent another letter to London:

Dear Mr Hill,

[...] I have written "Joachim" asking him to write me what he thinks of the tone of the Messie and its state of preservation and I fancy he will reply, and if he only states what he said verbally [?] no violin tone can be better. He and Piatti were in the Picture Gallery along with Mr Campbell while I was playing the Guarnerius, the Darbrucke, the Messie in the Billiard Room [?] the instant the

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<sup>21</sup> The text of this postscript suggests that Robert Crawford had questioned W E Hill's first-hand historical knowledge of the violin (which only extended back to the London Exhibition of 1862).

<sup>22</sup> Illegible word.

<sup>23</sup> What was Robert Crawford to make of the reference to the violin's 'unique character'? – or the absence of any mention of its tonal qualities?

<sup>24</sup> The letter from Laurie is included within the Hill Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Was Laurie's phrase – 'much more trustworthy information' – deliberately ambiguous?

<sup>26</sup> Dissmore (un-numbered page). Dissmore's booklet – *The Violin Gallery* – is stated to have been published in America during the same year (1890) in which Robert Crawford, in mid-May of that year, obtained *Le Messie*. The soubriquet identity of the 'other Strad' is uncertain.

<sup>27</sup> 1831-1907.

<sup>28</sup> Carlo Alfredo Piatti (1821-1901) was principally a cellist, but also played the violin.

<sup>29</sup> Illegible word.

<sup>30</sup> 1727 *Deurbroucq*.

bow went on the “Messie” they both<sup>31</sup> said instantly that is by far the best, fuller and richer tone [?] Piatti said he thought playing would improve it, but Joachim was quite satisfied with its tone at present. [...]

Alfredo Piatti, having returned to London from Edinburgh, wrote (20<sup>th</sup> March 1891) from 15 Northwick Terrace, Maida Hill, to Robert Crawford:

In this moment I arrive from Glasgow and find your letter and the whisky which you kindly sent me. I have no doubt that it is Messie of all whiskies. That puts me in mind that you are the happy possessor of that extraordinary violin which in beauty of tone surpasses “almost” all the other violins which I have heard.<sup>32</sup> The other Strad (I believe you call it Darbrucke) is also very fine but it wants the sound-post to be removed further back from the bridge and there I am sure it will sound better. Your favourite Guarnerius is also very fine and in good condition. The sound-post I consider it not very properly placed. You happy mortal to possess such instruments!

With best regards believe me, sincerely yours  
Alfred Piatti

In my excitement speaking of your violins I forgot to thank you for the whisky. I think it very kind of you to part with such excellent stuff; but violins, paintings, or liquor are stuffs that very few possess like you.<sup>33</sup>

None of Piatti’s comments appears in the Postscript of the Hills’ 1976 *Tuscan/Messie* re-publication; perhaps his opinion that the tone of *Le Messie* was not *ne plus ultra* ruled his letter out. The unidentified author of the 1976 *Tuscan/Messie* Postscript writes: ‘A number of adverse comments have been made<sup>34</sup> concerning the tonal qualities of “Le Messie,” and we have repeated a letter that Joseph Joachim wrote to Mr. Crawford which speaks for itself.’ Joachim’s letter, sent from 13 Airlie Gardens, Campden Hill, London, to Robert Crawford, is dated 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1891:

Dear Mr Crawford

I received your kind note, and it is a great pleasure to be reminded of the most pleasant hour I had the privilege of spending in your house, surrounded by the treasures in your picture gallery and playing your splendid fiddles. Of course the sound of the Strad, that unique<sup>35</sup> “Messie” turns up again and again in my memory, with its combined sweetness and grandeur, and this struck me so much in hearing it. It is indeed justly celebrated, and I hope I may again put my bow to it someday but I long to see the second Strad and the Guarnerius again too! *I wonder whether you had the sounding post [in] the former altered.*

*I was quite touched by your attention in sending me that fine old produce of Scotland, yellow varnish, and I can assure you that I felt its beneficial effects after coming home from a fatiguing journey very much. I shall never become a teetotaller now, I am afraid.*<sup>36</sup>

Believe me, dear Mr Crawford to be with kindest regards, yours most sincerely,  
Joseph Joachim

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<sup>31</sup> Underscore as in original letter.

<sup>32</sup> Piatti’s caution is noticeable.

<sup>33</sup> All underscores are as in original letter.

<sup>34</sup> No details supplied.

<sup>35</sup> Underscores are as in Joachim’s handwritten letter.

<sup>36</sup> The italicised text is not included in the Hills’ reproduction of Joachim’s letter in their 1976 Postscript (although this excision is not acknowledged). The exclamation mark, after ‘too’, is also omitted from the 1976 Postscript. Joachim appears to be just as excited by the ‘second Strad and the Guarnerius’ as he is by the “Messie”.

Robert Crawford was evidently much pleased with the written comments which he received from both Piatti and Joachim, for he wrote to ‘Mr Hill’ the next day (24<sup>th</sup> March 1891):

Dear Mr Hill,

I enclose [?] copies of letters I have received from Joachim and Piatti and I have no doubt you will be pleased to see what a great opinion they have of the tone of the *Messie* and I am sure the instrument deserves it. [...] seems now that the tone is much grander than when I received it evidently through the sound post having got fixed securely in its place [...].<sup>37</sup>

The 11<sup>th</sup> March 1891 visit, by Joachim and Piatti, to play Robert Crawford’s violins, was evidently not their first journey to Crawford’s Edinburgh residence. A comment made by Arthur Hill indicates that both musicians had been at ‘Newbank’ one year earlier, during March 1890. In Arthur’s letter (28<sup>th</sup> March 1890), after his opening sentences regarding the strategy needed to purchase the *Le Messie* violin (see above), he writes:

After having had such distinguished visitors as Joachim and Piatti you will begin to look down upon your lesser friends. What great artistes these two men are! and if it was not that you possessed a Strad none of the ordinary worldly attractions would have obtained for you the honour of their company.

The ‘Strad’ to which Arthur Hill refers cannot be *Le Messie* since, in mid-March 1890, Robert Crawford was still six weeks away from owning it. It would therefore seem that Joachim and Piatti had travelled to Edinburgh in March 1890 in order to see another Stradivari violin owned by Crawford – perhaps the 1694 *Muir-Mackenzie*, or the 1704 *Viotti*,<sup>38</sup> or the 1727 *Deurbroucq*.<sup>39</sup> Joseph Joachim was the leader of two string quartets, one in England (in which Alfredo Piatti was the cellist) and one in Germany. Joachim’s English Quartet performed a concert in Newcastle on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1890 and it is probable that Joachim and Piatti travelled to Edinburgh immediately after this Newcastle concert.

According to Charles Beare the cordial relations between Robert Crawford and the Hills deteriorated in April 1891 when the Hills’ monograph on *Le Messie* was published.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Crawford’s copies of the letters from Joachim and Piatti were perhaps received by the Hills too late to be included in the April 1891 publication of their monograph on *Le Messie*.

<sup>38</sup> There are four more *Viotti* Stradivari violins: two are label-dated 1709 (one of which is now owned by the Royal Academy of Music), the others are label-dated 1710 and 1712.

<sup>39</sup> The Cozio.com website (accessed June 2012) was unable to provide precise details of when these violins were owned by Robert Crawford.

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 11.