

'The Absolute Stradivari: the *Messie* violin 1716/2016'

eds. Fausto Cacciatori and Gregg Alf

Edizione Museo del Violino, 2016.

This publication follows hot on the heels of the 'Antonio Stradivari: disegni, modelli, forme' volume, also published by the Museo del Violino in Cremona. There are eleven essays in the new volume, to which 21 different authors have contributed; the texts are presented in both Italian and English (the translations were carried out by Darryl D'Guerra and Harry Mairson). It is clear that the essays are intended to represent the last word in the long-running argument regarding the identity and authenticity of the *Messiah* violin; it is equally clear that the expressed certainties are frequently built upon limited investigative strategies and the (deliberate?) omission of any evidence which fails to contribute to the required outcome.

The volume is copiously illustrated but poor editing has resulted in some illustrations being unnumbered and/or incorrectly presented. For example, p. 59, Fig. 6: 'a colour micrograph of the area surrounding a nearly invisible soundpost crack is positioned on the CT [X-ray Computed Tomography] scan.' The small image shows an X-ray outline of the *Messiah* violin's front plate (viewed face on) with a small hatched circle apparently indicating the position of the sound-post. In the image, the brown-coloured 'area surrounding a nearly invisible soundpost crack' lies longitudinally to the immediate right of the soundpost circle. Reference to the text which is provided on p. 116 finds that 'The crack [...] is placed in an area which is between the 4th and the 5th growth ring to the left [reviewer's emphasis] of the indentation left by the right foot of the bridge looking at the instrument from the [tail-piece] button to the neck.' Thus the illustration and the explanatory text do not correspond with each other and the reader is left wondering which to believe.

There are six illustrations presented on p. 84; none has a Figure number or any caption which might indicate the reason for its inclusion. In the text of the associated essay (p. 83) it is stated that 'The [XRF – 'X-Ray Fluorescence'] instrument, as shown in the image, was initially calibrated on iron Ka (6.40keV).' There is no illustration showing 'the instrument'. The text continues: 'The arrow indicates the red area generated by the laser pointer that shows the surface of the sample [...].' An arrow cannot be seen in any of the six illustrations, nor any 'red area'.

Fig. 3 on p. 127 apparently shows the 'Treble and bass view of the violin'; the side-view images are the other way round – bass on the left of the page, treble on the right.

In Fig. 4 on p. 128 there is a longitudinal CT view of the *Messiah* violin (viewed from behind the scroll); the caption reads: 'Top view: notice the top-ribs gluing surface shape.' The image of the violin seems to be upside down. Even if it was the right way up the image would still not show any 'top-ribs gluing surface shape'.

Fig. 8 on p. 132 is captioned 'Saggital section, taken at the back centre joint'. The image seems to show a simple longitudinal cross-section of the violin showing the arching of the front and back plates from the left of the image (end pin) to the right (neck). The meaning of 'taken at the back centre joint' is unclear.

Fig. 6a on p. 144 is captioned 'Bass side corner of C-bout – lower bout'; Fig. 6b (p. 145) is given the exact same caption even though it shows a small area of the back plate on either side of the centre-joint.

There are mis-translations scattered throughout the volume – 'dell'Ottocento' is translated as 'eighteenth century' (p. 18); there are 'duals' instead of 'duels' (p. 55); Count Cozio's given name of 'Ignazio' becomes 'Ignatius' (p. 59); 'planing' the wood becomes 'planning' (p. 115) – as well as

passages where names and identities have become confused: on p. 34 the sons of Carlo Carli are muddled with non-existent sons of Count Cozio. On p. 77 the French-language phrase 'un violon de très grand patron' is translated as 'a violin of a great patron'; the French word 'patron' can mean 'pattern' (which is the intended meaning). Curiously, this French-language text, written in 1822 by Count Cozio, appears in ms. Cozio 65 at Cremona's Biblioteca Statale, a manuscript which is not transcribed by Renzo Bacchetta in his 1950 'Carteggio' publication and has only been brought to public notice within this reviewer's 2015 *Messiah* history volume.

On p. 60 we read: 'For the 'Messie' Exhibition we are displaying a fine example of [Giuseppe] Rocca's work from 1856 (Fig. 7).' 'Fig. 7' (p. 59) turns out to be a photograph of the underside of a fingerboard with Rocca's name inked on the wood.

On p. 72 it is stated, by Fausto Cacciatori, that 'On 29 May 1816 Count Cozio [...] described his 1716 violin [...].' Cacciatori's associated footnote citation is to the Biblioteca Statale manuscript 'ms 47/17'; the correct location is ms. Cozio 47, folio 13v.

Errors of fact appear in Charles Beare's essay, 'The Life of a masterpiece': the 'treasured "Inlaid Quintet"' made its way to Spain in 1772, not post-1774 (see p. 25) and Robert Crawford, in his letters (Hill Archive, Ashmolean Museum) indicates clearly that he frequently played the *Messiah* violin during his 14 years of ownership (see p. 27).

With respect to the playing of the *Messiah* violin Beare makes no mention of the public recital which took place in 1910 (organised by Alfred Hill) when Aldo Simonetti played the *Messiah* violin, its quality of tone being compared against a copy-violin made in the Hills' Hanwell workshop; the reporter from the *Hanwell Gazette* reported that 'to the ordinary individual the tones were identical.'

Beare, for a moment, allows a scintilla of doubt to creep into his essay-text (p. 26): 'It cannot be absolutely proved that Cozio's violin of the same year [1716] definitely was or was not been [*sic*] this one' (i.e. the *Messiah* violin), but this is immediately countered by a 'proof-by-authority' attitude:

What no-one can challenge, however, is, firstly, that the 'Messie' is a genuine and typical Stradivari violin, dating from 1716 and in near-perfect condition; secondly, that in about 1843 it was shown to Giuseppe Rocca of Turin [...] who made many good copies of it; and thirdly, that it was Tarisio who owned this violin at the time of his death.

The reason why no-one can challenge the identity of the 1716 violin is not explained; the evidence of a connection between the *Messiah* violin and Giuseppe Rocca is ambivalent at best; there is no verifiable evidence that Luigi Tarisio ever owned the *Messiah* violin.

The more scientific essays are full of unnecessarily complex and (for almost all readers) impenetrable terminology; the caption to Figure 1, p. 112, is typical: 'The wood of the purfling, in both the light and dark portion, is visible in a tangential longitudinal section that shows the presence of radial parenchyma of monoseriate type.' On p. 83 we are informed that 'The spectra were acquired with the portable fluorescence system model EIS XRS 38 (W anode, SDD sensor, resolution 135eV at 5.9keV).' There is an obsessive usage of the phrase 'non-invasive analysis' throughout the essays.

It would seem that the two editors of this new volume have failed to notice the errors identified above (and others) and have failed to address the issue of terminological overload in a publication which is aimed at the violin-making and violin-history community.

One general point: within **The Absolute Stradivari** it is unclear in which sense 'attributed' should be understood by the reader: 'by ...', or 'thought to be by ...'. There seems to be no consistent policy.

The essays are preceded by introductions of the mutual-back-slapping variety; for some reason the introduction from the Mayor of Cremona is presented on a separate sheet of paper. Colin Harrison (Senior Curator of European Art at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford) writes (p. 14): 'Any sense that the 'Messie' could not have been made by Stradivari, that it is really 'too good to be true', must now be definitively laid to rest'; Harrison's absolute certainty of expression is not supported by any evidence. Harrison continues: 'Moreover, conspiracy theories that [the *Messiah* violin] was actually made by a former owner, Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume, have also been proven to be impossible [...].' Harrison fails to identify where these conspiracy theories have been expounded, fails to identify those responsible for advancing such theories, and fails to indicate the evidence on which the theories were built. Harrison's sole piece of evidence regarding his 'proof of impossibility' lies in the different colouristic response to ultraviolet (UV) light from the back plate of the *Messiah* violin when compared to the response from a Vuillaume violin *which was covered in shellac*; for further consideration of this issue see later in this review.

The two editors – Gregg Alf and Fausto Cacciatori – then provide a 'Note from the curators' which states (p. 18) that 'This catalogue provides a synthesis of contributions from violinmaking experts, from scientific investigation, and from the study of Stradivari artefacts, beginning with the moulds used for the construction of his instruments' (historians were evidently excluded from contributing to the synthesis). Alf and Cacciatori conclude with: 'For such a multidisciplinary study to be truly fruitful, a dialogue between these different actors, without automatically accepting what each may affirm, is indispensable. This is clearly the method that we have chosen.' The editors' claim to a tolerant dialogue can be juxtaposed against comments spoken by the Honorary President at the 'Messiah Study Day' held in Cremona on 9th October 2016:

We shall be hearing about some very important new discoveries as well as some wise and sensible opinions today, and I myself am very confident that we shall, amongst other things, find ourselves pushing aside some of the silly, irrelevant, recent theories published by negative and ill-informed experts – so-called experts.

Charles Beare's essay is followed by one written by Renato Meucci. Meucci states (p. 30) that the *Messiah* violin 'became the property of the famous string instrument dealer Luigi Terrugi (1796-1854), more often known as Luigi Tarisio.' A photograph of Terrugi/Tarisio is provided 'courtesy of his heirs' (p. 30); the photograph shows an unidentified old man sitting on a low chair, holding the front plate of a violin. Meucci states that Terrugi changed his name to Tarisio 'to avoid military service' and 'in order to remain incognito'. In a footnote Meucci directs the reader who is intrigued by this unexpected change of identity to 1) 'The Violin Hunter', a book written by William Silverman (pub. 1957) which Silverman admits (p. 256) is 'reconstructed fact, being based on stories repeated by the principals to others', 2) the writings of Antoine Vidal (but Vidal acknowledges that all his information was supplied by J-B Vuillaume); 3) Roger Millant's small-scale and uncritical biography of Vuillaume, and 4) to a web-blog at <https://viaggiatoricheignorano.blogspot.co.uk/2015/05/tarisio-il-cacciatore-di-violini.html> where one 'Pietro Giuseppe Terrugi' (apparently a.k.a. 'Tony Graffio') writes a history of Terrugi/Tarisio's life, this history being illustrated by the same 'unidentified old man' photograph as described above. According to this web-blog T/T was born on 21st June 1796 (no documentary evidence is supplied), was illiterate throughout his life, strummed his violin in a tavern for a little food, never missed an opportunity to buy old violins which he repaired in his miserable lodgings at the Porta Tenaglia in Milan, it was not difficult then to find old violins ... *etc. etc.* This entirely unsubstantiated narrative is paraphrased from previous writers, principally Hart, Farga, and Millant. The story about T/T walking all the way to Paris with six violins is once again told, likewise

how he sold them for too low a price to Aldric (all this information principally sourced from Hart); T/T boasted for twenty years about the *Messiah* violin ... (see Farga); in 1854 guards broke down the door to his 'miserable lodgings' (which have now become a 'poor but well-kept house'); 'Tarisio lay dead on a couch with two violins clasped to his chest' (see Farga); Vuillaume arrives from Paris (as usual), finds the *Messiah* violin, and buys the rest of the collection for 80,000 francs (see Millant) *etc.* This borrowed narrative ends with the information that 'One of the grandsons of Luigi Teruggi, aka Tarisio [...] was my great, great, grandfather' (but T/T didn't have any children; see below).

Posted below this web-blog are a few 'Comments'. One, from 'luisella' (submitted in December 2015) pertinently asks: 'It would be interesting to know how the writer managed to reconstruct the origin of his ancestors, and that of his illustrious ancestor, dating back to the 18th century'. A reply (apparently from the blogger) states that he has been shown 'all the original documents belonging to the family' and 'I think I will prepare all documentation for show it on graffitiamilano.blogspot.it next September on the occasion of the historic journey of the "Messiah" in Italy, in Cremona, to celebrate the 300th anniversary of its construction. TG.' Evidently the owner of the family's 'original documents' didn't think that contacting Cremona's Museo del Violino in advance of the *Messiah* exhibition (September-December 2016) might be a more appropriate strategy.

The promised posting is seemingly at <http://graffitiamilano.blogspot.co.uk/2016/06/luigi-teruggi-da-fontaneto-dagogna.html>; this new blog appears to be the responsibility of 'Tony Graffio'. Having learned from the first blog (see above) that the writer was a far-distant descendant of T/T, we now learn from the second blog that 'Tarisio had no children, his descendants being derived from the Gaudenzio brothers, born in 1798, and Peter [Peter who?] was born in 1811' (*Tarisio non ha avuto figli, i suoi discendenti derivano dai fratelli Gaudenzio, nato nel 1798 e Pietro nato nel 1811*).

On this second web-blog the 'unidentified old man' photograph appears yet again but now there is a caption printed in the top-right corner of the image; the first part of the caption can be deciphered: 'Luigi Tarisio, detto Teruggi, nato a Fontaneto il 21/6/1796, morì a Milano in circostanze misteriose il 1 Novembre 1852' (... died in mysterious circumstances 1st November 1852). The photograph is evidently a page from a published book (the page number – '83' – can be seen at the bottom of the photograph) but no identification of the book is provided (and this reviewer has not been able to locate the book).

Thus there are now four dates when T/T died: 1850 (according to J-B Vuillaume); 1852 (as above); 1852 (Elia Santoro); 1854 (most writers) – but T/T was still alive in September 1855 (according to a letter from Vuillaume to Delphin Alard); see Chapter 7 of *The Messiah violin: a reliable history?* (2015).

Finally, the unidentified old man in the photograph – the supposed T/T – appears to be rather short in stature (the Hills describe Tarisio as 'tall and thin') and T/T looks to be at least 65 years of age. If T/T was born in 1796 then he was 56 years of age when he apparently died in 1852 (but the second web-blog states that T/T was 60 years of age when he died which, if he was born in 1796, would place his death in 1856). Now there are five dates associated with the death of Luigi Tarisio.

Renato Meucci refers to an 1856 review of the Vuillaume/Fétis *Antoine Stradivari, luthier célèbre* publication (also 1856), the review being written by Ignazio Cantù. Cantù apparently writes that Luigi Tarisio bought the *Messiah* violin from Count Cozio di Salabue in 1822. The Count's 1716 *più bello* violin – the instrument which most commentators claim to be the *Messiah* violin – was definitely still in his possession in 1823 and almost certainly still in his possession in 1840 when he died (the sale of a *più bello* [...] *più perfetto* Stradivari violin was noted by Count Cozio's daughter, Matilde, in 1841).

Meucci refers to this reviewer's own research when he comments: 'Sackman's conclusion could have been made stronger had he known the results of the recent research: namely that the G in the box of the pegs [of the *Messiah* violin] was written by [Count] Cozio (see the essay of Cacciatori and D'Agostino in this volume).' The essay being referred to is written by Marco D'Agostino and Curzio Merlo and is titled 'The G letter dispels all doubts'. The 'G letter' mentioned in the title of the essay is not the G letter which is inked in the pegbox of the *Messiah* violin but rather the G letter which is inked inside a partial pegbox (with neck) which is persistently identified in **The Absolute Stradivari** as the 'original' pegbox/neck of the 1714 *Soil* violin despite this reviewer having demonstrated that it cannot be the original.

(In 1911 the Paris dealers Caressa & Français studied the 1714 *Soil* violin and wrote a long and detailed description of the instrument. In that description they identify the letters 'P.S.' in the pegbox; see www.thesoilviolin.uk)

(Since the present review was first web-published the 'old man' in the photograph, 'sitting on a low chair', has been identified as the violin-maker Francois-Marie Pupanat (1802-1868.)

Meucci's essay is followed by 'Stradivari's concept' written by Carlo Chiesa and John Dilworth. Most of this essay is a repetition of previous writings; there is little which is new (indeed, Dilworth must get tired of trotting out the same information time after time). Only one paragraph (p. 50) is interesting:

Even when Charles Reade [Reverend Haweis?] wrote his most eloquent description of the instrument in 1883 [1872?] the condition of the varnish was obviously the most absorbing aspect. By that time most other classical instruments had already succumbed to wear and tear, and particularly the over-application of French polishing techniques to smooth out damaged varnish. On the 'Messie' the original varnish is clear to see, the surface still slightly rough and unabraded.

If the varnish of the *Messiah* violin is original, 'still slightly rough and unabraded', one might wonder why the violin was used in a comparison of UV fluorescence response against a shellac-covered Vuillaume violin (see p. 106 of **The Absolute Stradivari** for this comparison).

The next essay is the work of one of the editors, Gregg Alf: 'The 'Messie': a violinmaker's perspective.' Like others, Alf makes statements for which there is no evidential support: on p. 57 he writes: 'Cozio's 'Carteggio' shows some confusion in his early efforts to organize the forms [moulds] he received from the Stradivari family in 1775.' Alf does not demonstrate any aspect of Count Cozio's 'confusion', the Count did not write a 'Carteggio', and he obtained the moulds in 1776, not 1775.

Alf continues (p. 57): 'It was with great interest that Maestro Cacciatori and I reviewed new evidence that he [Cacciatori] had just received regarding the form [mould] and pegbox letters ['letters'? – plural? – in the *Messiah* violin's pegbox?]. If this information [no details are provided] holds up over time it will link the provenance of each of the six or more instruments bearing original necks and pegbox letters to the hands, and indeed the pen, of Count Cozio di Salabue.'

Since the chemical composition of the ink used for the pegbox letter G of the *Messiah* violin was not analysed by the Italian scientists (see Fausto Cacciatori's text on p. 77: '**The letter G on the 'Messie' was not analysed as there were major difficulties in reading the analysis points due to the presence of the scroll**') it is unclear how it can be known that Count Cozio was responsible for the writing of the letter G. To claim to be able to identify a unique individual on the basis of how a single upper-case letter has been drawn – a letter which, in its simple shaping, could be drawn by anyone (even the proverbial child of six) – is 'scientific' nonsense. Nonetheless, the volume's joint editor,

Cacciatori, states unambiguously (p. 77): 'The letter G in the pegbox of the 'Messie' violin and the 'Soil' are in his [Cozio's] hand' (*sua la grafia della lettera G nella cassetta dei pirolì del violino 'Messia' e del 'Soil'*).

Alf makes much of the discovery of a front-plate crack in the *Messiah* violin and imaginatively posits (p. 59) that 'it's likely that he [Vuillaume] too was surprised to find it.' The caption to the small image of the crack (p. 116) states that the image was captured by an 'Optical Digital Microscope' using a magnification of '450×'. Vuillaume would likely have been very surprised if his eyesight could have generated 450× magnification (see p. 1 of this review for information relating to the location of the crack). Alf then adds: 'To say that Vuillaume then tried to hide his disappointment by removing the larger patch that Cozio had Guadagnini install and by keeping the violin locked silently away in a glass case, would be pure speculation.' Alf does not indicate whether anyone has ever 'said' what he has apparently paraphrased. Furthermore, how would removing Guadagnini's larger patch help Vuillaume to hide his disappointment?

Conversely, a London-based violin dealer has written: 'There is no such crack on the *Messiah* [...] there is none, not even any trace of an 'invisible' crack [Count Cozio's wording] when looking under the closest scrutiny [...] when the *Stradivari Varnish* book [Brandmair and Greiner, 2010] was being researched we had the opportunity to look for surface evidence of an invisible crack under a microscope. There simply is no disruption to the wood or varnish that would indicate the slightest crack' (see B. Hebbert writing on Maestronet.com). Perhaps the front-plate crack occurred at an unknown date between approximately 2008 and 2016.

Alf states (p. 59) that 'Giuseppe Rocca, originally a baker, became acquainted with Luigi Tarisio after moving to Turin in the 1830s.' Alf cites for evidential support *Liuteria Italiana*, vol. 4, ed. E Blot (2001) but does not specify a page number; nor does he replicate the (presumably documentary) evidence which Blot (presumably) provides with respect to the Rocca/Tarisio acquaintance.

Alf also states (pp. 61-62) that 'Vuillaume became fixated on replicating the [*Messiah*] violin, even hunting for copy wood for that purpose on his way back to Paris with his new treasure.' Alf's foot-noted evidence for his statement is a letter from J-B Vuillaume to Nicolas-François Vuillaume, dated 1st October 1855, but Alf does not indicate where he located this letter. It is curious that this reviewer's 2015 study of the history of the *Messiah* violin includes the text of that same letter (p. 105).

An argument put forward in this new volume is that, under UV light, the fluorescence given off by the back plate of the *Messiah* violin is quite different to the fluorescence produced by the back plate of a Vuillaume violin dated 1870; photographic illustrations are presented on p. 61 and p. 106. Alf refers to two Vuillaume violins (nos. 2936 and 2943) as being 'true replicas – their wood and varnish style match closely to the original 'Messie' Stradivari.' However, Alf then states (p. 62) that the Vuillaume violin which was chosen for the comparison of fluorescence under UV light was no. 2836, 'an example antiqued by Vuillaume, and was chosen because its various varnish layers made an ideal specimen for non-invasive analysis.' So, two violins which 'match closely' were ignored in favour of an antiqued violin which had been covered in shellac. Alf then extrapolates from the fluorescence evidence provided by the 1870 Vuillaume violin a sweeping generalisation which is apparently applicable to all Vuillaume's varnishes: 'The results [...] confirms [*sic*] what we have long known about Vuillaume's varnishes: they are completely different.' (p. 63)

With respect to Vuillaume's 'King of Portugal' violin (no. 2936) Alf writes (p. 63): 'It's truly a beautiful violin and as close as Vuillaume could come to duplicating the 'Messie' Stradivari. The differences are also clear to see.' The clearly visible differences are not identified.

The next essay – ‘A violin, Count Cozio and Stradivari’s artifacts’ – is the work of the second editor of **The Absolute Stradivari** – Fausto Cacciatori. FC begins by discussing the moulds which were owned by Count Cozio. When he reaches the ‘PG’ mould he offers a curious interpretation (pp. 68-69) of the descriptive text which was written by Count Cozio in an inventory of 1823 (Biblioteca Statale di Cremona, ms. Cozio 72). Count Cozio’s text, and its layout, is:

*No 2 forma, di cui pure se ne vede fatto molto uso
scolpitavi in essa le lettere P G A. 4. PG
SM. 1689*

As the present reviewer explained in 2015, the Count has mis-interpreted the closely-positioned letters and numbers which are carved, or punched, into the mould: PG

A 4 GIV1689

(PG on the day of 4th Giu[gn]o [June] 1689)

In his Italian-language text (pp. 68-69) Cacciatori presents the mould’s carved text as:

PG A[dì] 4 S[tesso] M[ese] 1689

The English-language translation (p. 68) is: PG A[dì] 4 S[ame] M[onth] 1689.

FC does not explain which month would be the ‘same month’.

If FC had looked at p. 108 of the aforementioned ‘Disegni, modelli, forme’ catalogue – for which he was the editor – he would have seen that the catalogue presents the carved text on the PG mould as:

A(dì) 4 Giu(gno) 1689

Furthermore, with respect to FC’s transcription of what he thinks is the carved letter ‘S’ (Œ is the closest representation which this reviewer can find on his computer), if FC had looked at p. 111 of the ‘Disegni’ catalogue he would have found a ‘detail’ photograph of the carved letters on the ‘B’ violin mould of 3rd June 1692. The first three letters of the month are carved in the identical manner as those carved on the PG mould, i.e. ‘GIV’ (followed by ‘GNO’).

(It is entirely unclear why the ‘Disegni’ catalogue (p. 111) should specify this B-mould carving as being the work of Antonio (II) Stradivari – who was not born until 1738.)

FC writes (p. 69):

Comparing the dimensions of the moulds in his possession and a violin of 1716 in his collection, Cozio came to an intriguing conclusion: “mould (P.G.) measure of my most beautiful and large violin by Antonio Stradivari of 1716 [...]” (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7 is a photographic illustration of folio 13v from ms. Cozio 47 (Biblioteca Statale); it is this page wherein the highly accurate measurements made by Count Cozio conclusively prove that his 1716 ‘(P.G.)’ violin cannot be the *Messiah* violin (cf. Beare’s comment on p. 2 of this review). Cozio’s measurements are explained in painstaking detail in Chapter 5 of this reviewer’s *Messiah* history. FC does not discuss the Count’s measurements even though they can all be viewed in the Fig. 7 illustration. Perhaps FC did not want the reader of **The Absolute Stradivari** to appreciate the significance of ms. Cozio 47, folio 13v.

FC continues (p. 76):

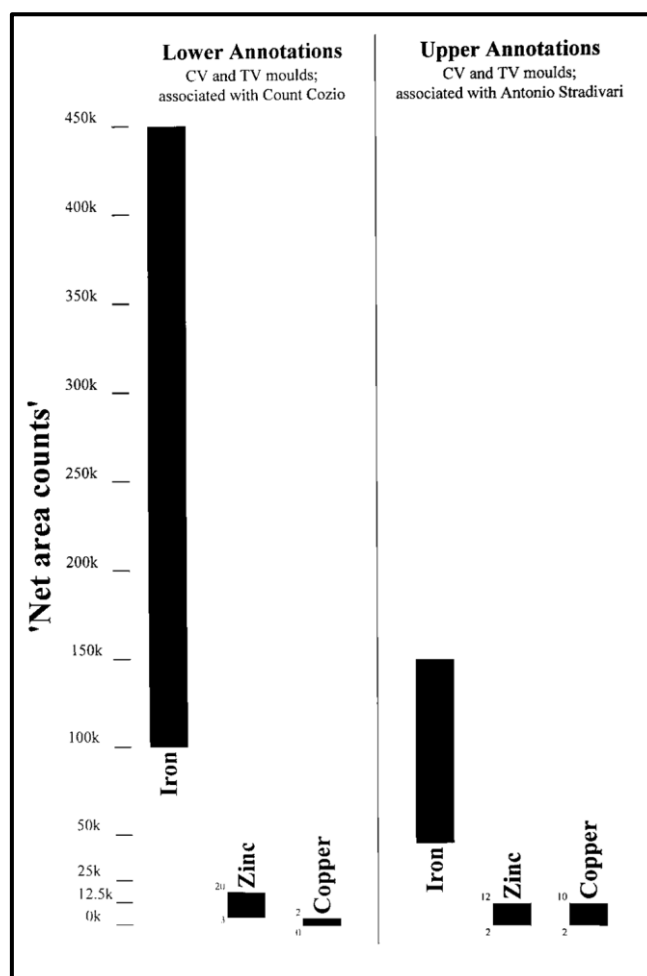
It was possible, despite the difficulty due to its position, to analyse the ink of the letter G of the original[?] neck of [the] ‘Soil’ violin (MS129) kept at the Museo del Violino. The results of the elemental composition [i.e. the chemical analysis] show that iron is consistently present **whereas copper and zinc are absent** (reviewer’s emphasis and square-bracket insertions).

FC claims that this composition of the ink ‘reveals that we are in the presence of an ink used by Count Cozio’ and refers the reader to p. 81 of **The Absolute Stradivari**. At that location Marco D’Agostino states

The study of the chemical composition of the ink [...] has demonstrated that the G letter on the neck of the violin ‘Soil’ shows the same composition as the ink of the notes [i.e. annotations] [written] in the lower parts of the moulds CV and TV (MS205 and MS229) attributed with certainty to the hand of Cozio.

The inks used for the CV-mould and TV-mould annotations are analysed in the previously-published ‘Disegni, modelli, forme’ catalogue, where, in Fig. 4 (p. 92), there are three ‘binary variation diagrams relating to the Fe/Cu, Fe/Zn, and Cu/Zn ratios [within the ink used for] the upper annotations and the lower annotations [found on the] wooden [moulds marked] CV and TV.’ These three diagrams are unnecessarily opaque in their presentation of simple information (the caption to the diagrams does not explain the legend ‘net area counts’). Re-casting the data into bar-graphs shows that:

1. the ink used for the lower annotations is made up almost entirely of iron, with a small amount of zinc and a trace of copper;
2. the ink used for the upper annotations is also made up almost entirely of iron, with small amounts of zinc and copper. However, in proportion to the iron, the presence of the zinc and copper seems more significant.



(Tab. 2 of ‘Disegni’ (p. 98) identifies twelve different types of ink which appear on Stradivari’s wooden moulds. One of these ink types (designated ‘W_02’) apparently appears on the CV contralto viola mould (MS 205) both for the ‘upper

initials CV' and the 'lower annotation'. The upper initials are 'attributed', paleographically, to Antonio Stradivari, while the lower annotation is 'attributed' to Count Cozio. It seems unlikely that Count Cozio could have written the lower annotation on the CV mould using an iron gall ink which, in its chemical composition, was the same as an ink which Antonio Stradivari had used, perhaps 100 years earlier, for the upper initials 'CV'. The same unlikely result is indicated for the 'upper initials TV' and the 'lower annotation' on the TV tenor viola mould (MS 229).

Tab. 2 also indicates that six different inks (designated 'W_05' to 'W_10') – each seemingly being chemically unique, and each used just once – appear on six different moulds, either to write a capital letter (three examples) or an annotation (three examples). The differences between the chemical composition of each ink are neither explained nor illustrated.)

Thus the ink used for the letter G of the *Soil* violin – 'iron is consistently present **whereas copper and zinc are absent**' – does *not* have the same chemical composition as the ink used for the lower (or, indeed, the upper) annotations on the CV and TV moulds. Moreover, as the three writers of this 'Disegni' chapter state (p. 86): 'It should be understood that the classification of groups of different inks allows the [constituent] materials to be separated and catalogued **but of course cannot be used as an unambiguous criterion for attribution**' (reviewer's emphasis).

FC then turns his attention to the newly-discovered crack in the front plate of the *Messiah* violin, next to the soundpost, i.e. the crack which 'surprised' Vuillaume, but, ten years ago, apparently did not exist. FC states (p. 78) that 'such a fissure would correspond to what is annotated by Cozio' but such a correspondence is only possible if Count Cozio's texts are selectively quoted. FC quotes 'two inventories' where Count Cozio 'writes of a crack on his 1716 violin: "set [...] a large square patch above the soundpost for a crack that is invisible and perhaps as a necessary reinforcement by G. B. Guadagnini"'. FC adds: 'In a previous section he [Cozio] notes: "with a patch above the soundpost and under the bridge for reinforcement set by the maker at the time of construction"'. FC fails to explain that his second quotation comes from Count Cozio's 1774/75 description of a 1716 violin (ms. Cozio 41) and simply refers to a protective patch, or veneer, added by Stradivari *to protect the underside of the top plate from being cracked by the pressure generated by the soundpost*. FC's first quotation comes from Cozio's 1801 description of the same 1716 violin (ms. Cozio 42) but FC does not address the obvious illogical juxtaposition within the text, namely a 'crack that is invisible'. G B Guadagnini, who died in 1786, modified all the Stradivari violins which belonged to Count Cozio (see p. 173 of this reviewer's *Messiah* history). At the time of Count Cozio's 1801 description the 1716 violin's protective veneer had either been supplemented or entirely replaced by Guadagnini who had affixed a 'wide square patch' to the underside of the top plate in the soundpost area. Cozio could evidently see Guadagnini's wide square patch (either by using a mirror inserted through an *f*-hole or, perhaps, by looking through the end-pin hole) but, obviously, was unable to ask Guadagnini *why* he had affixed such a patch. Cozio could only understand what Guadagnini had done by assuming that there must be a crack in the area of the soundpost which, in some manner, Guadagnini had been able to see (or, perhaps, feel) but which Count Cozio could not see (or feel) – hence his reference to a 'crack that is invisible'. See p. 6 of this review for further consideration of this 'invisible crack'.

Finally, in this essay, on p. 79, footnote 11, FC refers to 'a recent monograph on the 'Messie'; FC is obviously referring to this reviewer's *The Messiah violin: a reliable history?* publication of 2015 but cannot bring himself to mention the monograph by name. He continues by stating that, in the unidentified monograph, 'the measurements indicated by Cozio are transformed by using as the reference the foot of the French king; an inch is given as 27.07mm and a point as 2.26mm.' Count Cozio's usage of the French 'Pied du Roi' measurement system is explicitly and repeatedly specified in his documents – his measurements *are* 'Pied du Roi' measurements. This reviewer's identification of Cozio's *pollici* and *ponti* units as being lengths of 27.07mm and 2.26mm is 'borrowed' by FC without acknowledgement.

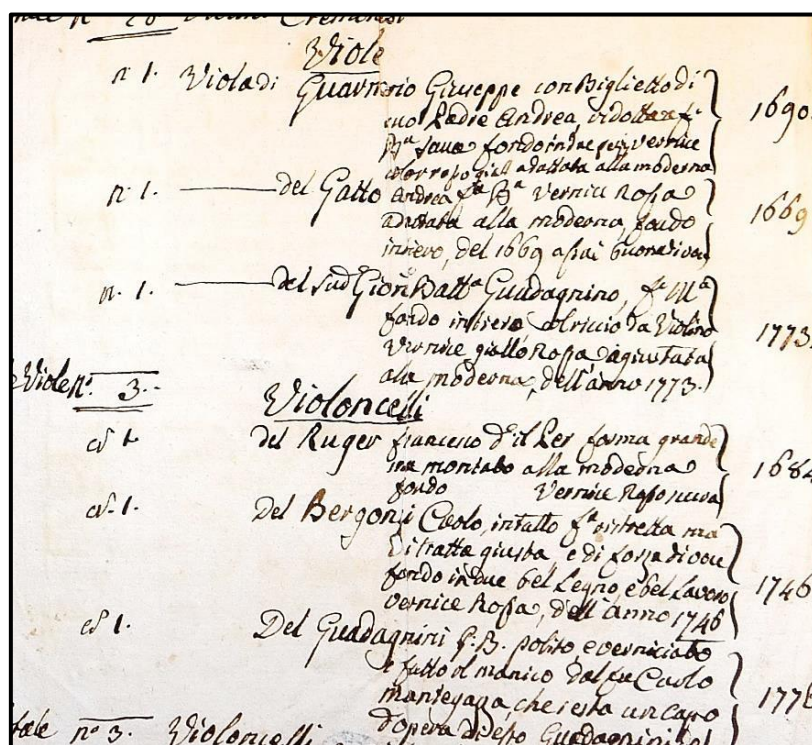
The next, very short, essay is titled 'The letter G dispels all doubts'. The first part of the essay – 'Paleographic Analysis' – is written by Marco D'Agostino. 'Paleographical analysis' is defined as identifying 'the chronological and geographical coordinates among an ensemble of graphic artifacts, as well as the morphological characteristics of the writing.' The reader is informed that

the paleographic analysis of the capital letter G, written on the neck of the famous 'Messie', appears to be composed of two segments:* the first one is curved, marked from top to bottom, and makes up the upper part of the letter; the second one is vertical, with the same directional trend, making up the lower part of the letter. Furthermore, at top and bottom, both segments are reinforced by a short horizontal sign. A hatching [the Italian text has *tratteggio*] similar to the one described can be found in several manuscripts attributed with certainty to Count Cozio.

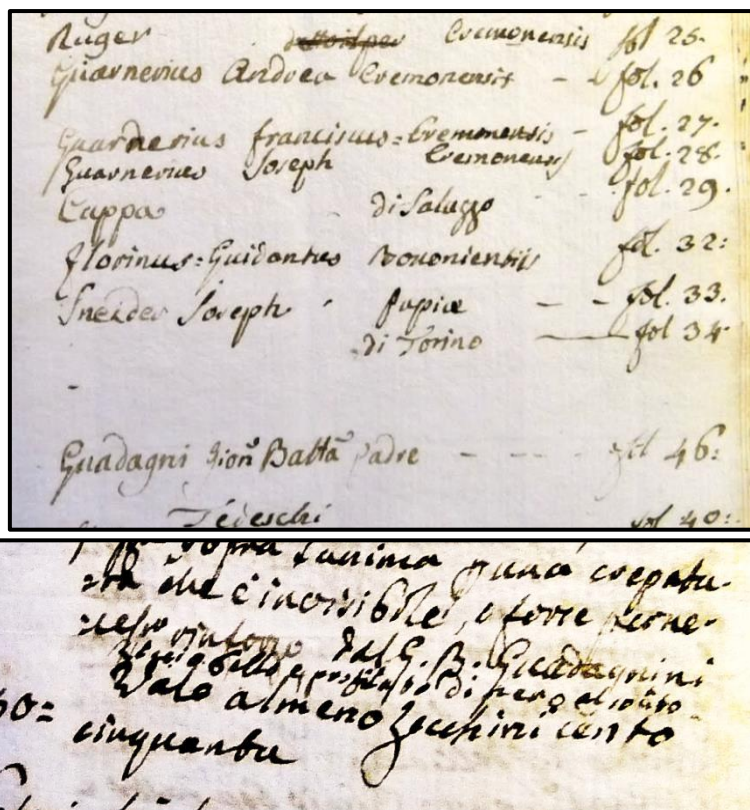
* a 'paleographic analysis' cannot 'appear to be composed'.

This unnecessarily complex descriptive text could have been entirely avoided by using a photograph of the letter. Two poor-quality photographs of the letter G in the *Messiah* pegbox do appear on p. 84 but a much more useful photograph appears on p. 93 (albeit upside-down). D'Agostino provides a footnote (fn. 3, p. 85): 'It is possible to look at some examples [of capital-letter Gs] in the beautiful picture published in 'Disegni, modelli, forme', p. 42, fig. 27.' At that location there is a photograph of the aforementioned moulds inventory which was written by Count Cozio in 1823 (Biblioteca Statale, ms. Cozio 72). In the photograph one can see some capital-letter Gs. It is unclear why D'Agostino should send the reader to an illustration in another publication when the top-right corner of the first page of Cozio's inventory appears in D'Agostino's own essay, on p. 84.

What is clear is that, when he draws a capital-letter G, Count Cozio always begins with a wide curl, as can be observed in the document reproduced below (which is part of ms. Cozio 72). There are seven capital-letter Gs visible on this page; all begin with a curl (and none of the examples has a 'foot' at the bottom of the stem). No curl can be observed in the letter G of the *Messiah* violin's pegbox (nor in the letter G which is inked in the partial pegbox which is mistakenly associated with the *Soil* violin).



Two documents written by Count Cozio during April 1801 (ms. 42) – more than twenty years earlier than ms. 72 – reveal the same characteristic capital-letter G, always starting with a curl:



D'Agostino states (p. 81) that the capital-letter G found in the pegbox of the 1690 *Tuscan-Medici* violin and in the pegbox of the '1716'[!] *Soil* violin 'carry the same hatching [as on the *Messiah* pegbox], with identical reinforcement.' No illustrative photograph of the 1690 violin's pegbox cavity is provided. Information from the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, in Rome, indicates that the neck of the 1690 *Tuscan-Medici* violin has been replaced; no mention is made of a letter inked onto the end-face of the replacement neck (i.e. facing into the pegbox). The same violin is described by Charles Gand, in 1870, on p. 72 of his *Catalogue descriptif*; again, there is no mention of any peg-box letter. The same violin was the subject of a monograph (1889) written by the Hill brothers; they make no mention of a letter inside the violin's pegbox.

However, there is a capital-letter G inked inside the pegbox of the 1716 *Medici* violin which is held today at the L'Istituto Luigi Cherubini, in Florence. In this case the pegbox/scroll has been grafted onto what is apparently a new neck; a capital-letter G is inked onto the end-face of the neck. The letter G does not have an initial curl, and its shaping is very similar to the letter G which is found in the partial pegbox which, allegedly, was an original component of the 1714 *Soil* violin. Despite this similarity of 'chronological and geographical coordinates' Fausto Cacciatori (p. 77) states: 'We do not know if the [1716 *Medici*] letter G is in the hand of the Count [Cozio].'

As already indicated (see p. 8 of this review) D'Agostino asserts that the chemical composition of the ink used for the *Soil* letter G (note, not the *Messiah* letter G) 'shows the same composition as the ink of the notes in the lower parts of the CV and TV moulds [and these 'notes' have been] attributed with certainty to the hand of Cozio.' D'Agostino concludes: 'The agreement of these results and the published data [which data?] demonstrate, without any doubt, that the violin 'Messie' has been part of the collection of Count Cozio di Salabue.' **To paraphrase: the *Messiah* violin, without any doubt, 'has been' part of Count Cozio's collection because the ink used to write the *Soil* violin's capital-letter G is the same ink as used in the lower annotations on the CV and TV moulds. (!)**

(But, as already demonstrated, on pp. 8-9, the ink is not the same.)

The essay's second section, written by Curzio Merlo, is titled 'Ink of the letter G'; it is not explained *which* letter G is being identified. After some tangential scientific information, the reader reaches Merlo's 'Conclusions' (p. 83):

The non-invasive analysis of the X-ray fluorescence* of the wooden support and the ink of the letter G have confirmed the mainly ferrous nature of the iron gall ink used for writing the character [...] high concentration of iron [...] the presence of other metallic elements was not identified; in particular, the presence of copper and zinc was not identified.

This last item of information is a repetition of the information previously stated by Cacciatori with respect to the ink used on the *Soil* violin: 'iron is consistently present, whereas copper and zinc are absent.'

(* It is entirely unclear how 'X-ray fluorescence' can be the subject of 'non-invasive analysis'.)

Merlo concludes (bottom of p. 83): 'the composition of the ink of the letter G [of the *Soil* violin] can be correlated to that of the annotations on the lower part of the CV and TV wooden forms [moulds].' This is a repetition of D'Agostino's information in the same essay (see above).

(But, as already demonstrated, on pp. 8-9, the ink is not the same.)

The reader would be forgiven for assuming that the D'Agostino/Merlo essay has been focused on the pegbox letter G of the *Messiah* violin, but, clearly, it is not. It is disturbing that the reality of the D'Agostino/Merlo essay is nowhere made clear.

To repeat: '**The letter G on the 'Messie' was not analysed [...].'**

Thus, the letter G which 'dispels all doubts' is not the *Messiah* violin's pegbox letter G. This chapter – and especially its title – could be evaluated as a deliberate falsification.

There is no indication, in **The Absolute Stradivari**, that a systematic chemical analysis, for comparative purposes, was made of the ink(s) used in Count Cozio's numerous hand-written documents which are archived at the Biblioteca Statale in Cremona. These documents would have provided a perfect resource from which to construct a chronology of ink types – either consistent from year to year, or constantly varying – as Cozio, or his secretary, mixed (or bought) new supplies of iron gall ink.

The following chapter – 'Research on materials and study of moulds' – is the work of six scientists. For the most part the text avoids blinding the reader with scientific terminology although it would have been helpful if the symbols for chemicals – Si, S, K, Ca, Pb, etc. – could have been 'written out' in a simple chart. Much space is given over to a detailed but quite unnecessary investigation of mould dimensions and their relationship with the dimensions of the *Messiah* violin. The conclusion – that the G mould is too large to have been used for the *Messiah* violin and it is the 1689 PG (*Poco Grande*) mould which fits best – is hardly news.

What *is* newsworthy is the writers' discovery (p. 95) that the lower part of the *Messiah* violin's back plate 'displays IR [infra-red] signals that are typical of a hydrocarbon material [...] indicators of a possible paraffin wax.' On p. 99 this discovery is re-iterated: 'the most superficial layer of non-original material, composed of paraffinic wax, is limited to the lower part of the back [of the *Messiah* violin].' Paraffin wax was not invented until approximately 1850. The authors of the essay do not address the issue of *why* someone, on an unknown date post-1850, might have covered the lower area

of the *Messiah* violin's back-plate with paraffin wax (surely one or more of the expert violin-makers involved in the production of **The Absolute Stradivari** could have provided an explanatory commentary?) nor do they indicate whether this wax has any effect on the colouristic results achieved during an X-Ray Fluorescence analysis.

The presence of paraffin wax on the back plate of the *Messiah* violin may be related to a comment made by Carlo Chiesa and John Dilworth in *Musical Instruments at the Ashmolean Museum* (2011), p. 164: 'The inside of the soundholes [of the *Messiah* violin] shows an accretion of white paste which does not presently lend itself to interpretation.' If the 'white paste' was paraffin wax then the coverage of the *Messiah* violin with this substance was apparently more extensive than only on the lower part of the back plate. If the Italian scientists did not see any white paste on the inside of the soundholes (and paraffin wax is white) then perhaps it was removed by someone at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford at an unknown point between approximately 2010 and 2016.

Readers of **The Absolute Stradivari** who support the Stradivarian origin of the *Messiah* violin will, of course, latch onto the three UV fluorescence images which show the back plates of a Vuillaume violin dated 1870, the *Messiah* violin, and the *Hellier* violin. The images show clear colour-differences between all three instruments, not just between the Vuillaume violin and the *Messiah* violin. It is worth noting when studying Table 1 (p. 106) – in which the chemical components discovered within the varnish of the three instruments are identified – that in areas of 'low-thickness varnish' the X-Ray Fluorescence analysis reveals almost identical chemical components across all three violins:

Vuillaume: K (Potassium), Ca (Calcium), Cl (Chlorine), Fe (Iron), S (Sulphur), and Si (Silicon).

Messiah: K (Potassium), Ca (Calcium), Fe (Iron), S (Sulphur), and Si (Silicon).

Hellier: K (Potassium), Ca (Calcium), Cl (Chlorine), Fe (Iron), S (Sulphur), and Si (Silicon).

It is assumed that the authors of the essay arranged the chemical symbols in descending order of 'amount present'; no numerical values are provided.

There seems to have been no effort made to find an appropriately-dated Vuillaume violin which was *not* covered in shellac; such a violin would have helped ensure that a comparison between its varnish and the *Messiah* varnish was scientifically valid.

The subsequent 'Wood species and structure survey' essay is the work of three writers. It is this essay which contains the photograph of the front-plate fissure, and contains the text which locates the split to the left of the treble-side foot of the bridge. The English translation of this essay, in places, is very awkward and seems not to have been proof-checked:

'However, this is a very little frequent event, happening during the first wood drying cycles, and affecting only the terminal portions of the trunk, just below the surface of the heads.' (p. 115)

'[...] the tomographic image reveals instead a higher density area which could be explained by a penetration occurred through the fissure, of varnish or maybe glue.' (p. 117)

The first part of footnote 4 (p. 118) reads: 'Heartwood is in the tree, and in the wood, the innermost part of the stem where all the cells, both tracheids and parenchymatic, are died.'

At times the text becomes particularly tangled and reader-resistant:

'The position of the fissure in the ring raises doubts about the origin of the detachment: although the opening of the fracture is, from a mechanical point of view, a stochastic process, i.e. manifesting itself

where the material presents its smaller strength, it would be much more consistent with the assumptions of mechanical origin if the fissure manifested itself in correspondence of the passage limit between springwood and latewood, where the value of density is the minimum and where presumably the mechanical resistance of wood is the lowest.' (p. 117)

The essay is followed by 'The dendrochronological analysis' written by John Topham. The essay is an overview of the current dendrochronological knowledge with respect to the *Messiah* violin (most of which knowledge has already been published, and some of these publications date back 15 years). The producers of **The Absolute Stradivari** seem to have been disinclined to present Topham's graphs in a reader-friendly manner: on p. 123 there are three matrices which are presented at such a small size that their information content is almost impossible to grasp. On the same page (Tab. 4) there is a 'Simple matrix showing just numbers' (*Una matrice semplice rivela soltanto numeri*); what the reader is supposed to understand from this matrix of 'just numbers' is entirely unclear.

Topham refers to 'an unnamed violin labeled and attributed to Antonio Stradivari dated 1717.' It is assumed that this is the 1717 violin which, in an advertisement placed by Florian Leonhard on the back page of a brochure produced by *The Strad* in 2016, was announced as 'An important violin by Antonio Stradivari 1717 with precisely matching table wood to the 1716 Messiah.' With respect to this unnamed violin (i.e. no soubriquet) Topham comments that 'it is the treble side [of the front plate] that most significantly cross-matches the 'Messie' front' but he does not offer any statistical evidence (and he offers no information, graphical or statistical, on the level of cross-matching between the bass side and the *Messiah*).

Topham provides a graphical representation (Tab. 2, p. 121) of dendro curves obtained from the *Messiah* violin, the 1724 *Wilhelmy* violin, a '1717 violin', and the 1717 *Fite* violin, but the associated caption does not explain how these curves were achieved.

The penultimate essay is a compendium of images and technical information derived from an 'X-ray CT investigation of the 'Messie'. This is followed by 'Varnish phenomena of the Messie violin', written by Brigitte Brandmair (who was co-author with Stefan-Peter Greiner of the self-published *Stradivari Varnish* volume of 2010). It is assumed that Brandmair's text was submitted in English and then translated into Italian.

Brandmair immediately states (p. 137) that 'the varnish [of the *Messiah* violin] is covered with a thin layer of polish' (*un sottile strato di lucido*); it is not explained whether this polish is the aforementioned paraffin wax (it is unclear whether Brandmair was aware, when writing her essay, that the Italian scientists had identified paraffin wax on the lower part of the *Messiah* violin's back plate). Brandmair also draws attention to the absence of any varnish on the wood underneath the *Messiah* violin's fingerboard. It is unknown why the maker of the violin should have varnished the front plate with a Baroque-period short fingerboard already in place. This reviewer has read commentaries which indicate that the 1721 *Lady Blunt* violin also has non-varnished wood below the fingerboard; the *Lady Blunt* is another violin which arrived in Paris 'out of the blue' (see this reviewer's *Messiah* history, pp. 108-109).

The *Stradivari Varnish* publication of 2010 presented UV images of three chronologically-relevant Stradivari violins (the 1709 *Viotti*, 1714 *Smith-Quersin*, and 1724 *Sarasate*) which create a powerful contrast to the UV image of the *Messiah* violin in the same publication. Brandmair's essay in **The Absolute Stradivari** makes no mention of these earlier images; nor does she comment on the new volume's juxtaposition of the UV fluorescence result obtained from the 1870 Vuillaume violin against those which were obtained from the *Messiah* and *Hellier* violins. It is unknown whether the Italian

scientists alerted Brandmair (before she submitted her essay) to the visual evidence derived from their Vuillaume/*Messiah/Hellier* comparison of UV fluorescence.

The essays are followed by photographs of the *Messiah* violin, the 1870 Vuillaume violin, two more Vuillaume violins from 1873, a Giuseppe Rocca violin dated 1844 (photographs of this violin were previously published by Cremonabooks in 2000), another Rocca violin dated 1856, and a poorly conserved Enrico Ceruti violin dated 1868.

Prior to the photographs of the Vuillaume violins 'G.A.' (Gregg Alf?) writes an overview of the life and work of J-BV. GA begins (p. 160) by identifying Vuillaume's death as being on '19 March 1875': J-BV actually died on 19th February 1875. On the same page GA states that JBV purchased '144 instruments made by the Italian masters, for 80,000 francs, from the heirs of Luigi Tarisio, an Italian tradesman. These included the 'Messie' and 24 other Stradivari.' GA cites Sylvette Milliot for his information (*Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume et sa famille* (2006)) but does not provide a page reference. In her text (p. 152) Milliot makes no mention of '24 other Stradivari', and the remainder of her unverifiable account is borrowed from Roger Millant's biography of J-BV (p. 57): 'Everyone went back to Milan, where at the Hôtel des Délices, they found one hundred and forty-four violins, violas, and cellos, including twenty-four Stradivaris from all periods. Pulling a purse from his belt, J.B.V. said: "I have here 80,000 francs. Would you accept it for the complete collection?"' (reviewer's translation).

On p. 162 GA states that on J-BV violins 'there is generally a black dot on the joint of the top under the bridge.' The existence of a 'rather large, conspicuous black [ink] dot', 'impressed into the varnish from above', 'on top of and into the varnish', *on the centre-joint of the 'Messiah' violin's front plate* was discovered by three American dendrochronologists and extensively reported at the time (2001-2003). A full consideration of this feature of the *Messiah* violin is provided in this reviewer's *Messiah* history (pp. 131-132). GA does not mention that the *Messiah* violin has a black dot on the joint of the front plate, under the bridge; perhaps he didn't know about it.

Like others before him, GA states (p. 164) that Vuillaume made a copy of the *Messiah* violin for King Pedro V of Portugal, 'after he [King Pedro] visited the 1873 Exhibition at the South Kensington.' The Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments, at the South Kensington Museum, took place in 1872, not 1873, and Pedro V never visited the exhibition since he had died in 1861 (he was King of Portugal between 1853 and 1861). The King of Portugal in 1872 was Luis I (reigned 1861-1889). These careless and frequent mistakes undermine the academic credibility which the Museo del Violino might have hoped for with their new publication.

'F.C.' (Fausto Cacciatori?) provides an overview of Giuseppe Rocca on pp. 178-179. Once again, unsubstantiated statements are made: 'The dealer Luigi Tarisio offered [Rocca] the opportunity to see and study two extraordinary instruments: the 'Messie' Stradivari of 1716 and the 'Alard' Guarneri del Gesù of 1724' [*sic!*]. FC then retreats into probabilities and vague assessments: 'Rocca probably made patterns and took measurements of the instruments; he studied them and adopted some of their stylistic features [features which are not specified by FC]. He knew how to interpret their classicism [meaning?] [...] allowing him to reproduce their essence[?] in his composed[?] and modern interpretations.' FC's commentary can be set against that written by Philip Kass: '[...] it is also unfortunate that Rocca's idea of a copy was oriented entirely around a general form, liberally interpreted [...] rather than a literal copy which would act as a proof of their association' ('Holes in history', *The Strad*, August 2001, p. 864).

FC also writes about Enrico Ceruti (pp. 188-190) and states (p. 190) that 'The neck on [Ceruti's] violins was still mounted directly on the ribs, without being inserted into the upper bouts of the belly [into the upper block?] and mortised. It was attached, as in the past, utilising nails to fasten it to the upper block.' This final comment sits against a statement made by Roger Hargrave: '[Enrico Ceruti] was still using a variation of the Cremonese [construction] system, albeit screwing rather than nailing the neck through the neck-block' ('Evolutionary Road', *The Strad*, February 2013, p. 55).

It seems clear that the production of **The Absolute Stradivari** was rushed, and, as a result, mistakes, unsubstantiated statements, and dubious conclusions can be found within its pages; in these areas the rôle played by the two editors is questionable. Some of the photographic illustrations are valuable but whether these justify the considerable cost of the volume is open to question.
