

# **The Bass of Spain and the Vaslin-Galley: two cellos of Cremona**

© Nicholas Sackman

April 2023; with June 2023 Postscript and December 2023 revision  
(www.themessiahviolin.uk)

Charles Reade: ‘Cremona Fiddles (The Romance of Fiddle-Dealing)’; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 24 August 1872.<sup>1</sup>

Well, one day [in the late 1840s?] Georges Chanot [1801-1883] made an excursion to Spain to see if he could find any instruments there. He found mighty little. But, coming to the shop [in Madrid] of a fiddle-maker, one Ortega, he saw the belly of a Stradiuarius bass [cello] roasting in a shop-window! He went in, and very soon bought it for about forty francs. He then ascertained that the bass belonged to a lady of rank. The belly was full of cracks so Ortega had made [and fitted] a nice new one. Chanot carried this precious fragment [i.e. the Stradivari belly which was full of cracks] home to Paris.

Silverio Ortega (1765-1846) succeeded Vicente Assensio (1730-c.1793) as *luthier* to the Spanish royal household in Madrid; Silverio was followed by his son, Mariano (1803-1855). The Hills (*Antonio Stradivari* (1902) p.78) castigate Silverio Ortega for having cut down the ‘Spanish Court’ decorated cello to a more manageable size: ‘[Silverio] Ortega, the pupil and successor of Dom Vincenzo Ascensio, performed this ever-delicate operation in the most drastic and barbarous manner conceivable’. Nonetheless, the Hills also describe Ortega (*ibid.*, p.236) as someone ‘who, as a mere workman, was very good’. It is not known which member of the Ortega family – Silverio or Mariano – was behind the shop counter when Chanot arrived. Perhaps Silverio/Mariano’s perfectly reasonable judgement had been that the cello’s original belly – ‘full of cracks’ – was beyond repair and the cello could neither be used nor sold in its then-current state; the shop-window was as good a place as anywhere to hang the useless piece of wood. Silverio/Mariano would not have spent time and effort making a replacement belly if the original just required a visit from the glue-pot.

Chanot sold the belly to [Luigi] Tarisio for one thousand francs and told him where the rest was. Tarisio flew to Madrid.<sup>2</sup> He learned from Ortega where the lady lived, and called on her to see the bass. She sold it to him for about four thousand francs.<sup>3</sup> Tarisio sailed exultant for Paris with the Spanish bass in a case. The pair were caught by a storm in the Bay of Biscay. It was a terrible gale, and for one whole day they were in real danger. I will give you his real words:

“Ah, my poor Mr Reade, the Bass of Spain was all but lost.”

He got it safe to Paris. A certain high priest in these mysteries, called Vuillaume, with the help of a sacred vessel, called the glue-pot, soon re-wedded the back and sides to the [original] belly, and the bass now being just as it was when Ortega put his finger in the pie, was sold for 20,000 francs.

I saw the Spanish bass in Paris twenty-two years ago,<sup>4</sup> and you can see it any day this month for it is the identical violoncello now on show at Kensington, numbered 188.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The quoted narrative has been minimally edited by the present writer.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Hills (1902, p.135) the cello was ‘brought from Madrid by Tarisio, who, we are assured, journeyed the whole way from Paris [to Madrid, c.750 miles] on foot.’

<sup>3</sup> It is curious that although Chanot learned from Silverio/Mariano that the belly came from a Stradivari cello owned by ‘a lady of rank’ Chanot apparently made no effort to contact the lady with a view to buying the complete instrument despite having ‘found mighty little’ to buy in Spain; it is left to Tarisio to repeat Chanot’s journey from Paris to Madrid and then return.

<sup>4</sup> i.e. 1850. It is noteworthy that Reade is remarkably precise with his identification of the date; other writers would more likely have written ‘about 20 years ago’. It is assumed that Reade saw ‘the Spanish bass’ at J-B Vuillaume’s shop in the Rue Croix des Petits Champs, Paris.

<sup>5</sup> ‘... now on show at Kensington’ refers to the ‘Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments’ held at the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum) between June and August 1872; see overleaf.

**COMMENTARY**

Note that, in order to place into J-B Vuillaume's hands the body of the Stradivari cello (as well as its original, much-cracked, belly) Luigi Tarisio (1) had walked from Paris to Madrid, (2) had almost drowned in the Bay of Biscay during his return to Paris, and (3) had spent more than 5,000 francs. After expending all this effort and money it is inconceivable that Tarisio would have sold his Spanish cello to Vuillaume for less than 7,500 francs – more likely 10,000 francs. It follows that Vuillaume, needing to make a profit, would have charged a subsequent purchaser much more than 10,000 francs – perhaps 15,000 francs.<sup>6</sup>

Charles Reade clearly believed that exhibit 188 at the South Kensington Museum was the Tarisio/Vuillaume *Bass of Spain* cello; in reality, exhibit 188 was a 1725 Stradivari cello which, in 1872, belonged to Jules Gallay. The SKM catalogue (see p.5 of this account) states that Gallay bought the 1725 cello for 20,000 francs, which is the price mentioned by Reade in his narrative. Reade's mis-identification of exhibit 188 cello suggests that when he was in Paris in 1850 he was led to believe, perhaps entirely inadvertently, that the 1725 cello which he saw in Vuillaume's workshop was the *BoS* (see later, p.19, Questions), hence Reade's certainty about the 1725 instrument at the SKM exhibition. Reade surely believed that Vuillaume had sold the *BoS* to Gallay.

Reade says nothing in his narrative about the *BoS* being sold to 'a Russian nobleman'; such a person was not mentioned, in print, until 1902, and if there ever was, and still is, any supportive documentary evidence it has never been published:

It [i.e. the body of the Stradivari cello, together with the original belly] was purchased [from Tarisio] by Vuillaume who sold it [after repair and re-assembly] to a Russian nobleman.<sup>7</sup>

The Hills (1) do not identify the Russian purchaser by name,<sup>8</sup> or (2) identify the nobleman's place of residence, or (3) identify the date of the Vuillaume-nobleman transaction, or (4) identify the price paid for the cello, or (5) explain how they learned of the sale. It seems that at the time of writing their 1902 *Stradivari* monograph the Hill brothers did not possess a Vuillaume-issued sale receipt for the *BoS* cello despite their having recently bought the cello as part of the Camposelice instrument collection (see later, p.11).

\*\*\*\*\*

The narrative on p.1 is extracted from the second of four long and closely-argued articles (totalling some 14,000 words) which Charles Reade contributed to the *Pall Mall Gazette* and which were published on 19, 24, 27, and 31 August 1872. All four articles were built on Reade's experience of visiting the 'Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments' at the South Kensington Museum. The quoted text on p.1 very likely derives from a conversation between Charles Reade and Luigi Tarisio, a conversation which probably took place during 1851 when Tarisio visited London.<sup>9</sup>

Reade's narrative continues at the start of his third *Pall Mall Gazette* article, dated 27 August 1872:

"The Spanish Bass" [i.e. the 1725 Gallay cello] is of the grand pattern<sup>10</sup> and exquisitely made: the sound-hole, rather shorter and stiffer than in Stradiuari's previous epoch, seems stamped out of the wood with a blow, so swiftly and surely is it cut. The purfling is perfection. Look at the section of it in the upper bout of the back. The scroll extremely elegant. The belly is a beautiful piece of wood. The back is of excellent quality, but mean in the figure [?the flames are small?]. The sides are cut the wrong way of the grain; a rare mistake in this master. The varnish sweet, clear orange-coloured, and full of fire. [...]

The belly is full of cracks and those cracks have not been mended without several lines of modern varnish [being] clearly visible to the practised eye.<sup>11</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

<sup>6</sup> As a point of reference, in 1842-3 the 1711 *Duport* cello was sold to August-Joseph Franchomme for 25,000 francs.

<sup>7</sup> Hill (1902), 135.

<sup>8</sup> The Hills are content to identify by name 'Count Wielhorsky' and 'Count Apraxin' in their commentary on the *Davidoff* cello (*ibid.*, 134) which makes their reticence re 'the Russian nobleman' all the more curious.

<sup>9</sup> See G. Hart, *The Violin: its famous makers and their imitators*, Dulau/Schott (1875), 243-244.

<sup>10</sup> See boxed text on p.17 for measurements.

<sup>11</sup> Did the presence of many cracks in the belly of Gallay's 1725 cello help to confirm Reade's belief that the SKM cello was Tarisio's Madrid cello? See also p.5 of this account.

Not all the promised instruments had arrived by the time the SKM's Special Exhibition opened on 5 June 1872, hence the exhibition catalogue's title-page superscription: 'Under Revision'. Carl Engel (1818-1882), who wrote the Introduction to the catalogue explains the situation:

A catalogue was prepared. It contains an Introduction in which an account is given of the principal collections of musical instruments which have been formed in different countries. Some inaccuracies in the catalogue, owing to the necessity of it being in print before the opening of the Exhibition, when not all the instruments described had arrived, have been rectified in a revised edition [pub. 1873], of which a number of copies were printed for distribution among the lenders.

This [revised] edition contains photographs of interesting instruments which were exhibited.<sup>12</sup>

The situation described by Engel indicates that it is the revised catalogue of 1873 which provides an accurate guide to the 1872 display of instruments (where late-arrived instruments were perhaps identified in the vitrines by small place-cards, or, alternatively, a lengthy 'Errata' sheet was given to visitors). Some examples are:

- The 1872 catalogue lists the seven exhibits numbered 54-60 as 'Sordino'; the 1873 catalogue lists Nos. 54-61g – fifteen items – as 'Sordino'.
- The 1872 catalogue has a 'Kit' violin listed as exhibit 61; the 1873 catalogue lists the same instrument as exhibit 66a.
- The 1873 catalogue shows a Brothers Amati violin of 1586 as exhibit 70a; no such numbered instrument appeared in the 1872 catalogue.
- In 1872 exhibit 74 was a 'J. Guarnerius' violin; in 1873 the same number was allocated to a Brothers Amati violin.
- In 1872 exhibit 78 was a N. Amati violin of 1676; in 1873 the number 78 does not appear.
- In 1872 exhibit 84 was a Stradivari violin of 1732; in 1873 it was a 1679 violin.
- In 1872 exhibit 92 was followed by exhibit 93; in 1873 exhibit 92a was interleaved (a 1683 Stradivari violin); similarly between 98 and 99 (an "A. Guarnerius" violin dated 1671).
- Exhibits 107, 110, and 114 of 1872 do not appear in the 1873 catalogue.
- In 1872 exhibit 132 is followed by 133; in 1873 six violin bows are interleaved as 132a-e.
- Two violas, which in 1872 were nos. 139 and 141, do not appear in 1873, while exhibit 138 is re-numbered as 151, and exhibit 140 as 138.
- Similarly, exhibit no. 146 changes to no. 142, 148 to 143, 151 to 148, and 153 to 150.

Errors are also found in two of the sixteen illustrative plates:

- Plate VII shows exhibit 141, a Montagnana viola; the 1872 catalogue had listed exhibit 141 as a Gaspar di Salo viola.
- The same plate shows a Stainer viola as exhibit 143; the 1872 catalogue listed exhibit 143 as a J Guarnerius viola.
- Plate IX has a Maggini viola as exhibit 142; in 1872 this number was used for a di Salo viola.
- The same plate shows a di Salo viola as exhibit 139; in 1872 this was an Amati violin.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>12</sup> *Some Account of the Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments in the South Kensington Museum, Anno 1872*. Original copies of the small (21×14cms) Exhibition catalogue of 1872 ('Price Sixpence') and the larger (28×21.5cms) revised 1873 catalogue ('With Illustrations, Price Twelve Shillings') are held at the National Art Library (V&A Museum, London).

Charles Reade (1814-1884) was a successful and popular Victorian novelist who was also closely involved with the importation and sale of rare Italian string instruments. His London home was at 19 Albert Gate, Knightsbridge, just a short cab ride from the South Kensington Museum where the Special Exhibition was held in the summer months of 1872.

The Hill brothers evaluate Reade thus:

Charles Reade, during a number of years between 1840 and 1860, took a keen interest in old instruments. He travelled a good deal in France, where he frequently met Tarisio,<sup>13</sup> and purchased there Italian instruments, including Stradivaris and Guarneris, which he resold to the London dealers, principally to Hart and Corsby. He also had transactions with Mr. Gillott, the pen-maker, whom he materially aided in forming his collection.<sup>14</sup>

George Hart provides this admiring assessment:

The principal buyers of Italian instruments on the Continent, when dealing in this class of property was in its infancy, were Aldric, MM. Chanut senior, Thibout, Gand, Vuillaume of Paris, and Vuillaume of Brussels. In London, among others, were Davis, Betts, Corsby, and John Hart. There is yet another, the omission of whose name would be a blemish in any notice of the Violin and its connoisseurs. I refer to Mr. Charles Reade, the novelist, who in early life took the highest interest in old Italian Violins. We are indebted to him in a great measure for bringing into this country many of the most beautiful specimens we possess. Impressed with the charms of the subject, he visited the Continent for the pleasure it afforded him of bringing together choice specimens, and thus opened up the intercourse between England and the Continent for the interchange of old Violins which continues to this day. It would be difficult to find an instance where the intricacies of the subject were so quickly mastered as in his case. Without assistance, but solely from his own observation, he gained a knowledge which enabled him to place himself beside the Chief Continental connoisseurs, and compete for the ownership of Cremonese masterpieces.<sup>15</sup> These were the men who laid bare the treasures of Cremona's workshops, and spread far and wide love and admiration for the fine old works. Connoisseurship such as theirs is rare. To a keen eye was united intense love of the art, patience, energy, and memory of no ordinary kind, all of them attributes requisite to make a successful judge of Violins.<sup>16</sup>

In his *Pall Mall Gazette* articles Reade identifies, by exhibit number, the instruments which he discusses. For example, Reade refers to Exhibit 202 and unapologetically re-identifies the instrument:

The small violon 202 [NB: 'violon', not 'violin'] that stands by the side of the Gasparo da Salo 199, has the purfling of Andreas Amatus, the early sound-hole of Andreas Amatus, the exquisite corners and finish of Andreas Amatus, the finely cut scroll of Andreas Amatus; and the back, instead of being made of any rubbish that came to hand after the manner of Brescia, is of true fiddle wood, cut the bastard way of the grain, which was the taste of the Amati; and, finally, it is varnished with the best varnish of the Amati. Under these circumstances I hope I shall not offend the owner by refusing it the inferior name of Gasparo da Salo. It is one of the brightest gems of the collection, and not easily to be matched in Europe.

Exhibit 202 is described in both catalogues as a 'double bass, assigned to Gaspar di Salo; probably by Maggini.'

Reade re-identifies a further three instruments:

- an anonymous 'basso da camera' (198) was made, according to Reade, by Domenico Montagnana.

<sup>13</sup> Present writer's underscore. Charles Reade's narrative (p.1) should be read in light of this comment from the Hills.

<sup>14</sup> Hill (1902), 264.

<sup>15</sup> Present writer's underscore.

<sup>16</sup> Hart *The Violin* (1884/1909), 357.

- a violin (100) ‘ascribed to Guarnerius, probably by Storioni’ was made, says Reade, ‘by Landolfo of Milan before 1760’.
- a cello (189) ‘assigned to Andreas Guarnerius 1685’ is corrected by Reade to ‘made by David Tecchler of Rome’.

\*\*\*\*\*

In 1872 Charles Gand, in Paris, wrote the following description of a 1725 Stradivari cello which, at that time, belonged to Jules Gallay. It is possible that Gand’s text was written as a descriptive insurance document (so to speak) before Gallay’s cello was sent, or taken, to London to be exhibited at the South Kensington Museum: <sup>17</sup>

*(année 1872) M<sup>r</sup> Gallay, Paris*

*Violoncelle Stradivarius, 28 pouces, année 1725*

*Fond de 2 pièces, belles ondes descendant, cheville au milieu du fond à deux lignes du joint à gauche, belles éclisses. Table beau sapin ayant plusieurs cassures du côté de l’âme. Très-belle tête ayant eu la mortaise percée à jour. Très-beau vernis jaune rouge doré.*

*Ex Vaslin* <sup>18</sup>

(1872) Monsieur Gallay, Paris

Antonio Stradivari cello, 28 *pouces* [758mm], year 1725

The back plate is made from two pieces; beautiful flames which descend [from the centre-joint]. There is a dowel in the middle of the back plate 2 *lignes* [4.5mm] to the left of the joint [see p.19 of this account]. Beautiful ribs. The front plate is made of beautiful spruce, having several splits on the sound-post side.\* Very beautiful head having had the mortise cut through.\*\* Very beautiful varnish, golden yellow-red.\*\*\*

*ex* [Olive-Charlier] Vaslin [for whom see later, pp.12-13].

\* cf. Reade’s commentary (earlier, p.2); see also Gand’s text for the Camposelice cello (p.10).

\*\* i.e. a slot cut through the wood at the back of the peg-box so that one can look through the box (as is also the case on the 1707 *Countess of Stainlein* cello); this rear access can be helpful when lacing up the strings. It is inconceivable that Gand should identify a cut-through pegbox if the rear of the box was solid wood.

\*\*\* cf. Reade’s ‘orange-coloured’ (earlier, p.2).

There is no record in Gand’s 1872 business ledger of Gallay paying for a ‘fill-in’ to be inserted in the back of the pegbox of his 1725 cello. The only transactions with Gallay which are listed by Gand for 1872 are:

13 March: Gallay bought a mahogany (cello?) case for 28 francs

16 March and 20 September: Gallay bought a few cello strings. <sup>19</sup>

It must be concluded, therefore, that when Gallay’s 1725 cello was exhibited at the SKM it was showing a cut-open pegbox, but see Figure 2 of this account on p.16. Gallay’s cello was identified identically in the two SKM exhibition catalogues:

188 VIOLONCELLO. By Antonius Stradiuarius, 1725. A magnificent specimen.

Purchased by M. Gallay for 20,000 francs (800*l.*)

*Lent by M. Gallay, Paris.*

<sup>17</sup> In preparing for the 1872 exhibition the SKM Executive Committee established a ‘French Sub-Committee, in Paris’; there were four members, one of whom was Jules Gallay (1822-1897). In addition, ‘Mons. Vuillaume, of Paris, was invited to superintend the arrangement of the Italian Stringed Instruments.’

<sup>18</sup> *Catalogue descriptif des Instruments de Stradivarius et J. Guarnerius*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> All the Gand/Bernardel/Caressa & Français business ledgers are available online from the Musée de la musique, Paris.

Once Reade's 24 and 27 August 1872 articles were published did no-one – Gallay? – Vuillaume?<sup>20</sup> – point out to Reade his mistaken identification? George Hart's *The Violin: its famous makers and their imitators* was published three years after the Special Exhibition, in 1875. Hart reprints (pp. 241-2) the entirety of Reade's *Gazette* narrative including '... it is the identical Violoncello now on show at Kensington, numbered 188.' Seemingly, Hart saw no reason to query Reade's identification; perhaps David Laurie (see below) – who surely visited the SKM exhibition – was of the same opinion.

The only other Stradivari cello exhibited at South Kensington was label-dated 1730 (no.187 in the 1872 catalogue; lent by Mr Frederick Pawle). The 1872 catalogue also lists a 1711 cello – 'somewhat damaged' – as being exhibited as no.186 but this number does not appear in the 1873 catalogue and the name of the cello's owner, J. Whitmore Isaac, does not appear in the 1873 list of lenders' names. It thus seems that the 1711 cello was promised to the exhibition but never arrived (or if it did arrive perhaps it looked so damaged in comparison with the other instruments that Mr Isaac withdrew the instrument).

\*\*\*\*\*

In Chapter XIII of his *Reminiscences of a Fiddle Dealer*,<sup>21</sup> David Laurie describes at length – 25 pages – and in considerable detail – a journey he made to St. Petersburg, in 1876, to evaluate 'a collection of high-priced string instruments' belonging to a Russian widow. Having eventually reached St. Petersburg and having learned that the widow would be willing to receive him, Laurie, on arrival, was obliged to negotiate the purchase of the collection with the household's major-domo since the lady was unable to see him 'at such an early hour'. The impression given by Laurie is that the widow's identity and status, and, obviously, her deceased husband's identity and status, lay within the extensive ranks of St. Petersburg's wealthy aristocracy and nobility, a constituency wherein very many, perhaps all, would have owned collections of paintings, sculptures, books, furniture, and other works of art, and many would also have owned collections of musical instruments. Given the Francophile sophistication of St. Petersburg (where no educated person spoke anything other than French) string instruments would almost certainly have been sourced from the dealers in Paris.

Laurie relates that the un-named widow, in her introductory letter, 'enclosed all the receipts shewing what had been paid for them':

On looking over the receipts I found that nearly all the instruments had been purchased either through J. B. Vuillaume or Gand *Frères*, Paris, and as they were duly guaranteed by these firms there could be little doubt of their authenticity.<sup>22</sup>

From the receipts Laurie would have learned the names of all the supplying dealers, the label-dates and recent histories of the widow's instruments, and their cost prices. It was the knowledge gained from this paperwork that convinced Laurie that it would be financially advantageous for him to travel to St. Petersburg (via Berlin): 'It was plain [that] the sacrifice, both of time and money, must be on my side.'

The next consideration was the price to be paid. [The instruments] had, with a few exceptions, been bought many years before, and their value had greatly increased. It would pay me, therefore, to buy them at cost price if – but that *if* meant a lot – they had been well cared for and were good specimens of the makers. [...] ... from the tone of [the widow's] letter it was quite evident it was not necessity

<sup>20</sup> The present writer has been unable to establish whether Vuillaume, aged 74 in 1872, came to London to 'superintend the arrangement of the Italian Stringed Instruments' or whether he just corresponded with the SKM organisers. He died in 1875.

<sup>21</sup> *A Purchase in St. Petersburg*, pp. 84-108. Laurie's *Reminiscences* were written in 1896 (see later in this account, p.8, bottom, for the evidence); he died in 1897; his *Reminiscences* were published c.1924.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 84. Why did the widow contact David Laurie, and not Charles Gand, when she decided to sell her deceased husband's collection (Vuillaume having died the previous year)?

which made her desire to sell them but simply that as there was no one who took any interest in them they were only in the way and might as well be sold as not.<sup>23</sup>

When Laurie is finally able to see the instruments in St. Petersburg he becomes noticeably circumspect – unenthusiastic, even – in his evaluation:

[The collection] consisted of three Strad. 'cellos, several violins, and a tenor [viola].<sup>24</sup> The king of the collection was one of the 'cellos, which was of Strad.'s best period 1712, the other two being of the early period. None of them could be called first-class in point of preservation, and, owing to their mountings not being in order, it was impossible to judge their tone, but they would all, I thought, prove saleable when put in proper order.<sup>25</sup>

It is unclear whether Laurie is indicating that *all* the instruments in the collection were made by Antonio Stradivari, or only the three cellos; equally it is unclear if 'none of them' refers to all the instruments or just the cellos.

In January 1896 Laurie sent to *The Strad* a long letter about two violins which he had previously supplied to the then-recently-deceased violinist, John Tiplady Carrodus – a Stradivari and a Guarneri *del Gesù*. Although Laurie's letter to *The Strad* is focused on the two violins, Laurie makes a point of mentioning the three St. Petersburg cellos in his narrative:

I bought [the 1708 Stradivari violin] in the year 1876, in St. Petersburg (along with three "Stradivarius" violoncellos – no less – and other less notable instruments) all having been in the collection of a deceased amateur there.

Laurie's letter is nothing more than an unashamed piece of self-promotion, courtesy of the *Strad* editor who allowed almost an entire page for Laurie's advertisement. If the *BoS* was one of the three cellos which Laurie bought in St. Petersburg in 1876 he surely would not have missed the opportunity, even 20 years later, to bring such a purchase to the attention of *The Strad*'s readers, but in his Chapter XIII Laurie never mentions Georges Chanot, Luigi Tarisio, or J-B Vuillaume, nor does he mention a Stradivari cello label-dated 1713 or a cello known as the *Bass of Spain*. Perhaps the widow's receipts said nothing about the 'king' cello being the *BoS* – perhaps it wasn't – perhaps the 'king' was simply a 1712 Stradivari cello which happened to be the best instrument in an otherwise unremarkable collection.

If Laurie, like Reade and Hart, believed that exhibit 188 at the 1872 SKM Exhibition was the *BoS* (and at that time was the property of Jules Gallay) he would have been most surprised if, four years later, he had found within the widow's documentation written evidence which showed that the *BoS* cello was in St. Petersburg and had been in that city for many years. Laurie would not have been able to clarify this confusing situation with J-B Vuillaume since the latter had died in 1875.

\*\*\*\*\*

One outcome from the un-evidenced comment made in 1902 by the Hills – namely that Vuillaume sold the *BoS* to a Russian nobleman – has been the necessity for subsequent commentators to try to demonstrate a direct line of connection between the unidentified nobleman, the nobleman's widow, St. Petersburg, David Laurie's purchases in 1876, his sale of a 1713 cello in 1877, and Mr. John Adam. Demonstrating such a line of connection has to begin with a retrospective re-write of Laurie's narrative: namely, that Laurie made a mistake when he dated his 'king' cello as '1712', the label-date actually being '1713'. As far as is known to the present writer, no-one has ever claimed that a close examination of the '3' of the *BoS* label has revealed that the numeral is ambiguously drawn by Stradivari and that

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>24</sup> c.10 instruments in total?

<sup>25</sup> *Reminiscences*, 89.

this explains Laurie's 'mistake'; as far as is known, no commentator has declared their personal inspection of a label inside the *BoS*. Equally, no-one has suggested that because Laurie was writing his *Reminiscences* 20 years after his St. Petersburg purchase his memory was faulty. It is not known whether Laurie's manuscript still exists, nor whether the printer's typesetter may have mis-read Laurie's numbers, nor whether the type-set text was carefully proof-checked against the original manuscript.<sup>26</sup>

In order to put an end to speculation about the dating of the *BoS* it would be a simple matter for the present owner to publish a photograph of the cello's internal label; no issues of ownership-security and privacy would be breached. It is noticeable that David Fulton, who owned the *BoS* between 1999 and 2019, then sold it, and then published his volume *The Fulton Collection* in which the *BoS* is presented on pp. 249-263, says not a word about any label.

To try to narrow down Vuillaume's generic 'Russian nobleman' to just one person – a resident of St. Petersburg who acquired a collection of string instruments, whose widow instructs her major-domo to write to David Laurie with respect to selling the collection, and Laurie, in turn, finds a 1713 Stradivari cello identified within the widow's paperwork, travels to St. Petersburg and buys the cello but in his memoirs notates '1712' instead of '1713' as its label-date – this stretches credulity too far unless contemporary documentary evidence still exists, and the most important document would be a sale receipt, written by Vuillaume, not only identifying the Russian purchaser by name and location but also providing details of the Spanish cello's physicality and an account of its provenance. The Tarisio.com/Cozio Archive entry for the *BoS* (ID 40278) identifies only one document which relates to the cello – a dendrochronological dating of 1702 for the 'youngest' ring.

**cf. the POSTSCRIPT at the end of this article.**

In 2004 Bruce Carlson followed in the Hills' footsteps:

After the death of the nobleman, the "Bass of Spain" was sold in 1876, along with other important instruments, to the well known collector and dealer David Laurie who then returned to London. In 1877 the cello passed into the collection of Mr. John Adam and into that of the Duc de Camposelice in c.1884.<sup>27</sup>

If Tarisio's Spanish cello was sold by Vuillaume to a Russian nobleman (for, perhaps, 15,000 francs), and if, in 1876, in St. Petersburg, Laurie bought the cello for the same price, he would have done so only after calculating the higher price which he would need to demand when subsequently selling the instrument; *he could not have countenanced selling the instrument for less than he paid* (see quotation below, and overleaf). Would a future sale at a 'cost-plus' price – 20-25,000 francs? – be possible? Only an extremely wealthy individual based in London or, more likely, Paris would be willing to pay such a price. When Laurie 'went into the market' he knew what he could afford to buy and he also knew what he could sell to the fine-violin enthusiasts in England and on the near continent; his business career consisted of a balancing act between these two financial realities. In this respect it is worth noticing that, *en route* for St. Petersburg, Laurie visited some dealers in Berlin:

I saw some fine instruments, two in particular, which I tried hard to get. One was a splendid 'cello by Montaignaux [Montagnana?] in an almost perfect state of preservation; indeed I never saw another of that maker that came within a hundred miles of it. The other was a princely Petrus Guarnerius. The price asked for [the] cello and [for the] violin was, however, quite impossible and, indeed, could not be got by me even now, twenty years later [i.e. 1896]. I was therefore forced to give up all thought of buying them [...].<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> A few letters written by Laurie and sent to Robert Crawford are preserved in the Hill Archive at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Laurie's handwriting is ornate – full of elegant flourishes – but perfectly easy to read.

<sup>27</sup> *I Violoncelli di Antonio Stradivari* (2004), 158; the photographs of the *BoS* (*ibid.* 159) – front and back – are labelled '1712'.

<sup>28</sup> *Reminiscences*, 85.



In his St. Petersburg chapter Laurie relates the endless difficulties he faced in bringing all the bought instruments back to London. It is assumed that he kept all the widow's receipts and associated documents but it is unknown to the present writer whether any of these are still in existence.

\*\*\*\*\*

On 30 September 1877, David Laurie sold a 1713 Stradivari cello – otherwise unidentified – for £437; the name of the purchaser is unknown.<sup>29</sup> The unusual price suggests that £437 was what Laurie received from a payment made in another currency. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century the exchange rate between French Francs and Pounds Sterling was 25:1; such a rate would convert 11,000 Francs to £440 (with £3 lost to bank charges?). Such a price, in 1877, for a Golden Period 1713 Stradivari cello would have been *very* reasonable.<sup>30</sup>

John Adam was a fruit merchant whose business offices were initially in Pudding Lane in the City of London. Perhaps for business reasons Adam seems to have maintained a presence in Paris: Charles Gand's business ledger for December 1875 shows 'Mr. Adam, 67 rue de Monceau', requiring the inspection of an unidentified cello; in the succeeding ledger 'John Adam, 11 Pudding Lane, London', is identified as the owner of the 'Le Duc' Guarneri *del Gesù* violin which, in December 1882, needed a 500-franc(!) repair; on the same date Gand carried out a 200-franc 'complete repair' to Adam's 1722 Stradivari violin. Payment for David Laurie's 1713 cello by someone using French francs does not, by itself, demonstrate a direct link to John Adam, notwithstanding Adam's presence in Paris.

**NB: As shown overleaf, on an unknown date John Adam paid 25,000 francs to buy a 1713 Stradivari cello; the vendor's name is not known.**

One potential destination for Laurie's 1713 cello in September 1877 can be eliminated: the Gand & Bernardel business ledgers show all their transactions with Laurie during 1876 and 1877 and, during that period, there is no mention of Laurie placing any cello with G&B for sale. What *is* shown by the relevant ledger<sup>31</sup> is that on 14 April 1877 Laurie settled his debts with G&B by handing over 8,395 francs, in cash; in July 1877 Laurie sent a cheque for 1,000 francs to settle other purchases; in February 1878 Laurie sent two cheques to G&B for 7,250 francs. This level of commerce suggests that Laurie, in September 1877, did not sell a 1713 cello at a bargain-basement price of 11,000 francs because he urgently needed the money.

\*\*\*\*\*

In 1882 Charles Gand wrote a *Catalogue* description of a 1713 Stradivari cello belonging at that date to the Duc de Camposelice.<sup>32</sup> On 25 October 1882 Gand & Bernardel carried out a 40-franc repair to a cello belonging to the Duc: *réparation d'une Basse, 196-1882* [repair no.196 of 1882]. Given the 1882 date of Gand's descriptive text it is very likely that the repaired cello was the Duc's 1713 instrument:

(année 1882) *M<sup>r</sup> le duc de Camposelice, Paris*<sup>33</sup>  
*Violoncelle Stradivarius, 28 pouces, année 1713*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, [172]. If this 1713 cello was the *BoS* then it had taken 18 months to find a buyer even at the bargain-basement price of £437.

<sup>30</sup> See the Appendix to this article for some prices of Stradivari cellos.

<sup>31</sup> Musée de la musique, Paris; E.981.8.6, p. 313.

<sup>32</sup> *Catalogue descriptif*, 110. David Fulton (*The Fulton Collection*, 262) states: 'The Duke [of Camposelice] bought the *Bass of Spain* around 1884'; was Fulton using the date put forward by Bruce Carlson in 2004? (see p.8 of this account).

<sup>33</sup> Victor Reubsat (1843-1887) was a multi-talented and much-admired musician whose charismatic personality was particularly effective within Parisian society. In 1879 Victor became the second husband of Isabella Eugénie (Singer) and subsequently the Duc de Camposelice. The Duc's instrument-collecting obsession was funded by Isabella's wealth.

*Fond de 2 pièces, veines douces descendant. Eclisses bois plus vif. Table de 2 pièces, très-beau sapin un peu large sur les côtés. Cassures à l'âme et aux quatre coins, marques d'usure faites par les archets. Tête splendide. Vernis rouge vif.*

*Ex Adams, 25,000* <sup>34</sup> [Gand's red ink annotation; see boxed text below]

*M<sup>r</sup> Singer, 78 Avenue du Bois; racheté vente Camposelice, 30,000 f.*<sup>35</sup>

(1882) Monsieur le Duc de Camposelice, Paris

Antonio Stradivari cello, 28 *pouces* [758mm], year 1713

The back plate is made from two pieces; the flames are mild, descending. The ribs are made with brighter wood [i.e. the flames are more distinctive]. The front plate is made from two pieces; very beautiful spruce, [?the rings] slightly wide at the sides.

There are splits at the sound-post<sup>36</sup> and at the four [C-bout] corners. There are wear-marks caused by the bows. Splendid head. The varnish is bright red.

*ex Adams* [John Adam], 25,000 [francs].

Mr Singer, 78 Avenue du Bois [de Boulogne]; bought back at the Camposelice sale, 30,000 francs.

Throughout his *Catalogue descriptif* Gand identifies previous owners of instruments by using red ink; a financial amount next to an owner's name indicates the price paid by that person to buy the instrument which is being described. For example: with respect to a 1736 Stradivari violin (*Catalogue*, p.64) Gand lists, in red ink, the sequential owners and the prices they paid for the violin:

*Monsieur Cornet* from *Amiens* paid *2,500 francs* in *1832*

*M. Wilmotte* from *Anvers* paid *5,000 francs* in *1862* (this purchase is itemised in Gand's business ledger)

*M. Ménard* from *Marsinville* paid *6,000 francs* in *1867* (ditto)

*Mr Muntz* from *Birmingham* paid *10,000 francs* in *1874* (ditto)

Gand's 1882 descriptive text (above) shows that John Adam paid someone 25,000 French francs (equivalent to 1,000 UK Pounds) to acquire a 1713 Stradivari cello. As already shown, according to David Laurie's accounts the un-named purchaser of his 1713 cello paid 11,000 francs. As far as is known by the present writer no-one has explained and reconciled this critically-important financial discrepancy.

There is no entry in Charles Gand's business ledger (*Grand Livre*) which itemises a John Adam-Duc de Camposelice transfer of a 1713 cello; evidently, Gand had nothing to do with this transaction which was a private matter. It may be the case that, on the occasion of the transfer, Adam informed the Duc of the price he had paid for the cello – i.e. 25,000 francs. It is assumed that the Duc paid Adam a still higher price; after some years of ownership it would not have been unreasonable for Adam to price his 1713 cello at 30,000 francs, thus making 5,000 francs profit.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps Gand knew nothing about the 1713 cello until the Duc brought the instrument to him, in October 1882, to have some small repairs made and it was then that the Duc informed Gand of the price which had been paid by Adam; Gand included the financial information in his descriptive text (as shown above) using red ink.

Following the death of John Adam, Arthur Hill wrote in his diary on 7 February 1908:

His collection of Italian stringed instruments 25 years ago was the finest in this country, and his interest was both keen and intelligent. The prices that he paid in his day were very extravagant [...].<sup>38</sup>

To pay 25,000 francs c.1880 for a 1713 Stradivari cello was certainly extravagant; to pay 11,000 francs in 1877 was not.

<sup>34</sup> Gand's text ends at this point.

<sup>35</sup> This undated annotation was added by Albert Caressa & Henri Français to their copy of Gand's text.

<sup>36</sup> This comment can be compared with Gand's descriptive text for the 1725 Gallay cello; see earlier, p.5.

<sup>37</sup> It is noticeable that 30,000 francs is the sum subsequently paid by Franklin Singer to 'buy back' the cello from the Hills (see overleaf).

<sup>38</sup> Fulton, 255.

If – for the sake of argument – David Laurie, in September 1877, sold to John Adam, for 11,000 francs, one of his three St. Petersburg Stradivari cellos, Laurie would surely have provided Adam with a receipt and warranty, and also the relevant documentation from St. Petersburg. If, in 1882, John Adam sold the same cello to the Duc de Camposelice for c.30,000 francs – *a near three-fold increase in price in just five years* – the documentation would surely have been transferred with the cello. The Duc died five years later, on 1 September 1887, and the Hills then bought the Camposelice instruments. Sale receipts and provenance documents were surely included in that transaction yet such have never been mentioned by any commentator. Arthur Hill, in a diary entry dated 24 June 1929, recalled that ‘after his death [i.e. after the death of the Duc de Camposelice in 1887] we pulled off one of the brilliant strokes of our career by obtaining the [Camposelice] Collection from his widow, the Duchess de Camposelice.’<sup>39</sup> That this acquisition took place c.1889-90 is suggested by Arthur Hill’s diary for 13 March 1891:

Albert (Boubee) here this afternoon to try the Strad. cello of 1713.<sup>40</sup>

In their *Stradivari* monograph of 1902 the Hills write briefly about the Camposelice cello of 1713; their text contains not a single expression of admiration for the instrument:

The violoncello of the year 1713 was formerly in the collection of Mr. John Adam, later in that of the Duc de Camposelice, at whose death it passed into our hands, and was sold to the present owner. This instrument is the so-called “Bass of Spain”, the romance of the purchase of which by Tarisio is narrated by Charles Reade in his “Letters to the Pall Mall Gazette” published in 1872. The story will also be found in Hart’s book. Reade confused this Stradivari with the one to which he refers as being then exhibited by M. Gallay at the Exhibition of Ancient Instruments held at South Kensington. Brought from Madrid by Tarisio, who, we are assured, journeyed the whole way from Paris on foot, it was purchased by Vuillaume, who sold it to a Russian nobleman. At the death of the latter it was disposed of, with other instruments, to the late Mr. David Laurie, who brought it to London in 1876.<sup>41</sup>

Caressa & François speak of ‘the Camposelice sale’ (see previous page) but the present writer has not been able to find any record of a public auction during the period 1887-1890; it would seem, therefore, that the Camposelice-Hill sale was conducted privately. In their 1902 monograph (and in the 1909 second edition) the Hills identify Mr. Franklin [Merritt Morse] Singer (1870-1939) – a step-son of Victor Reubsæet/Duc de Camposelice – as the owner of the 1713 ‘*ex Adam*’ cello.<sup>42</sup> Clearly, therefore, on an unknown date between March 1891 and 1902 Franklin Singer paid 30,000 francs to retrieve the 1713 cello from the Hills (hence the C&F annotation to Gand’s descriptive text).

Arthur Hill wrote in his diary on 24 June 1929:

[...] the whereabouts of [the Camposelice] instruments subsequently sold by us is more or less known to us today; were we to relate the story of their successive sales, and the prices paid, it would form an interesting chapter in fiddle lore! One of the Stradivari cellos is still in the possession of Paris Singer [1867-1932] who lives in the city which bears his Christian name.<sup>43</sup>

Given that there were only two Stradivari cellos owned by the Duc de Camposelice it is curious that the identification of Paris Singer’s cello is not definitive. According to Charles Gand, writing in 1886,<sup>44</sup> the

<sup>39</sup> Fulton, 255. Does the present-day reader correctly detect a disconcerting tone of voice in the phrase ‘... we pulled off one of the brilliant strokes of our career ...’? The Duchess was Isabella Eugénie (Singer).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>41</sup> Hill, 134-5.

<sup>42</sup> Hill (1902), 129; Hill (1909), 135.

<sup>43</sup> According to Fulton, 254, Paris Singer received the *BoS* in 1902, ‘through inheritance’ but the Hills state that they obtained the Camposelice instruments c.1890. It has not been possible to identify whether it was Franklin or Paris Singer who was living at 78 Avenue du Bois at the time of the Camposelice-Hill transaction.

<sup>44</sup> *Catalogue descriptif*, 116.

second of the two Stradivari celli owned by the Duc de Camposelice was a 1719 instrument, now known as the *Duke of Marlborough*. Lisa Robinson quotes from a diary entry written by Arthur Hill on 3 March 1892:

George Hart called and mentioned that the Strad. cello dated 1719 which we have now obtained from the Camposelice collection was the one they bought off Capt. Bayley of Exeter.<sup>45</sup>

Robinson continues with a commentary:

Arthur Hill's earliest notes on the [1719] instrument indicate that it was sold on the Hills' behalf in 1892 by their German colleague Fridolin Hamma to another German dealer named Edler. Edler then sold the cello to Hugo Becker (1863-1941). Becker owned the instrument until around 1923 when it passed to the cellist Lorenz Lehr [who still owned the instrument in 1937].

If, between 1892 and 1937, the 1719 cello passed from the Hills to Fridolin Hamma, then to (Friedrich Christian?) Edler, then to Hugo Becker, and then to Lorenz Lehr who still owned the cello five years after the death of Paris Singer, the cello identified by the Hills as being 'still [in 1929] in the possession of Paris Singer' cannot be the 1719 instrument. Franklin Singer, having bought back the 1713 cello from the Hills, certainly could have passed the cello to his older brother, but Arthur Hill's diary of 24 June 1929 (see previous page) simply refers to 'one of the Stradivari cellos', a curiously vague identification of the instrument previously referred to as 'the so-called "Bass of Spain"'.

The ownership of the *BoS* during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth is particularly opaque. It seems that little is known for certain about the ownership of the cello during the period 1910-1950.

David Fulton states that in 1954 the *BoS* was in the hands of an American, Michael Antonacci, with the cello possibly having been obtained through Emile Français.<sup>46</sup> In 1997 a short obituary for Michael Antonacci was published, electronically, in the Stanford (University) Magazine.<sup>47</sup> A small photograph of Michael Antonacci is included on the web-page; he is holding a cello; it might be the *BoS*.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **The 1725 *Vaslin-Gallay* cello**

This Stradivari cello was obtained in 1827 by Olive-Charlier Vaslin (1794-1889). The following narrative is provided by the Hills:<sup>48</sup>

[The cello] remained the trusty companion of Vaslin during many years, and not until 1869 could he be tempted to part with it. Grown old and fidgety – he was over eighty years of age<sup>49</sup> – M. Vaslin conceived the notion that something was amiss with the neck of his 'cello – in fact, that it was ill-shapen. In vain did the best luthiers of the day, such as Gand, Victor Rambaux, and others replace it: nothing could satisfy him, and after having it changed times without number, he finally took to scraping it down himself, though still without satisfaction.

The following Gand and Bernardel business ledgers (online at the Musée de la musique, Paris) have been inspected for listings of repairs carried out to instruments owned by Olive-Charlier Vaslin:

E981.8.3 (1854-1861): no listing of the name 'Vaslin'

E981.8.24 (1860-1863): ditto

---

<sup>45</sup> *A Living Legacy*, 35.

<sup>46</sup> See Fulton, 254.

<sup>47</sup> <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/engineer-soldier-musician>.

<sup>48</sup> Hill (1902), 141.

<sup>49</sup> Olive-Charlier Vaslin (b. 1794) was 75 years old in 1869 when he sold his cello to Jules Gallay.

E981.8.34 (1861-1866): ditto  
 E981.8.20 (1863-1866): ditto  
 E981.8.19 (1866-1875): ditto

In 1869 Vaslin sold his cello to Jules Gallay. The Hill commentary continues:

The late M. Gallay, to whom we are indebted for these interesting details, adds: "I followed the wanderings of this admirable instrument to the different luthiers with a sad heart, and watched during many years for my opportunity to secure it. At last, in 1869, an offer of £600, plus my own Stradivari, which I valued at £400, obtained it for me. In 1880 I parted with it in favour of the present owner [Richard Loys]."

The Gand & Bernardel *Grand Livre* for 1866-1876 shows all the transactions with Jules Gallay during the late 1860s:<sup>50</sup>

December 1867: repair to a Cappa cello  
 October 1868: repair to a Montagnana cello  
 April 1869: repair to a Montagnana viola  
 1869 Mai 14: *réparation d'une basse Stradivarius, 80 francs* (assumed to be the newly-bought 1725 *ex*-Vaslin cello)  
 November 1869: cleaning of a 'Rugger' violin and a Bergonzi; new strings fitted to both.

Then, in 1871, Gallay's recently-acquired *ex*-Vaslin cello needed a new neck(!):

1871 Octobre 19: *fait une poignée neuve au Stradivarius etc., 60 francs.*

There is no record, in the Gand & Bernardel business ledgers, for the transfer of a cello between Gallay and Loys in 1880 so it must be assumed that the transfer was carried out privately. However, the ledger for 1875-1884 (E.981.8.6) does show, under the name of Loys, a 100-franc repair to an undated Stradivari cello; the repair is dated 8 July 1880 and it is likely that this was the *Vaslin-Gallay* instrument.

The only G&B listings of repairs to Vaslin's instruments, repairs which are all dated many years after Vaslin sold the 1725 cello to Gallay, are:

Musée de la musique, Paris; E981.8.6; 1875-1884

20 May 1880: a repair to a Bernardel cello

4 June 1880: a repair to 'the Stradivarius' (assumed to be that which Vaslin obtained from Gallay)

Musée de la musique, Paris; E981.8.4; 1881-1887

3 March 1885: repairs to 'a cello' (assumed to be the Bernardel cello)

14 March 1885: re-cut, re-polished, and re-varnished the necks of two celli – made by Stradivari and Charles Mennégand

2 December 1885: re-polished and re-varnished the neck of the Mennégand cello

18 December 1885: re-polished the neck of the Mennégand cello.

\*\*\*\*\*

(continued overleaf)

<sup>50</sup> Musée de la musique, Paris, E.981.8.14, p. 684.

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Charles Gand's *Catalogue descriptif* text for the 1725 Gallay cello (see p.5 of this account) was copied by Albert Caressa and Henri Français into their own notebook; the text was subsequently annotated by Jacques Français and also by Emile Français:<sup>51</sup>

**Charles Gand's text**  
*(année 1872) M<sup>r</sup> Gallay, Paris*  
*Violoncelle Stradivarius, 28 pouces, année 1725*  
*Fond de 2 pièces, belles ondes descendant, cheville au milieu du fond à deux lignes du joint à gauche, belles éclisses. Table beau sapin ayant plusieurs cassures du côté de l'âme. Très-belle tête ayant eu la mortaise percée à jour. Très-beau vernis jaune rouge doré.*  
*Ex Vaslin*

**EF** { **JF** { *Loys*  
*Silvestre l'a acheté en Mai 1903, rixxx*  
*1928 Sir Wilhelm van Hulsteyn à Johannesburg,*  
*avocat du gouvernement South Africa anglais pour l'Afrique du Sud*  
*appartient à Warburg, USA, 1931*  
**JF** { *1953 appartient à M<sup>me</sup> Flora Stad*  
*4331 Ches[t]nut Street, Philadelphia 4, Penna; Telé Evergreens 1214.*  
*Loys*  
*Silvestre bought it in May 1903, 37,000 [francs]*  
*1928, Sir Willem van Hulsteyn, from Johannesburg, lawyer in the English government of South Africa*  
*Owned by Warburg, USA, 1931*  
*1953, owned by Madame Flora Stad, 4331 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia 4, Pennsylvania; telephone Evergreens 1214.*<sup>52</sup>

The acquisition of the Loys cello by 'Sylvestre' (born Hippolyte Chrétien, 1845-1913) in May 1903 is not mentioned in the relevant Caressa & Français ledger.<sup>53</sup>

The provenance of the 1725 *Vaslin-Gallay* cello specified on the Tarisio.com website (ID 40285) is quite different to that given above: the website states that 'G[erald] Maas' bought the cello in 1909, but the Caressa & Français business ledger<sup>54</sup> shows that in August 1909 Maas bought a 1724 Stradivari cello 'with front and back plates having a central insert' – i.e. the cello now known as the 'Vaslin Composite'.

\*\*\*\*\*

(continued overleaf)

<sup>51</sup> The Jacques Français- and Emile Français-annotated copies of the Gand/Bernardel/C&F descriptive notebook are archived at the Smithsonian Museum (National Museum of American History), Washington DC, USA. Jacques' copy is in Box 55 folder 2, Emile's is in Box 55 folder 4. See the present writer's transcription, translation, and commentaries at [www.themessiahviolin.uk](http://www.themessiahviolin.uk).

<sup>52</sup> Flora Stad was the wife of Ben Stad (1885-1946); in 1929 the couple founded *The American Society of Ancient Instruments*.

<sup>53</sup> Musée de la musique, Paris; E.981.8.43, p. 1388.

<sup>54</sup> E.981.8.45.

### The photographic evidence

The 1873 revised South Kensington Catalogue included sixteen photographic images (plates). Plate XI shows the fronts of two cellos within a vitrine (Figure 1):



Figure 1

The image for the No. 188 Stradivari cello – Jules Gallay’s 1725 cello – shows a piece of string looped around the cello’s scroll; evidently the string was tied to a support beam in the roof of the vitrine. One loose end of this string can clearly be seen hanging to the left of the pegbox; a second loose end is discernible on the right of the pegbox. It can also be seen that the bass-side C-bout upper corner has been damaged, or badly worn down, and presents a truncated appearance. There is a horizontal ‘scar’ just to the right of the outer notch of the treble *f*-hole. It cannot be determined with certainty whether or not the pegbox is cut through, as specified by Charles Gand.



Plate XII (Figure 2) shows an image of the rear of the same two cellos; the visual evidence indicates that the rear of the Stradivari pegbox is filled in, despite Gand's unambiguous descriptive text of 1872.



Figure 2

The camera is in the same position as it was when the fronts of the cellos were photographed (Plate XI); the two cellos have simply been rotated on their cord supports.



Charles Reade, in his third letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* (27 August) writes:

By the side of the Spanish bass stands another,\* inferior to it in model and general work, superior to it in preservation, No. 187. [...] The scroll is superb in workmanship; it is more finely cut at the back than the scroll of the Spanish bass;\*\* [...] the back and belly, where the varnish gets fair play, are beautiful. The belly is incomparable. Here is the very finest ruby varnish of Stradivarius, as pure as the day it was laid on.

\* i.e. 'stands another Stradivari cello'

\*\* Reade makes no comment about the 'Spanish bass' (i.e. the *Vaslin-Gallay* cello) having its pegbox cut through.

Plate XI (Fig. 1) shows a Sanctus Seraphin cello by the side of Gallay's cello; the Seraphin cello is identified in the Plate image, as well as in the 1872 and the 1873 catalogues, as exhibit 191. It seems that Reade, by being imprecise with his 'stands another', has made another mistake of identification. However – in 1872 there were just two Stradivari cellos exhibited at the SKM: the Gallay cello of 1725 (no.188) and the Pawle cello of 1730 (no.187). It was surely the case that Vuillaume arranged for those two cellos to be in the same vitrine, side by side; such a positioning would have facilitated Reade's comparison of the two instruments. Plates XI and XII (Figs. 1 and 2), therefore, were 'staged' images, created after the exhibition concluded but before all the instruments were retrieved by their owners. Mr Pawle, it seems, had already removed his cello; so, for the benefit of the photographer, another instrument – the Sanctus Seraphin (no.191) – was placed next to the 'Spanish bass'/*Vaslin-Gallay*.<sup>55</sup>

With respect to the 1730 *Pawle* cello: in their Stradivari monograph (p.273) the Hills state that the cello was sold to Mr C G Meier in 1880 for £525. 'The instrument now migrated to Paris, and was there bought in 1882 from MM. Gand & Bernardel frères for £600 by Mr. David Johnson, and brought back to England.'

Inspection of the G&B business ledger which covers the period 1875-1884 shows that on 30 October 1880 Meier consigned his cello to G&B – '*une basse Stradivarius à vendre*' – for 13,750 francs. Barely one month later, on 2 December 1880, the cello was sold to David Johnson for 15,000 francs: '*Un violoncelle Stradivarius, Longuet, qui était en dépôt par M<sup>r</sup> Meier.*'

With respect to Gand's identification of the *Pawle/Meier/Johnson* cello as '*longuet*' the anonymous historian who has written the *Pawle* commentary in Jost Thöne, *Antonius Stradiuarius*, Vol. VIII, p.192, states:

The instrument thus appears considerably more slender [than a standard *forma B* cello], although by no means disproportionate – interestingly, the proportions are reminiscent of Stradivari's Long Pattern violins.

The *Pawle* is one of the handful of *forma B piccola* cellos which were made during Stradivari's final years. The cello's basic measurements (Jost Thöne) are: 320, 208, 412, and 740mm.

The usual measurements of *forma B* celli are: circa 340, 228, 436, and 757mm.

The Hill measurements of Gallay's 1725 cello are: 333.4, ---, 444.5, and 758.8mm (converted from the Hills' imperial measurements). The Tarisio.com/Cozio Archive measurements (ID 40285) are 333, ---, 445, and 759mm (i.e. Hill measurements, but rounded). Applying 759mm to the photo of the Gallay back plate produces width measurements of 338, 223, and 435mm. The Hills' 444.5mm is incorrect.

The Hill measurements of the 1713 'Bass of Spain' cello are: 336.5, ---, 434.9, and 760.4mm. The body-length measurement specified in the catalogue produced by the Ashmolean Museum for their 2013 *Stradivarius* exhibition is 756mm (see p.146 therein). Applying 756mm to the Ashmolean photographs and to the Fulton photographs reveals that the three width measurements of the *BoS* are 339, 226, and 433mm (i.e. *forma B*).

Summary: the essential measurements of the 1730 <i>Pawle</i> cello are:	320, 208, 412, and 740mm ( <i>piccola</i> )	
the essential measurements of the 1725 <i>Gallay</i> cello are:	338, 223, 435, and 759mm	} ( <i>forma B</i> )
the essential measurements of the 1713 <i>BoS</i> cello are:	339, 226, 433, and 756mm.	

<sup>55</sup> Exhibit 189 was a 1685 cello assigned to Andrea Guarneri; exhibit 190 was a 1702 cello by Giuseppe Guarneri *filius Andreae*. Like the Stradivari cellos, these two Guarneri cellos were surely exhibited in their own vitrine, side by side.

In 1905 the publishing firm of T Werner Laurie (London) published *Chats on Violins* by Olga Racster; in 1907 the firm also published Racster's companion volume, *Chats on Violoncellos*. Around 1920 the publishers brought the violin and violoncello publications into one revised and rewritten volume: *Chats on Big and Little Fiddles*. Included (facing p. 200) is a photograph of the front of the 1725 Vaslin cello (Figure 3):

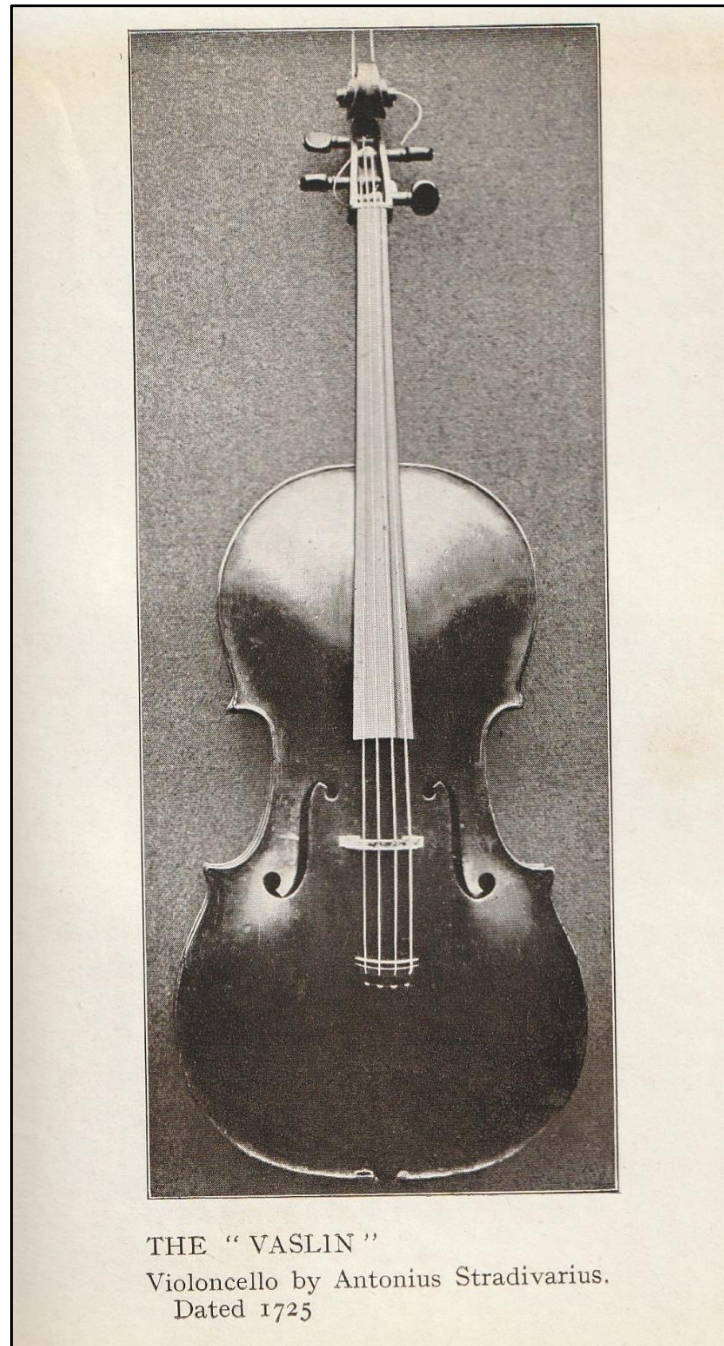


Figure 3

This image is a copy of the 1873 SKM Catalogue photograph (Plate XI, Fig. 1) but seems to have been cleaned and enhanced; the edges of the cello are much sharper and better defined (but the overall 'colour' is quite dark).

Also noticeable: the aforementioned loosely hanging piece of string is now seen on the right of the pegbox; the aforementioned damaged corner on the cello's front plate is also now on the right of the

image, and the ‘scar’ is on the left. It thus seems that in enhancing the 1872 photo the publisher’s photographers used the wrong side of the photographic negative which has resulted in the image being ‘flipped’ from side to side.

\*\*\*\*\*

Front, back, and treble-side photographs of the 1725 ‘Vaslin’ cello then appear in the booklet issued for the *Stradiuarius Memorial Concert* at Carnegie Hall in December 1937; the image-resolution is good and the truncation of the C-bout corner is clear to see.

In 1945 the first edition of Ernest Doring’s *How many Strads?* was published by William Lewis in Chicago. Doring presents the same photographs as used in the *Memorial* brochure, and provides a commentary which indicates that the 1725 *Vaslin-Gallay* cello passed through the Hills’ hands en route to Wurlitzer in New York. The Tarisio.com/Cozio Archive web page (ID 40285) shows an additional set of Hill photographs, of good quality. These show the cello’s worn down C-bout corner and what is apparently a dowel in the centre of the back plate, slightly to the left of the centre-line, exactly as was specified by Gand in 1872. The ‘dowel’, however, looks like a black-ink dot superimposed on the photographic image. Neither the *Memorial* photos nor Doring’s copy-photos show a black dot.

Neither the *Memorial* photos, nor Doring’s copy-photos, nor the Hill photos show any evidence for the back of the pegbox having been cut through, as specified by Gand.

\*\*\*\*\*

If, as seems to be the case, Charles Reade mis-identified Gallay’s cello as the instrument which he believed to be the *BoS*, the present-day commentator has to ask how such a mistake came to be made:

- both celli are of almost identical dimensions (see the boxed text on p.17)
- both cellos have narrow flames on the back plate which descend gently from the centre-joint (but the flames on the *BoS* are more tightly packed together than on the Gallay)
- both cellos have ribs featuring vertical flames which, in appearance, are very similar
- on the front plates the rings of the *BoS* increase in width in a more consistently graduated manner than they do on the Gallay cello where there are groups of rings of varying width.

Since the only known photographs of the Gallay cello are black-and-white no comment can be offered regarding any differences or similarities between the colours of the two varnishes (other than Gand’s comment that the Gallay varnish is ‘golden yellow-red’ whereas the *BoS* has ‘bright red’ varnish).

\*\*\*\*\*

## QUESTIONS

1. When Charles Reade was in Paris in 1850 was Vaslin’s cello in Vuillaume’s workshop having its neck adjusted?
2. Was the *BoS*, having just been bought by Vuillaume from Tarisio, also in the workshop being re-assembled and having its cracks repaired and glued?
3. Was there a misunderstanding about the identities of the two similar-looking cellos, and was Reade inadvertently led to believe that Vaslin’s cello (later Gallay’s cello) was Tarisio’s *BoS*?
4. As a result, was Reade left believing that the *BoS* cello (as he identified it) was label-dated 1725?
5. When Reade visited the SKM Exhibition in 1872 was it the catalogue’s specification of ‘1725’ as the date of Gallay’s cello (see earlier, p.5) which convinced him that he was looking at the same cello?

6. Did Vaslin, at some point between 1850 and 1872, ask Vuillaume to cut open the pegbox on his cello so that he could lace the four strings more easily?

7. In 1872, Gand definitively identifies the cut-open pegbox in the *Vaslin-Gallay* cello, but, in that same year, the instrument seemingly appears at the SKM with a normal filled-in pegbox.

Regrettably, these (and other) discrepancies cannot be explained with any certainty.

\*\*\*\*\*

## APPENDIX

### Prices of Stradivari cellos

#### Hill, Antonio Stradivari, 1902

In 1842-3 the 1711 *Duport* cello was sold to August-Joseph Franchomme for 25,000 francs (p.132).

The 1712 *Davidoff* cello was bought (at an unknown date) from the Russian nobleman Count Apraxin by Count Wielhorsky who gave 40,000 francs and his best horse.

In 1878 the c.1725 *Chevillard* cello was sold to the King of Portugal for 20,000 francs (p.142).

In 1885 the 1701 *Servais* cello was sold to M. Couteaux for 60,000 francs (p.124).

The Duc de Camposelice offered 70,000 francs for the 1714 *Batta* cello; a 'Russian nobleman' presented Batta with a signed blank cheque (which wasn't accepted).

#### Jacques Francais business records (Smithsonian Institution)

In 1873 a 1689 cello belonging to Charles Wilmotte was sold for 13,000 francs.

In 1885 the *Cristiani* cello of 1700 was sold to Hugo Becker for 25,000 francs.

In 1887 Abel Bonjour's 1691 cello was sold for 12,600 francs.

In 1893 the firm of W. E. Hill & Sons bought the 1714 *Batta* cello for 60,000 francs.

In 1899 Olive-Charlier Vaslin's 1707 cello (?that which Jules Gallay sold to him – see earlier, p.13?) was sold for 19,000 francs.

#### Jost Thöne, Antonius Stradiuarius, Vol. VIII, pp. 192 and 220

In 1878 the *Pawle* cello of 1730 was sold by W. E. Hill to Edward Hennell for £500 (12,500 francs); two years later, in 1880, it was sold again, this time for 15,000 francs.

In 1886 George Withers bought the 1730 *Scholz/Goltermann* cello from Vicomte de Janzé for 57,000 francs; Withers immediately sold the cello to the Duc de Camposelice for 65,000 francs.

\*\*\*\*\*

## POSTSCRIPT (June 2023)

In the June 2023 issue of *The Strad* Gennady Filimonov presented an article (pp. 42-47) which, in part, stated that the 'Russian nobleman' was Nikolai Aleksandrovich Haller (1823-1875). In his article Filimonov quotes from a memoir, published in 1917, in which the Russian violinist Aleksandra Vasilevna Unkovskaya (b. 1857) recounts that, around 1870, Haller went to Paris 'and bought from J. B. Vuillaume a whole collection of magnificent violins, violas, and cellos of Antonio Stradivari, Nicolò

Amati, and other famous Italian masters, and a violin by Guarneri *del Gesù*.<sup>56</sup> Aleksandra comments that this was ‘an unprecedented Russian purchase of a whole collection of precious instruments – so precious that, essentially, they were priceless.’ Haller’s level of expenditure with Vuillaume evidently went far beyond normal expectations of commerce even in the rarefied market for Cremonese instruments. Aleksandra continues by stating (as quoted by Filimonov) that ‘The presence of Haller’s precious collection of musical instruments in the city [St. Petersburg] aroused a new interest in playing stringed instruments, on which many began to learn.’ The impression is given that Haller returned home with a collection which was extraordinary in both quality and number of specimens.

Filimonov quotes from the diary of Grand Duke Constantin Nikolayevich (brother of Tsar Alexander II) wherein the Grand Duke, an amateur cellist, reflects on a musical soirée:

2 February 1873: There was the eccentric Nikolai Aleksandrovich Haller and he brought his three Stradivari cellos to show off, which he ‘terribly’ praises while others do not share his opinion and prefer Markevich’s [Stradivari] cello.

If the *BoS* was one of the three celli owned by Haller – and if all three were outperformed by Stradivari’s 1709 *Markevich* cello – perhaps the *BoS* did not represent the pinnacle of cello-making *lutherie* (as has been claimed). David Fulton has evaluated the *BoS* thus:

I believe this instrument is among the great treasures of mankind, in no way inferior to other great works of art like Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* and Michaelangelo’s *Pietà*. The *Bass of Spain* is the greatest cello I have ever personally seen, heard, or know of.<sup>57</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

In his *Reminiscences* Laurie describes (pp.90-91) the great difficulties he had in getting a St. Petersburg workshop to make protective shipping cases for the instruments he had bought. Laurie relates how he went back to the widow’s house and borrowed an empty cello case; returning to the workshop he ‘laid [the case] on the ground and drawing a line round it with the point of my stick shewed [the manager] the height I wanted. At last he grasped the idea [...]’ Laurie then went to the shipping company and relates (p.95) how ‘he told them I had four cases[,] large but very light[,] containing valuable instruments.’ It is surely reasonable to assume that three of the cases contained the three cellos, the fourth containing the ‘several violins and a tenor’. The present writer’s suggestion (see footnote 24) that in 1876 there were only about ten instruments in the posthumous collection thus receives some support; evidently some of the instruments – ‘a whole collection of magnificent violins, violas, and cellos’ – had already been sold or gifted to others (such as Aleksandra Unkovskaya herself to whom, in 1873, Haller gifted a 1742 Guarneri *del Gesù* violin).

\*\*\*\*\*

Peter Davidson in his *The Violin: its construction theoretically and practically treated* writes of David Laurie:<sup>58</sup>

Amongst the matchless and unsurpassable instruments which he has imported into this country may be mentioned –

the “Alard” Stradivarius violin, *ex* Alard, Paris

the “King Joseph” Guarnerius violin, *ex* Vicomte de Janzé, Paris

the “Sancy” Stradivarius violin, *ex* the Baron de Sancy

<sup>56</sup> If the *BoS* was one of the cellos bought by Haller from Vuillaume around 1870 it would therefore seem that the instrument had remained in Paris, unsold, since 1850.

<sup>57</sup> Fulton, p. 259.

<sup>58</sup> New, enlarged edition, 1880, pp. 278-9.

the “De Heller” [Haller] Stradivarius violoncello, *ex* De Heller, St. Petersburg  
– all now in the possession of John Adam Esq., Blackheath, London, whose magnificent collection  
of violins will be found detailed in a subsequent part of this work.’

It is noticeable that Davidson does not identify the “De Heller” cello as the Tarisio/Vuillaume *Bass of Spain* – and Davidson was writing just three years after Laurie’s visit to Russia. In Davidson’s listing of the Adam instruments (p.293) he briefly identifies a 1713 cello: ‘Of magnificent tone, very handsome, quite perfect.’

\*\*\*\*\*

**Nicholas Sackman:** Associate Professor, Department of Music, University of Nottingham (retired). Author of *The Messiah violin: a reliable history?* (2015); see [www.themessiahviolin.uk](http://www.themessiahviolin.uk) for details. Author of an historical study of the Stradivari *Habeneck* violin, published in the Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society, 2016, and re-published on the aforementioned website. Author of an historical study of the ‘original’ neck of the Stradivari *Soil* violin (website). Author of a detailed historical study of the two Guarneri *del Gesù* violins which belonged to John Tiplady Carrodus (website). Author of an extensive and detailed investigation into the reality of the 1724 Stradivari violin which Count Cozio di Salabue sold in 1817 to Niccolò Paganini (website). Author of an historical study of the Stradivari *Chant du Cygne* violin (Journal of the Galpin Society, March 2017). Author of a transcription and translation of the complete sales-ledger archive of Jacques Francais (Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC); see website. Author of a detailed historical examination of the Stradivari quartet of decorated instruments exhibited at the Palacio Real in Madrid, Spain; see website. Author of *The case of the missing mould* (‘The Strad’, June 2018). Author of a detailed examination of issues which surround both the *Cannone* violin in Genoa and the *Canon* violin sold by David Laurie (website). Further free-to-read research articles are available at the website.