

REVIEW: *The Missing Strad: the story of the world's greatest violin forgery*

Gerald Gaul

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Gerald Gaul – violinist, violist, and Vice-Chairman of the National Music Museum at Vermillion, South Dakota, USA – has assembled within this self-published book 35 short chapters which, despite the title, range mostly across the life and times of Niccolò Paganini, J-B Vuillaume, and the Guarneri violin(s) that passed between them; Antonio Stradivari and the Ashmolean Museum violin receive less attention.

Gaul's text is frequently heavily dependent on the writings of others, e.g. Geraldine de Courcy (whose 1957 *magnum opus*, 'Paganini, the Genoese', provides 52 out of 114 quotations), Roger Millant (10), Sylvette Milliot (6), etc. In addition, unacknowledged paraphrases of sources suggest that Gaul has himself carried out little primary research.

The rambling organisation (and, at times, perverse content) of the book may be observed by comparing the opening text of Chapter 1 with that of Chapter 26:

[p.3] In 1815 Niccolò Paganini was thrown in jail for kidnapping and raping Angelina Cavanna. He was thirty-three years old. Destined to be the most important violinist of all time he had recently given his first successful concert in a major city, Milan.

[p.221] In 1815 Niccolò Paganini was thrown in jail for kidnapping and raping Angelina Cavanna. Paganini was released from prison in 1815 [*sic*] a changed man. He was already thirty-three years old. He was a local violin celebrity but he was not headed toward anything greater. If he had not gone to prison in 1815 he would not even merit a footnote in the music history books.

Much that is found within the book's final chapters consists of a re-presentation of material covered earlier. In Chapter 14, p.106, for example, we are told that it was Paganini's Stradivari viola that 'inspired Achille [*sic*] Paganini to ask [Berlioz] for a viola concerto that included a beheading.' This extraordinary proposition is revisited in Chapter 31, p.262: 'Achille was supportive [of his father's plan to return to England and France as a violist]: unknown to [Niccolò] Paganini he [Achille] ordered a viola concerto from Hector Berlioz.' The impression is given that Gaul's text was never examined by a copy editor.

Gaul takes many, many pages to expound (irrelevantly with respect to 'the missing Strad') on the historical development of the bows which were used by violinists in the late-18th and early-19th centuries, likewise strings. Gaul also delves into Paganini's entanglement with Charlotte Watson, generating some astonishing statements: e.g. that to 'be rid' of Charlotte – to get her out of his life – Paganini 'was going to accuse Watson of breaking his violin' (pp.19-20), and, as a supporting element in this strategy, Paganini '[took] the precaution of breaking his diamond-decorated violin bow' (p. 32).

In Chapter 10 (p.76) we are informed, incorrectly, that Camillo Sivori paid Paganini 500 francs for Vuillaume's copy of Paganini's Guarneri violin – Sivori actually paid 500 francs to Vuillaume (through Paganini's lawyer, Luigi Geremi) – but Gaul then informs us (p.77) that Sivori 'was surprised to get the gift of the perfect Vuillaume *il Cannone* copy. [...] Paganini [...] gifted the copy to Sivori.' On p.100 the plot thickens still further when we are told that Paganini, on his death bed, gave Sivori a second violin, namely his 'original' Guarneri violin. On pp.269-70 Gaul writes: 'The lie that Sivori had been gifted the [*il Cannone*] violin before Paganini's death was a perfectly good reason [for Achille] to give nothing to the Genoese. Certainly, Paganini's executors thought so.' This curious statement is an echo of what is stated on p.110: 'The executors of Paganini's estate clearly felt that Achille owed nothing to

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Genoa.' Documentary evidence to support Gaul's baffling pronouncements is conspicuous by its absence (here and elsewhere).

With respect to Paganini's Guarneri violin 'it is assumed that he [i.e. J-B Vuillaume] only made one violin that was good enough to be a forgery: a copy of *il Cannone*, Niccolò Paganini's Guarneri *del Gesù* of 1743.' Covering all bases Gaul informs us that this copy violin 'was irreparably damaged, sold, or lost by Paganini's student, Camillo Sivori' (p. xiii).

The reader is informed (p.30) that 'it is more difficult to copy [a *del Gesù* violin] convincingly because its plates have a subtle depression near the ribs'; no further details are provided.

On p.245 we read: 'When [Nicolaus] Sawicki's fingerboard was removed from *il Cannone* in the twentieth century to modernize the instrument [his] signature [on the fingerboard's underside] made the whole violin look like an Austrian forgery.' Nicolaus Sawicki was Polish, and Paganini wrote a fulsome notice of recommendation and praise for Sawicki's work as a *luthier* and specifically for his expert replacement of the fingerboard on the Guarneri violin.

Chapters 15-20 have little or no relevance to a 'missing Strad' or 'the world's greatest violin forgery'.

It seems to be Gaul's argument that the 'Messiah' violin which is displayed in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum is a genuine Stradivari instrument: 'that [violin] really is a Strad' (p.272); it was 'made in 1716' (p. xiii); it was 'allegedly found in a farmhouse in Italy in January 1855 by Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume' (p. xiii). Gaul proposes that Vuillaume 'disposed of the original instrument by passing it off as one of his own Stradivari copies' (p. xv); the logic of such a course of action entirely escapes this reviewer.

Gaul (pp. xv-xvi) lists 'the identified Vuillaume copies of the Stradivari violin' by using, without any acknowledgement, Roger Millant's 1972 information, but then identifies an 1856 copy, Vuillaume's number 2173, as 'the missing Strad' (p. 218). Gaul adds: 'By this I mean the Vuillaume violin that is the voice of the Messiah. Vuillaume may have made more than one.' The narrative becomes ever more strange when we read (p. 219) that the 2173 violin – 'possibly Vuillaume's greatest artistic achievement' – 'has been studied [by whom?] and determined to be either a Strad violin or an exceptionally competent forgery.' It is difficult to know how to respond to the following: '1854 was the year that the violin world became convinced that Vuillaume was a terrible violin maker. Ironically, the very next year, Vuillaume would become the greatest violin forger of all time' (pp.271-2).

Elsewhere the reader is informed that Luigi Tarisio was actually Luigi Teruggi who 'changed his name after being cheated out of payment for some carpentry work in Rovasenda [45 miles north-east of Turin] and beating up the non-paying customer.' Tarisio's 'earliest successes in getting old Italian violins were at monasteries, where he convinced the monks to pay him for carpentry work in violins' (p.34). Gaul comes very close to rejecting the 'existence' [*sic*] of Luigi Tarisio (p.214) yet he continues by stating that Tarisio provides the provenance for 'as much as a third' of the '2500 great old Italian instruments'; it is not known how Gaul arrived at this implausible number. 'From 1827 to 1854 [Tarisio] supplied Vuillaume with over a thousand valuable old Italian violins' (p. 34) – that's 40 violins in each and every year, for 27 years.

The wearily flippant attitude of the author reaches its nadir on p.217 with: 'Here's something that bugs the crap out of me' (with respect to 'the whole thing with making violins look old'). Elsewhere (p.50) Gaul refers to the 'crapulence' of the English concerts organised on Paganini's behalf by John Watson. Something that 'bugs the crap out of' the present reviewer are un-evidenced statements: the following relates to the 1824 auction of Viotti's 1709 Stradivari violin for the sum of 3,816 French francs:

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This [auction price] must have given [Count Cozio di] Salabue and [Carlo] Carli the mental fortitude to resist when the actively psychotic Niccolò Paganini showed up and demanded to buy the magical 1716 violin, a violin which he claimed was the Messiah. (p.233).

Paganini bought a 1724 Stradivari violin from Count Cozio (through Carlo Carli) in 1817; there is no reason why the Count should have 'resisted' if Paganini wanted to buy the 1716 violin following the Viotti auction in 1824. The 1716 Strad (built around the *P.G. (Più Grande)* mould) was still in Count Cozio's possession when he died in 1840, and, in any case, it was/is not the violin which is now in Oxford.

Gaul's technique – of positing outlandish ideas but wrapping them in uncertainties rather than factual realities (which would undermine the ideas) – can be seen in the following extract (p.184):

It would have been sacrilege for Vuillaume to have entered an original Strad into the competition for the gold medal at the Paris Exhibition in 1855 – to try and pass off the greatest violin ever made as his own personal creation. And yet this is exactly what it appears he did.

The above text is sourced from Chapter 22 which, in a similarly uncertain manner, is titled: 'Vuillaume Creates, Copies, or Possibly Forges the World's Most Perfect Violin.'

Another example:

The violin that [David] Laurie saw hanging from the ceiling of Vuillaume's shop was perhaps the violin that sounded perfect. (pp.203-4)

Peter Klein's dendrochronological evaluation of the Oxford violin (carried out in 1997) is mentioned on p. xv, likewise (p.210) the dendro result publicised by John Topham – 'an amateur dendrochronologist' – but no mention is made of more recent scientific analyses which have been met with a higher level of international acceptance. On p.210 Gaul seems to confuse 'scientists at Sheffield University' with the three American dendro experts who examined the Oxford violin in 2001.

On p.209 Gaul writes: 'Given a reasonable reconstruction of the story[?] of Paganini and Vuillaume, the Messiah in the Ashmolean and Paganini's violin in Genoa both have to be fakes', but this is followed (p.210) by: 'The Messiah was made by Antonio Stradivari in 1716 and Paganini's violin in Genoa was made by Giuseppe Guarneri del Gesù in 1743.' Finally, Gaul writes (p.283):

I believe that the Messiah is a Stradivari violin. [...] Just as both *le Canon* and its one copy have the same name I imagine that there is a second *le Messie*. Perhaps [...] the second *le Messie* is better-sounding and more authentic-looking than the original.'

If the Oxford 'Messiah' violin was made by Antonio Stradivari how can a second *le Messie* be 'more authentic-looking than the original'?

In light of Gaul's statement in A NOTE ON THE TEXT that 'Within the limitations of the nineteenth-century sources, all the persons, events, and artifacts in this story [i.e. in this fiction] are real and true' the following caution might be offered to the inquisitive: *caveat emptor*.

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