

THE LÉVÊQUE CONJECTURE

(an opinion or conclusion formed on the basis of incomplete information)

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Documentary sources of information about string instruments and their owners during the 19th and early-20th centuries in France are threefold:

1. The Musée de la Musique, in Paris, has placed online more than 40 free-to-access digital files, the files containing images of each and every page from the business ledgers which were used by the personnel at the Gand/Bernardel/Caressa & Français violin dealership in Paris between 1816 and 1923.¹ The ledgers are paired together:

- a) a Directory (*Répertoire*) showing customers' names in alphabetical order, each name usually being followed by an address; adjacent to the address are numbers which refer to pages in
- b) a parallel General Ledger (*Grand Livre*), which usually covers the same chronological period as the Directory: the details of every transaction are entered in the *Grand Livre*.

These online files are identified as E.981.8.xx.

2. The *Catalogue descriptif des Instruments de Stradivarius et J. Guarnerius* which was compiled by Charles-Nicolas-Eugène Gand in the latter part of the 19th century. This *Catalogue* contains succinct descriptions of instruments, with the name of the then-current owner, and, in some cases, one or two identifications of previous and subsequent owners; a few prices are specified. The *Catalogue* is essentially a semi-private *aide-memoire* (its contents were surely shared with Gand's subsequent business partner, Gustave Bernardel).

3. After the death of Charles Gand in 1892 Gustave Bernardel continued to trade as the sole proprietor of the Paris dealership. During the last years of the 19th century someone working at the firm – perhaps Gustave Bernardel himself – copied the entire 127-page text of Gand's *Catalogue descriptif* into a large notebook. New descriptions of instruments were written up on further pages of the notebook, together with details of owners and prices; there are entries dated 1893, 1894, 1895, 1896, and 1897, together with other entries which are undated. After Gustave Bernardel retired in 1901 the firm was bought by Albert Caressa and Henri Français but the Gand/Bernardel notebook continued to be used to record descriptions of instruments and details of sales. These post-Gand entries include more than 140 further descriptions of Stradivari and Guarneri instruments (a handful of the descriptions are duplicates or elaborations of earlier entries). The entries finish on p.217, followed by an index of owners' names. Henri Français retired in 1920 whereupon Albert Caressa became the sole proprietor; Albert retired in 1938 after which the firm was in the hands of Henri's son, Emile Français (1894-1984).

The Gand/Bernardel/Caressa & Français descriptive notebook is today archived as part of the Jacques Francais Rare Violins Inc. Photographic Archive and Business Records, held at the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA; the notebook is within Box 55, Folder 2. When Jacques Francais (1924-2004) – Emile's son – emigrated to the USA in 1948 in order to establish his own violin business he took the notebook with him, for reference purposes. The notebook is hereafter cited as Gand/JF55.2.

¹ <http://archivesmusee.citedelamusique.fr/en/gand/archives.html>. The files are here cited as **GBC&F**.

Also contained within the same Smithsonian Institution archive is a second handwritten notebook (Box 55, Folder 4) which replicates all of the Gand/JF55.2 descriptions. This second notebook is identified by the following inscription on the first page:

Emile Français, 5 Rue de Copenhague, Paris 8^{ème}

The inscription indicates that this second notebook was retained in Paris. It is surely the case that when Emile Français ceased trading, in 1981, all the firm's documents and materials were sent to Jacques in New York (which would explain how it is that Emile's notebook is now archived at the Smithsonian Institution). Emile's notebook is hereafter cited as Gand/EF55.4; it contains some additional texts and annotations which supplement those found in Gand/JF55.2.

By using these documentary sources of information the following account hopes to unravel the confusions and misunderstandings which surround 'Monsieur Lévêque' and the Stradivari violins which are linked to that person (or persons, since one such lived and worked in Dijon, the other, contemporaneously, in La Rochelle).

Marie-Jean Baptiste Lévêque (this is the most usual combination of accents) was born 10 July 1846; in 1867 he was awarded a *Premier Prix* by the Paris Conservatoire for performance on the violin.

Within the **GBC&F Répertoire** ledgers the first appearance of the name 'Lévêque' is in the ledger for the period 1861-66. The linked *Grand Livre* shows the following transactions with *Monsieur Lévêque* (for whom no address is specified):

July 1865: buys some violin strings

September 1865: buys a *Gand frères* violin, N^o 402

July 1866: buys a second *Gand frères* violin, N^o 420.²

Clearly, these purchases pre-date M. Lévêque's success at the Paris Conservatoire in 1867; perhaps it was one of the *Gand frères* violins – perhaps N^o 420? – which he used at his final recital.

Within the **GBC&F** ledgers which were used during the 1860s there is no entry which indicates that M. Lévêque bought (or already owned) a Stradivari violin. Nonetheless, the *Grand Livre* for 1870 shows that on 23 April a chinrest was fitted to 'the Stradivarius violin' belonging to *M. Levêque à Dijon* whose address is now specified as *2 rue des Etioux* (Dijon); on 31 May 1870 a new bridge and soundpost were fitted to 'the Stradivarius'; on 28 May 1872 a *réparation complète du Stradivarius* was carried out (60 francs). The label-date of this Stradivari violin is never specified in the various ledgers but C N E Gand's descriptive text (below) – which is dated during the period when these repairs were being carried out – identifies the label-date of a *Lévêque* violin as 1712.

Charles-Nicolas-Eugène Gand, *Catalogue descriptif*, p.60 [upper half of the page]

(année 1871) M^r Lévêque, Dijon

*Violon Stradivarius, 13 pouces 2 lignes, année 1712*³

*Fond de 2 pièces, veines larges descendant, vernis très-usé (il n'en reste qu'aux C), belles éclisses, table revernie ayant beaucoup de cassures. Tête petites ondes. Vernis rouge brun.*⁴

² The N^o 420 stock number reappears in the *Grand Livre* for 1891 with the owner's name and city indicated as: *Lévêque, Dijon. 1891 Octobre 13: Visité le violon Gand frères N^o 420 [...] 30 francs.*

³ In the Gand/JF55.2 copy-notebook (p.60) the third numeral of the label-date – 1 – was subsequently altered to show as 0 (i.e. 1702). In Gand/EF55.4 (p.60) the label-date is specified as 1712.

⁴ Gand's text ends at this point.

C&F annotations: ~~Vendu en 1912 à M^r Molfessis à Constantinople haxx~~⁵
~~Acheté par CF pendant la guerre, mxzxx,~~⁶ et vendu en Amérique.⁷

(1871) M. Lévêque, Dijon

Antonio Stradivari violin, 13 *pouces 2 lignes* [356.4mm], year 1712

The back plate is made from two pieces; wide flames, descending. The varnish [on the back plate] has been greatly worn (remaining only at the Cs). Beautiful ribs. The front plate has been re-varnished, having a lot of splits. The head has small flames. The varnish is red-brown.

~~Sold in 1912 to M. Molfessis, of Constantinople, 12,000 [francs]~~

Bought by Caressa & Français during the war [WW1], 40,000 [francs],
and sold to America.

Note that the second annotation has been applied to the wrong violin (see overleaf for details).

In 1873 M. Lévêque bought from Gand & Bernardel Frères a Guarneri violin (which he returned, unwanted, one week later); on the same day he also bought a Stradivari violin:

*1873 Mars 6: un violon Stradivarius dans un étui, N° 1101, 5,000 francs.*⁸

It is here proposed that this N° 1101 Stradivari violin is the second Lévêque violin which is described by Charles Gand in his *Catalogue descriptif*, p. 60 [lower half of the page]:

[M^r Lévêque]

(année 187)⁹ Violon Stradivarius, 13 *pouces 2 lignes*, année 1732¹⁰

(portant sur l'étiquette fatto de anni 83)

Fond de deux pièces peu veiné, belles éclisses, table de deux pièces, beau sapin, cassure dans toute la longueur sur le côté gauche de la barre, une autre au coin gauche du haut et une au menton.

Belle tête unie. Vernis rouge brun.¹¹

C&F annotations: *Ex Général Lamorlière*¹²
*Greims à New York 1916 \$20,000.*¹³

[M. Lévêque]

(187) Antonio Stradivari violin, 13 *pouces 2 lignes* [356.4mm], year 1732

(showing on the label [‘made [when] of years 83[’])

The back plate is made from two pieces; slightly flamed. Beautiful ribs. The front plate is made from two pieces; beautiful spruce. There is a split for the whole length [of the body] on the left side of the bass-bar, another [split] in the upper corner of the bass-side C, and one at the chin. Beautiful head, plain. The varnish is red-brown.

ex Général Lamorlière

*Greims from New York, 1916, 20,000 dollars.*¹⁴

⁵ This struck-through line of text appears only in Gand/JF55.2, p.60.

⁶ The letters of the word *harmonieux* represent price numerals: *h* = 1, *a* = 2, *r* = 3, ... *u* = 9, *x* (or *z*) = 0.

⁷ This line of text appears only in Gand/EF55.4, p.60.

⁸ **CBC&F Grand Livre** for 1866-1876. M. Lévêque’s name and address are presented as *Mr Lévêque – Maître, Professeur de musique, route de Mirande, Maison Gogot à Dijon.*

⁹ The numerical omission is as in Gand’s manuscript.

¹⁰ In the Gand/JF55.2 copy-notebook (p.60) the date of 1732 was initially written but subsequently altered to show as 1727; adjacent is the annotation (*date 1727*). The date of 1727 is also found in the Gand/EF55.4 copy-notebook.

¹¹ Gand’s text ends at this point.

¹² The identity of ‘Lamorlière’ is uncertain but he may be Alexis Magallon de la Morlière (1707-1799), a lieutenant-général in the French Revolutionary army.

¹³ Herbert Spencer Grimes was an American violinist; see p.6 of this account.

¹⁴ Within the C&F **Grand Livre** for the period 1912-1920 there is no record from 1916 for the sale of a 1732 Stradivari violin to Herbert Grimes.

In 1877 Marie-Jean Levêque became Director of the Conservatoire at Dijon.

In the *Répertoire* for 1881-1887 a new address is given for the *Directeur du Conservatoire, Dijon*, namely *39 Boulevard Carnot*. The name *Levêque*, of *39 Boulevard Carnot, Dijon*, re-appears in the *Répertoire* for 1912-1920, with page 181 in the parallel *Grand Livre* specified as the linked location. At that page, and under the name *Levêque*, is the following entry which records the purchase by Caressa & Français, from M. Lévêque, of a Stradivari violin:

*1915 Novembre 30: Un violon de Stradivarius 1727, ex Rode ex Lamorlière (le Nestor),
40,000 francs*¹⁵

It will have been noted that the sum of 40,000 francs was previously attached to the 1712 (1702?) Stradivari violin which was ‘bought by C&F during the war and sold to America’ (see previous page of this account).

The 1912-1920 *Grand Livre*, p.181, shows that the sum of 30,000 francs was paid by C&F to M. Levêque on 30 November 1915 and a further 10,000 francs was paid in March 1916. The name of the next owner of the violin is not specified in the aforementioned *Grand Livre* but just six months after the purchase by C&F the violin is found (within the same *Grand Livre*) among the enormous number of instruments and bows bought from Caressa & Français by Rudolph Wurlitzer & Co. of Cincinnati:

1916 Mai 20: Violon A Stradivarius ex Leveque de Dijon, année 1727, N° 1101, 70,000 francs.

The repetition of the violin’s stock number – *1101* – cements the violin’s existence in March 1873 (see p.3) and in May 1916 (as above). Disconcertingly, the violin’s label-date, originally specified by Charles Gand as *1732*, has again been defined as *1727*.

The obvious question is: if M. Lévêque’s violin was dated *1732* how can it subsequently be dated *1727*? It surely cannot be the case that Charles Gand wrote *1732* in his *Catalogue descriptif* if the violin’s label actually showed *1727*.

Marie-Jean Lévêque died in 1919.

The **GBC&F** archive includes a small notebook (E.981.8.28) which contains details of repairs made to some instruments; the notebook contains the following undated entry:

*Monsieur Lévêque, Directeur du conservatoire Dijon. Très beau violon Stradivarius année 1727,
intact à l’intérieur, pas de doublures ni de pièce d’âme.*

Yet again – *1727*.

Information generously supplied to the present author by Tarisio.com confirms that the ‘Nestor, Leveque, Rode’ violin (ID 40533) contains an original label *of post-1730 type* (see below for details) with a year-date which cannot be completely determined because the third and fourth numerals – whatever they originally were – have been obliterated and replaced by ‘27’.

Throughout his long working life Antonio Stradivari more than once changed the appearance of the texts which were printed on his instrument labels. In 1730 he made his final change, namely that his family name, previously always spelled Stradiuaris, now became *Stradivarius*. The Hills write:

¹⁵ The violinist Jacques Pierre Joseph Rode was born in 1774 and died in 1830. The justification for apparently creating a violin’s soubriquet out of Greek mythology (*le Nestor*) is unknown.

[...] during that year [1729] and in 1730 came the third and last change.* The label is now printed with a still coarser type of letter, and Stradivari spells his name with a Roman V instead of a cursive one, as had hitherto been his practice. We believe that in one or two instances the maker did utilise the previous label during the years 1730 and 1731, but after that we invariably find the last type of ticket.¹⁶

* At this point the Hills add a footnote:

We have met with one exception, that in which a violin, dated 1727, bore the last [post-1730] type of label.¹⁷

M. Lévêque's 1732 violin (as dated by Gand) would have had an internal label with the spelling *Stradivarius*. If the third and fourth numerals of 1732 were altered to show as 27 then the discrepancy between the resultant date and the post-1730 spelling of *Stradivarius* should have been obvious to any knowledgeable commentator. Such a discrepancy should certainly have provoked a marker of 'falsely dated 1727' to be applied to any mention of that violin.

With regard to the *fatto de anni 83* annotation (as recorded by Gand) the Hills write in their 1902 *Antonio Stradivari* monograph:

Though forced to resign to others a greater share of the construction of his instruments, we find him [Stradivari] still clinging to his beloved calling and completing an instrument on the label of which he proudly inscribes, in his own hand-writing, "fatto de Anni 83".*

* At this point the Hills add a footnote:

The violin bearing Stradivari's label dated 1727 with this inscription is that in the possession of M. Levêque.¹⁸

The Cozio Archive of Tarisio.com (ID 40533) corrects the Hills' information with 'actually, it's "Anni 89"'.

Summary: According to Charles Gand, M. Lévêque's violin had *fatto de Anni 83* written on a 1732 label; according to the Hills M. Lévêque's violin had *fatto de Anni 83* (?Anni 89) written on a 1727 label. It is all but certain that it was M. Lévêque's violin which was the 'one exception' – i.e. it combined a false date of 1727 with a genuine post-1730 label (which showed the 'v' spelling of *Stradivarius*).

The Hills then provide a list of 'representative examples' of 1720s violins:

Representative examples [of violins] of these years are those in the possession of –
Mr. D. J. Partello, *ex* Duke of Edinburgh, dated 1725
[...]
Mr. F. Smith, falsely dated 1714
M. Levêque, 1727.¹⁹

In the second edition of the Hills' monograph (1909) the list of 'representative examples' (p.84) repeats the identification of 'M. Levêque, 1727'. No 'falsely dated' marker is appended despite the Hills' earlier (1902) acknowledgment that the violin contained a post-1730 label. If, as is here suggested, this '1727' violin is that which was originally dated 1732 then the alteration to the label-date was likely carried out during the late 1890s, just as the Hills were drafting the text of their 1902 monograph. It is possible that

¹⁶ Hill, *Antonio Stradivari* (1902), p.218.

¹⁷ M. Lévêque's violin is the only 1727 Stradivari violin mentioned in the Hills' monograph.

¹⁸ Hill (1902), p.218, footnote.

¹⁹ Hill (1902), p.81. Note that the violin is not identified as 'falsely dated'.

the Hills never saw and handled the Lévêque violin; the information which they published could have been sent to them by Gustave Bernardel (or by Albert Caressa and Henri Français immediately after they took control of the Bernardel dealership in the summer of 1901).

What is unexplainable is why anyone would falsify the label-date when, by doing so, he would leave behind an obviously incorrect conjunction. Is it conceivable that Gustave Bernardel, for example – on his own initiative – would remove the front plate of M. Lévêque’s violin, falsify the label-date, and then hand the violin back to the owner? Alternatively, is it conceivable that M. Lévêque, for some unknown reason, would ask Bernardel to carry out such an operation?

Gand’s date of 1732, combined with the *fatto de anni 83* annotation – **if the latter is a textual comment written by Antonio Stradivari** – indicates that Antonio was born in 1649 (1732 minus 83 = 1649). At the start of the twentieth century the commonly-accepted date for Stradivari’s birth was 1644; altering a 1732 label to show as 1727 (and subtracting 83) would indicate 1644.

Following on from the Tarisio.com information (‘actually it’s “Anni 89”’): if 1732 is combined with *fatto de anni 89*, then Stradivari was born in 1643; if 1727 is combined with *anni 89* the date of birth would be 1638.²⁰

Ernest Doring presents the following information:

1727* The NESTOR, ex LEVEQUE. The French connoisseur Levêque, whose name is connected with other Stradivari instruments, was the owner of this violin early in the century. Through the medium of Albert Caressa it passed to Herbert S. Grimes, an American amateur player, in whose possession it remains at the time of this writing [c.1940-45]. First of the known examples bearing a notation indicating Stradivari’s age.²¹

Doring’s asterisk indicates his personal inspection of the violin; he raises no doubts regarding the violin’s label-date nor does he comment on the textual content of the label.

If Caressa & Français sold the ‘1727’ violin to Rudolph Wurlitzer on 20 May 1916 (see p.4) Grimes could not have obtained the violin ‘through the medium of Albert Caressa’ (as stated by Doring, above). According to the Cozio Archive of Tarisio.com Herbert Spencer Grimes’ ownership of the violin commenced in 1925. It seems more likely that Grimes bought the violin from Wurlitzer (who had bought it from C&F).

The **GBC&F Répertoire** for the period 1912-1920 lists Mr Grimes as: *Greims, Herbert, Spencer, 31 et 33 W 72nd Street, New York*; the page number within the parallel **Grand Livre** is specified as 742. The **Grand Livre** for 1912-1920, page 742, shows only a single sale to Mr Grimes, a sale which is dated 1915:

Herbert Spencer Greims à New York
1915 avril 24: Un violon de Joseph Guarnerius del Gesu, année 1742 (N^o 2174), ex-Wieniawski,
53,000 francs [including a Tourte bow]

²⁰ All these calculations of year-of-birth are dependent on knowing in which month AS wrote the *fatto de anni 83* annotation (if he wrote it at all) and in which month AS was born; both pieces of information are currently beyond anyone’s knowledge.

²¹ *How many Strads?*, 1945, p. 276.

Another layer of information is located within the catalogue for the *Mostra di Antonio Stradivari* exhibition (Palazzo Borromeo, Isola Bella, 1963), the catalogue re-published by Turris Editrice, Cremona, in 1996. A ‘1720 L’EVÊQUE’ violin (with a one-piece back plate having distinctive flames rising from left to right) is presented on p.52 with an Italian-language commentary [present author’s translation]:

This violin belonged for many years to one L’Evêque of La Rochelle, in France, who purchased it from Gand, the noted luthier of Paris, for 140 Pounds sterling. In 1902, when L’Evêque sold his quartet of instruments (which included a Stradivari violin and cello, an Amati violin, and a ‘tenor’ [viola] attributed to Guarneri) this violin passed into the hands of the connoisseur Delmas who retained possession until his death in 1914.²² The violin is today [i.e. 1963] owned by Mr. Hugh W. Long of Elizabeth [New Jersey] USA.

Alessandra Barabaschi dates the £140 Gand/L’Evêque transaction to 1860²³ but there is no listing of the name ‘L’Evêque’ in the *Répertoire* ledgers for 1854-61 and 1860-63. The name ‘Delmas’ might refer to the French bass-baritone Jean-François Delmas (died 1933), who was a famous opera singer, except that ‘the connoisseur Delmas’, as identified in the *Mostra* catalogue (above), is stated to have died in 1914. Similarly, ‘Delmas’ cannot refer to Alphonse-Joseph Delmas – a double-bassist of international renown – since he died in 1958. The name ‘Delmas’ appears in the **GBC&F Répertoire** for 1912-1920. The linked page within the parallel *Grand Livre* shows that this M. Delmas hired a cello for three months, between January and April 1918 (i.e. four years after ‘the connoisseur Delmas’ died).

Ernest Doring writes:

1720* The L’EVEQUE. A very handsome violin. At one time it was in the possession of the French family Levêque of Rochelle, previously mentioned in connection with a violoncello of 1690 [within the current account see * on p.8 and footnote 22], and later with the “Nestor” violin of 1727.²⁴ The “L’Evêque” was in the Wurlitzer Collection for a time, and was sold in 1921 to the late Frank C. Frost.

The Cozio Archive of Tarisio.com identifies the 1720 *L’Evêque* violin (ID 40517) as having a one-piece back plate. Clearly, this violin is wholly unrelated to the 1712/1702 and 1732/1727 violins which both have two-piece back plates.

The first identification of *Levêque, La Rochelle*, appears in the **GBC&F Répertoire** for 1866-1875; the parallel *Grand Livre* shows *M^e Lévéque à La Rochelle*:

November 1866: the purchase of violin strings
December 1871: the ‘complete repair’ of a viola made by ‘Leclercq’ (60 francs)
April 1875: the repair – *très complète* – of a cello (200 francs).

In the *Grand Livre* for 1875-1884 are found, for the only time, references to rare and valuable instruments which belonged to *M^e Lévéque à La Rochelle*. It is possible that these instruments were bought from J-B Vuillaume; following Vuillaume’s death, in 1875, maintenance of the instruments may have necessarily been transferred to Gand & Bernardel:

1876 Novembre 13: *Visité etc. le violon Stradivarius, 25 francs* [the 1720 violin?]
Même réparation au violon Guarnerius Joseph, fils d’André, 25 francs
Visité etc. l’alto, 20 francs

²² The Tarisio/Cozio Archive states that, after ‘Delmas’, the 1720 violin passed to the violinist Daniel Herrmann (1873-1939).

²³ Jost Thöne, Jan Röhrmann (eds.), *Antonius Stradiuarius*, Vol. III, p. 256.

²⁴ Doring has mistakenly conflated Monsieur L’Évêque of La Rochelle with Monsieur L’Évêque of Dijon.

1877 février 23: *Réparation d'un violoncelle Gagliano, 150 francs*
* *Réparation d'un violoncelle Stradivarius, 20 francs.*²⁵

The **GBC&F** online archive does not contain any other reference to M. Lévêque of La Rochelle.

It has proved impossible to find any details of the sale, in 1902, of M. Lévêque's instruments; the sales appear to have been private transactions; there is no mention of any public auction in the pages of *le Ménestrel* for the year 1902.

Summary: In the latter part of the nineteenth century two musicians in France carried the same family name: 'Lévêque'. The two men lived many hundreds of miles apart: one in La Rochelle, the other in Dijon. Both men owned rare instruments made by Antonio Stradivari.

The 1712 Stradivari violin owned by M. Lévêque of Dijon has seemingly disappeared (the Cozio Archive lists five Stradivari violins dated 1712 which have two-piece back plates; none is linked to a M. Lévêque). M. Lévêque's 1732 violin had its label re-dated to 1727 (for unknown reasons); the violin's current location is uncertain.

Of the instruments owned by M. Lévêque of La Rochelle the 1690 cello is still in existence, as is the 1720 violin. The current locations of the three other instruments identified and repaired in November 1876 and February 1877 (see above) are unknown.

²⁵ It is probably this cello which is identified by Ernest Doring (1945, p.79) as '1690: The L'EVEQUE'. Doring relates that 'This cello is mentioned in a brochure published by the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company in 1918 as the "ex Levèque de la Rochelle".'