

The *Princesse de Polignac* violin

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This short research article does not claim to present the definitive history of the 1690 Antonio Stradivari violin – there are too many unanswerable questions – but it does provide more authoritative information than has been available previously.

Description written by Charles-Nicolas-Eugène Gand (Paris violin dealer) of a 1690 Stradivari violin which, in 1871, belonged to *Madame la princesse de Polignac*:¹

(année 1871) *M^{me} la princesse de Polignac, Paris*

Violon Stradivarius, 13 pouces 4 lignes, année 1690

(l'étiquette porte 1699, mais le dernier chiffre est refait)

Fond d'une pièce, belles veines larges remontant à droite, belles éclisses, celle du C gauche côté de la barre et celle du bas près du bouton côté droit ont des petites marques de trous de vers, table de 2 pièces, sapin très-serré, cassures à l'âme, dont une descendant jusqu'en bas, deux petites fentes à côté du sillet sous le menton, belle tête cassée au dessus de la cheville du La. Beau vernis rouge brun doré.

acheté par Hill en 1921: ooxzx.

(1871) *Madame la princesse de Polignac, Paris*

Antonio Stradivari violin, 13 *pouces* 4 *lignes* [360.9mm],² year 1690

(the label shows 1699 but the last numeral [has been] re-made) [?]by adding a lower 'tail' to the original '0']

The back plate is in one piece; beautiful wide flames rising to the right. Beautiful ribs; the rib of the left-side C, on the bass-bar side, and the rib at the bottom, at the end pin, on the treble side – both have small marks of worm tracks. The front plate is made from two pieces; the spruce [?]rings are] very tight/narrow. There are splits at the sound-post of which one descends as far as the bottom; there are two small splits at the side of the [tail-piece] saddle underneath the chin. Beautiful head, [but] broken above the A-string peg. Beautiful varnish; golden red-brown.

Bought by Hill in 1921: 55,000 [French Francs].

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Violinist Gil Shaham interviewed by Mimis Chrysomellis:

How does it feel to perform on such a unique instrument such as the 'Countess Polignac' Stradivarius?

I am so lucky to have this violin. It was made in 1699, and I have it since 1989. It's like my iPhone, it's much smarter than I am [laughs]. After all these years, I am just beginning to understand what it can do. It was built at the time when Stradivari was experimenting with shapes, and so it's a little bit long. [...] It's not from Stradivari's 'golden period', but it still sounds amazing. [...]

The violin started out in France. Countess Polignac was in the court of Louis XIV, but she was also very influential in Venetian musical life. She commissioned a lot of concertos by Vivaldi, and she was the one who brought The Four Seasons to Paris. Then the violin stayed in France for many years, maybe for a couple of centuries, and then it went through England and Australia and I eventually found it in Chicago. I knew the previous owner, a businessman and a patron of the arts, so one day he called me up – I was eighteen years old – and said 'Gil, I want

¹ *Catalogue descriptif des Instruments de Stradivarius et J. Guarnerius*; facsimile of Gand's manuscript, published by Les Amis de la Musique, Spa, 1994, p. 61.

² One *pouce* = 27.07mm, one *ligne* = 2.26mm.

to sell the violin, and I will give you the first option to buy.’ I felt this could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so I started calling banks and took out a big loan, and now the violin is mine.

‘Countess Polignac was in the court of Louis XIV’

Louis XIV (b. 1638) was King of France between 1643 and 1715. The only ‘Polignac’ whose life-span is roughly contemporaneous with that of Louis XIV is Scipione-Sidoine-Apollinaire-Gaspard-Armand de Polignac (1660-1739), *Vicomte de Polignac* and *Marquis de Chalençon*.³ Scipione-Sidoine married Marie-Renée de Rambures (b.1662) in 1686; Marie-Renée died in 1689, long before enthusiasm for Vivaldi’s music swept through cultural France in the early eighteenth century.

‘... she [Countess Polignac] was also very influential in Venetian musical life.’

This claimed connection with Venice is possibly the result of misunderstanding the ownership of one of the most important buildings in the city – a palazzo which faces onto the Grand Canal and was initially known as the Palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo. After passing through the hands of various owners (including the Montecuccoli family) the palazzo was bought, in 1900, by Winnaretta Singer, the *Princesse de Polignac* through her ‘marriage blanc’ (1893) to the composer Edmond de Polignac. The palazzo, now known as the Palazzo Contarini Polignac, was where Winaretta held musical and intellectual gatherings.

‘She commissioned a lot of concertos by Vivaldi’

In 1709 Scipione-Sidoine de Polignac entered into a second marriage, this time with 14-year-old Françoise de Mailly-Rubempré (1695-1767). It is wholly implausible that Françoise – newly-married – would be sending letters of commission to an Italian composer. There are no compositions by Vivaldi which display dedicatory text indicating a connection with the Polignac name. The present writer knows of no evidence that Vivaldi composed ‘a lot of concertos’ upon the commission of any woman, no matter how lofty her title.

‘... she was the one who brought ‘The Four Seasons’ to Paris.’

Louis XV of France was born in 1710; he reigned from 1715 (initially within a Regency). It seems that Louis was very partial to *La Primavera* (‘Spring’), the opening three-movement concerto of Vivaldi’s *Le quattro stagioni* cycle which begins his Op. 8 collection of twelve concerti; the collection has the overall title *Il cimento dell’armonia e dell’inventione*. The first printed edition dates from 1725 and was produced by the Amsterdam firm of Michel-Charles Le Cène but the concertos had been circulating in manuscript copies for some years prior.

A tentative association between Vivaldi and Louis XV of France flowed from the actions of Jacques-Vincent Languet (the French ambassador in Venice) and cardinal Pietro Ottoboni (Protector of France) who bought copies of Vivaldi’s sonatas and concerti, but there is no evidence that Vivaldi ever visited France or met Louis XV. According to Paul Everett *La Primavera* ‘was played at the French monarch’s court on 25 November 1730 by a band containing members of the nobility.’⁴ A complete performance of *Le quattro stagione* had been given at a Concert Spirituel in Paris in 1728 and individual ‘seasons’ were performed subsequently. ‘There was a substantial following for Vivaldi, especially at the height, from the 1730s, of the fashionable craze for Italian instrumental music.’⁵

³ The duc de Saint-Simon (1677-1755) described Scipione-Sidoine as ‘a little clown without any common sense’.

⁴ Paul Everett; *Vivaldi: The Four Seasons, and other concertos, Op. 8*; Cambridge Music Handbooks, 1996, p.3, citing the *Mercure de France*, December 1730, p. 2758.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Françoise – *Vicomtesse de Polignac* – was not responsible for bringing Vivaldi’s *Le quattro stagioni* to Paris.

Françoise was the mother of

1. **Louis-Héraclès-Armand** de Polignac (1717-1792)
2. François-Camille de Polignac (1718-1802)
3. Louis-Denis, *chevalier de Polignac* (1720-1758).

In 1738 **Louis-Héraclès-Armand** de Polignac – *Vicomte de Polignac* (from 1739), *Baron de la Voulte*, *Marquis d’Alençon*, and *Seigneur de Claye* – married the 12-year-old Marie-Diane Mancini (1726-1755). When Marie-Diane was 19 years of age she gave birth to **Jules-François-Armand** (1745-1817).

In 1767 **Jules-François-Armand** married Yolande-Martine-Gabrielle de Polastron (1749-1793), subsequently the notorious confidante of Queen Marie-Antoinette. In 1780 Jules-François was made *duc de Polignac* and Yolande-Martine therefore became *duchesse de Polignac*. The marriage produced one daughter and three sons:

Aglaé de Polignac (1768-1803)

Armand-Jules-Marie-Héraclitus de Polignac (1771-1847), *2^e duc de Polignac* (following the death of his father in 1817); died childless.

Auguste-Jules-Armand-Marie de Polignac (1780-1847), *prince de Polignac*; this title was bestowed upon Auguste-Jules in 1820 by Pope Pius VII. Auguste-Jules inherited the title of *3^e duc de Polignac* on the death of his older brother (Armand-Jules-Marie-Héraclitus) but Auguste’s own death occurred in that same month of March 1847.

Camille-Melchior-Henri de Polignac, *comte de Polignac* (1781-1855).

Auguste-Jules-Armand-Marie de Polignac married Barbara Campbell (1788-1819) in 1816. Two children were born to this brief first marriage:

Prince Jules-Armand-Melchior (1817-1890)

Princesse Seyna-Camille (1818-1833).

In 1824, five years after Barbara’s death, Auguste-Jules married Maria Charlotte Boothby Parkyns (1792-1864) who had previously been the wife of César de Choiseul-Beaupré (d. 1821). Five children were born to this second marriage:

Prince Alphonse (1826-1862)

Prince Ludovic (1827-1904)

Princess Yolande (1830-1855)

Prince Camille (1832-1913)

Prince Edmond (1834-1901); married Winnaretta Singer (1865-1943).

Jules-Armand-Melchior de Polignac became *2^e prince de Polignac* in 1847 on the death of his father. Jules-Armand-Melchior had already married (in 1842) Marie-Louise-Amélie Berton des Balbes de Crillon (1823-1904) and she, therefore, became *Madame la princesse de Polignac* in 1847, and, it is assumed, was still *Madame la princesse de Polignac* in 1871 when Charles Gand wrote his description of the 1690 Stradivari violin.

▼ see overleaf

Marie-Louise-Amélie was one of only two children, both girls, born to Louis-Marie-Félix-Prosper Berton des Balbes de Crillon (b. 1784) and his wife, Caroline-Louise d'Herbouville (b. 1789): Amélie-Louise-Léontine was born in 1819, Marie-Louise-Amélie in 1823.

Caroline-Louise died in 1863, Amélie-Louise-Léontine in 1867, and Louis-Marie-Félix in 1869. Thus, in 1869, Marie-Louise-Amélie (*Madame la princesse de Polignac* since 1847) became the sole surviving member of the Crillon family. It is possible that Marie-Louise-Amélie inherited a Stradivari violin from the estate of her deceased father, and, two years later, sent the instrument to Charles Gand and Gustave Bernardel. The absence from the Gand & Bernardel Frères *Grand Livre* ('General Ledger', covering the period 1866-1875⁶) of any details of repairs, and their costs, suggests – if the above narrative is correct – that Marie-Louise-Amélie merely wanted the dealers' opinions as to the violin's value (but while the violin was in the workshop Gand took the opportunity to write the descriptive text which was included in his *Catalogue*).

The only appearance of the name *Polignac* in the Gand & Bernardel Frères *Répertoire* ('Directory', covering the period 1866-1875) is:

72 rue de l'Université Polignac M.^e de [Madame de] [page] 398

Page 398 in the parallel *Grand Livre* has the following entry, itemising the loan of a violin, with a bow and a case:

1868 Février 19 M.^e ~~Delahaye~~ de Polignac Rue de l'Université 72
Loué un violon (jaune plat marqué Stradiva [sic])
archet et étui à 5 f. [francs] par mois
de la part de M.^r Garsin.⁷

The ledger's text demonstrates that this violin kit was initially hired for six months but that the hire was then extended to one year; the hire was then extended again, to May 1870. It is assumed that the name *Delahaye* refers to Léon Delahaye (1844-1896) who was a composer and pianist. With respect to the strike-through of the name *Delahaye* and its replacement with *Madame de Polignac* it is perhaps the case that Léon Delahaye was renting rooms at the Polignac's substantial four-storey residence in the *rue de l'Université* but was short of money so Marie-Louise-Amélie covered the insignificant cost of the hire.

↓
Prince Camille de Polignac studied at the Collège Stanislas de Paris in the 1840s. Having served in the Crimean War he visited the US in the early 1860s and, when that country's Civil War began (1861), joined the Confederate forces. In March 1865 Camille was granted leave to return to France in order to seek support for the Confederacy but the war ended in May 1865 so Camille's journey was in vain. He re-joined the French army at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war (July 1870).

Prince Camille de Polignac evidently had a personal involvement with playing the violin since his name appears in the Gand & Bernardel *Grand Livre* for the period 1845-1867:⁸

1853 Octobre 25. M. le Prince Camille de Polignac, 113 rue de Grenelle, St. Germain.
Un violon Nicola [Amati ?] grand patron. Repris un vieux violon Allemand, très petit patron et en mauvais état. Différence 50 [French francs]. Un etui 8 [Ff].

⁶ Online from the Musée de la musique, Paris.

⁷ ?Jules Garcin – violinist (1830-1896).

⁸ Online from the Musée de la musique, Paris.

This information appears on a page of the *Grand Livre* which is titled *Divers*; the other entries on the same page identify the purchases, by various customers, of strings, resin, etc., along with small ‘running repairs’ to assorted instruments. Gand’s information suggests that Prince Camille (aged 21) already owned the Amati(?) violin and that he paid the repair bill by handing over 50 francs and a very small old German violin. The name *Polignac* does not appear anywhere else in the business ledgers.

It is here proposed that, at an unknown date after 1871, Marie-Louise-Amélie (Berton des Balbes de Crillon) – *Madame la princesse de Polignac* – gifted her 1690 Stradivari violin to Prince Camille.

In 1874 Prince Camille de Polignac married Marie-Adolphine Langenberger (b.1852). On 8th January 1876 Marie-Adolphine gave birth to a girl, but, eight days later, Marie-Adolphine died. In 1895 the daughter – Marie-Armande-Mathilde – married Jean-Alfred-Octave, Comte de Chabannes-La Palice and thus she became *Comtesse de Chabannes-La Palice*.

Prince Camille eventually retired to his estate in Bavaria and continued his mathematical studies until he died of a stroke in 1913. According to the obituary in *Le Figaro* (19th November 1913) ‘one of Camille’s great joys was to follow the brilliant musical career of his eldest daughter, the composer Armande de Polignac. He himself, a talented violinist, was passionately interested in the development of our modern music.’ It is assumed that Marie-Armande inherited the *Polignac* Stradivari violin from her father’s estate.

Hedwige de Polignac, in her biography of her family – *Les Polignac*⁹ – describes Marie-Adolphine Langenberger as *une grande musicienne, virtuose du violon* (p. 250). Researching Marie-Adolphine’s family tree reveals the following:

Susanne-Adolphine von Erlanger (1829-73) was the daughter of Baron Raphael von Erlanger (1806-1878) and Margarete-Helene Albert (1800-1835). One of Susanne’s brothers was Baron Frédéric Émile d’Erlanger (1832-1911) who was a wealthy German/French private banker. Susanne married Franz Josef Carl Langenberger (1821-1878) who became a partner in her brother’s bank. Susanne was the mother of Marie-Adolphine who, as shown above, married Camille de Polignac in 1874 and briefly became *princesse de Polignac*, but this marriage post-dates Gand’s 1871 description of the 1690 violin so Gand’s *Madame la princesse* cannot be Marie-Adolphine.

Charles Gand, on p. 67 of his *Catalogue descriptif* describes two violins owned by ‘Monsieur le Baron d’Erlanger’; it is reasonable to assume that this person was Baron Frédéric Émile d’Erlanger. The two descriptions date from 1875:

1. A Stradivari violin of 1687
2. A Guarneri *del Gesù* violin of 1731

A third d’Erlanger violin, made by Guarneri *del Gesù* but undated, is described by Gustave Bernardel in his continuation of Gand’s *Catalogue*.¹⁰

The identity of the violin on which Marie-Adolphine displayed her virtuosity is unknown.

⁹ Fasquelle Editeurs, Paris, 1960.

¹⁰ See p.216 of *The Jacques Francais Rare Violins Inc. Photographic Archive and Business Records* (transcription, translation, and commentaries) which is free to read at www.themessiahviolin.uk.

In December 1919 Marie-Armande (*Comtesse de Chabannes-La Palice*) placed the 1690 Stradivari violin on sale through Caressa & Français (successors to Charles Gand and Gustave Bernardel). The details appear in the Gand/Bernardel/Caressa & Français *Grand Livre* which covers the period 1912-1920:

*1919, Decembre 11: En dépôt, un violon de A. Stradivarius année 1690, avec étui ancien; 50,000.*¹¹

Evidently there were no purchasers for the violin for on 20th January 1920 either Albert Caressa or Henri Français recorded in the ledger that the violin was returned to Marie-Armande. The London firm of W E Hill & Sons bought the violin one year later, for 55,000 French Francs.

The violin's subsequent owners can be found listed on the website of Tarisio.com (ID 40125).

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Author of **The 'Messiah' violin: a reliable history?** (2015); see 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 (300 pages) of Jacques Français (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). Author (with Bas Terraz) of a study of the 29 letters sent by Pablo Sarasate to his adoptive mother in Paris; a digest of this study appeared in the June 2020 issue of 'The Strad'.

Further investigative articles can be found at the author's website (www.themessiahviolin.uk); all are free-to-read.

¹¹ Musée de la musique, Paris.