

Did ‘Count Sasserno’ ever exist?

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A Stradivari violin dated 1717 carries the name *Sasserno* as its identifying soubriquet; the biographical evidence which surrounds the name *Sasserno* is here examined.

Towards the end of his life the Paris violin dealer Charles-Nicolas-Eugène Gand (1825-1892) compiled his *Catalogue descriptif des Instruments de Stradivarius et J. Guarnerius*. The following descriptive text appears on page 105 of the *Catalogue*; identical text appears on p. 103 of JF55.2 and on p. 103 of EF55.4:¹

(1845) M^r Sasserno,² Nice

Violon Stradivarius, 13 pouces 1 ligne, année 1717

Fond de 2 pièces, belles ondes larges descendant, petite pièce au bord du bas côté droit. Eclisses pareilles. Table de 2 pièces beau sapin, cassure à l’âme et au menton. Très-belle tête, beau vernis rouge doré.

1845 3,700^f

1884 M^r Laurie 20,000^f

1884 M^r Wimphen 25,000^f

} red-ink annotations by C-N-E Gand

The following annotations are found in JF55.2 (but not in EF55.4):

1888 Meïer de Londres, 25,000 pour Hill

1938 entre les mains de Carl Flesh [sic] pour le jouer – estimation A. Caressa £4,000

acheté par son propriétaire £1,500 en 1904 ou 5.

(1845) Mr Sasserno, Nice

Antonio Stradivari violin, 13 pouces 1 ligne [354.2mm], year 1717

The back plate is made from two pieces; beautiful wide flames, descending [from the centre-joint]; there is a small patch at the edge of the lower bout, on the right. The wood of the ribs is similar [to the back plate]. The front plate is made from two pieces of beautiful spruce, with a split at the sound-post and another at the chin. Very beautiful head. Beautiful varnish, golden red.

1845 3,700 francs

1884 Mr Laurie, 20,000 francs

1884 Mr Wimphen, 25,000 francs

1888 Meïer, of London, 25,000 [francs] for Hill [?bought on behalf of W. E. Hill].

1938 in the hands of Carl Fleisch, for him to play – valuation Albert Caressa £4,000.

Bought by its owner [Henry Summers? – see overleaf] for £1,500 in 1904 or 1905.

¹ After Charles Gand died his 252 *Catalogue descriptif* texts were copied by Gustave Bernardel into a ledger; a further 140 descriptions of instruments were subsequently added by Bernardel, Albert Caressa, and Henri Français. This extended ledger is now archived as part of the Jacques Français Rare Violins, Inc. Photographic Archive and Business Records, held at the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA; the ledger is located within Box 55, Folder 2 [JF55.2]. A copy of the Gand/Bernardel/Caressa & Français ledger was made by Emile Français; this is also archived at the Smithsonian Institution, within Box 55, Folder 4 [EF55.4]. A complete transcription and translation of the Smithsonian ledgers (with commentaries) is linked from www.themessiahviolin.uk.

² Note that Gand does not write *C^{te}* – i.e. *Comte*.

The Hills write:

1845 The "Sasserno" violin, dated 1717, was sold by the elder Gand for 3,700 francs = £148. In 1884 it was purchased from M. Sasserno for 20,000 francs = £800, by Mr. David Laurie, who immediately sold it for 25,000 francs = £1,000 [to M. Wimphen]. It again changed hands in 1887 at the price of £1,000 and was brought to England by Mr. David Johnson (an amateur player), who parted with it in 1894 [to Otto Peiniger – see below] at an increase in price.³

The *Sasserno* violin is currently owned by the Nippon Music Foundation. Their website states:

The name of this violin derives from the ownership by Monsieur Sasserno who purchased it from Gand & Bernardel of Paris in 1845⁴ and sold it in 1884 to David Laurie, a Scottish dealer. In 1887, it was bought by an amateur player Mr. David Johnson and in 1894 he sold it to a violinist Otto Peiniger, who in turn sold it via W. E. Hill & Sons to Mr. Pickering Phipps, who owned a brewery in Northampton, England. In 1906 Hill & Sons sold the instrument to Henry Summers of England, whose family retained it for 93 years, and it is from his granddaughter that Nippon Music Foundation purchased the violin in May 1999 via a luthier.⁵

Alternative information is provided on a second web-page from the Nippon Music Foundation:

The name of this violin was taken from Comte de Sasserno, a French owner in 1845. In 1894, it was acquired by a violinist Otto Peiniger, who in turn sold it to Pickering Phipps, owner of a well-known brewery in England. In 1906, this violin was passed into the hands of an English industrialist Summers and was well-preserved in his family over 90 years.⁶

Otto Peiniger (1847-?) was one of Joachim's violin pupils and subsequently taught the instrument at Harrow School for 35 years. His 'Violin Method' was published in 1891.

There were three related men named Pickering Phipps – father, grandson, and great-grandson. The father, Pickering Phipps (1772-1830), founded a brewery in Towcester, Northamptonshire, in 1801. The grandson was Pickering Phipps II (1827-1890); the great-grandson was Pickering Phipps III (1861-1937); only the last-named could have bought a violin from Otto Peiniger in 1894.

The NMF website cites (but does not quote) a certificate dated 24 February 1906 issued by the firm of W. E. Hill to Mr. Henry Summers. The firm of John Summers and Sons Ltd – a producer of iron and steel – was established by John Summers (1822-1876) in Shotton, Flintshire, Wales. Three sons – James, John, and Alfred – continued the business after the death of their father, subsequently being joined by another brother, Henry Summers (1865-1945).

Ernest Doring writes:

[the violin] was brought to England in 1887 by David Johnson. [...] Johnson retained the "Sasserno" until 1894. Passing later to Hill, the violin was sold to an English lady in whose possession it remains.⁷

William Henley states that the *Sasserno* violin is 'named after a celebrated Italian violinist of this name, who bought it for £150 from Gand of Paris.'⁸

The name 'Comte Sasserno' appears on the Tarisio.com/Cozio Archive website (accessed June 2019) not only in connection with the *Sasserno* violin (ID 40058) but also with a Pietro Guarneri violin (*Segelman*) of 1721 (ID 43273). Andrew Hooker also identifies a 'Count de Sasserno':

³ *Antonio Stradivari* (1902), p. 271

⁴ Charles-François Gand died 10 May 1845; the firm was then in the hands of Charles-Adolphe Gand. The two Bernardel brothers – Ernest and Gustave – did not become partners until 1866.

⁵ https://www.nmf.or.jp/english/instruments/post_285.html (accessed June 2019).

⁶ <https://www.nmf.or.jp/doc/greeting/brochure.pdf> (accessed June 2019).

⁷ *How many Strads?*, p. 213.

⁸ *Antonio Stradivari, Master Luthier*, p. 64. No information regarding such a violinist has been located.

Earlier, this [*Segelman*] Guarneri had belonged to the Count de Sasserno. He is better known for the Stradivari of 1717 that now bears his name.⁹

No evidence has been found which demonstrates the existence of a *Comte de Sasserno*.

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 during the 19th and early-20th centuries:¹⁰ The ledgers are paired together:

- 1) 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
- 2) a parallel General Ledger (*Grand Livre*) which usually covers the same chronological period as the Directory. Code numbers for all these digitised files follow a consistent format: E.981.8.xx.

The Directory for 1839-1845¹¹ does not include the name *Sasserno* (nor any variant spelling thereof). Nonetheless, all 384 pages of the parallel General Ledger of 1839-1854¹² – compiled by Charles-François Gand until his death on 10 May 1845 and, it is assumed, continued by Charles-Adolphe Gand thereafter – have been individually inspected in case of an error of omission within the Directory; the name *Sasserno* does not appear anywhere in the General Ledger.

Within the Paris online archive an alternative source of information from the years around 1850 is found within a *Registre de ventes: Instruments neufs et anciens*.¹³ In this register *Instruments vieux* are listed between pages 41 and 88, the entries being dated between July 1842 and July 1853. On page 54, against the date *1845 Juin 10*, is the following information:

*Vendu a M^r Sassernau de Nice, un violon Stradivarius, N^o 242, 3,700 francs.*¹⁴

The omission of the details of this sale from the relevant Directory and General Ledger may be the result of upheaval and disarray following the death of Charles-François Gand one month earlier.

Directory 1845-1853;¹⁵ *Sassernau à Nice, 110*

General Ledger 1845-1867, page 110;¹⁶ *Monsieur Sassernau, Nice*

One transaction in 1846, one in 1851, one in 1853; all are of small items with a total cost of 35 francs.

Directory 1854-1861;¹⁷ no listing of *Sasserno* or *Sassernau*

Directory [1860-1863];¹⁸ no listing of *Sasserno* or *Sassernau*.

Directory 1861-1866;¹⁹ *M^r Alfred Sasserno à Nice, 339*

General Ledger 1861-1878, page 339;²⁰ *1864 Novembre 12; M^r Alfred Sasserno, Rue François de Paule No. 24 à Nice*

Mr Sasserno purchased an Amati-style violin, a bow, and a case, for 150 francs.

⁹ *Mr Black's Violins*, p. 98.

¹⁰ <http://archivesmusee.citedelamusique.fr/en/gand/archives.html>.

¹¹ E.981.8.15

¹² E.981.8.16

¹³ E.981.8.38

¹⁴ This information confirms the Hills' statement (see p.2 of this account).

¹⁵ E.981.8.17

¹⁶ E.981.8.18

¹⁷ E.981.8.3

¹⁸ E.981.8.24

¹⁹ E.981.8.34

²⁰ E.981.8.35

Directory 1863-1866;²¹ no listing of *Sasserno*

Directory 1866-1875;²² no listing of *Sasserno*.

Directory 1875-1884;²³ *Nice, Sassern~~au~~^{*}, 44 Av^e de la Gare, 1768*

[* The last two letters have been crossed through with a thick pencil and *ô* written above]

General Ledger 1875-1884, page 1768;²⁴ *M^r Sassernô~~au~~ [sic] à Nice*

1879 July 9; Réparation d'une basse, 300 francs

1881 April 26; Réparation d'une basse, 300 francs.

Directory 1881-1887;²⁵ *Nice, Sassernô, 44 Avenue de la Gare, 1017*

General Ledger 1881-1887, page 1017;²⁶ *M^r Sassernô à Nice*

1884 Juillet 15; Réparation d'un violon, 100 francs

1885 Septembre 19; Réparation d'un violon, 120 francs

The Municipal Archives in Nice provide the following information:

Jules Antoine Alfred Sasserno was born 11 July 1822; his parents were Joseph Victor Adolphe Sasserno (1795-1874) and Marie Anne Spreafico (c.1799-c.1874).²⁷ As shown above, in 1864 Jules Antoine was living at *24 Rue François de Paule, Nice*, but by 1884 had moved to *44 Avenue de la Gare*; he died on 20 March 1896. The Archive describes him as a *musicien* and as a *rentier* – a person of independent financial means.

Agathe Sophie Sassernò (1810-1860) was a French poet who lived in Nice (where a school and a public square are named after the family).²⁸ Her parents were Jean Louis Sasserno (d.1829) and Anne Marie Félicité Sibille Chartroux (d.1847). Agathe's poem *Le Départ des pêcheurs!* was set to music by Alfred Sasserno and published by E. Chailiot (Paris) in 1851.

It is unclear whether it was J V A Sasserno (father, aged 50) or J A A Sasserno (his son, aged 23) who purchased a Stradivari violin from Charles-Adolphe Gand in 1845.

With respect to the claimed purchase of the *Sasserno* violin by David Laurie, in 1884, there is no supportive information within the Paris ledgers:

Directory 1881-1887;²⁹ *Glasgow [sic], Laurie David luthier, 35 Lansdowne Crescent, 152 154*

General Ledger 1881-1887, page 152;³⁰ *M^r Laurie*

*1884 Mars 28; Avoir un Violon Stradivarius à vendre
(en réparation), 12,000 francs*

²¹ E.981.8.20

²² E.981.8.19

²³ E.981.8.5

²⁴ E.981.8.6

²⁵ E.981.8.39

²⁶ E.981.8.4

²⁷ Jules Antoine Alfred Sasserno was one of two US Consuls to the Kingdom of Sardinia; he was based in Nice (the second Consul was based in Genoa).

²⁸ The biographical data provided by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France for Agathe Sophie Sasserno shows a *grave* accent on the final letter of her family name; it is not known whether this was an embellishment implemented by Agathe's branch of the Sasserno family in order to avoid confusion with the branch to which Alfred belonged. It has not been possible to establish definitive familial relationships between the various individuals named Sasserno.

²⁹ E.981.8.39

³⁰ E.981.8.4

*1884 Juin 7; réparation Violon Stradivarius raccourci [sic]
par en haut [shortened in the upper bout] 150 francs
1884 Juin 7; Violon Stradivarius rendu, 12,000 francs.*

The details of transactions which took place in 1885, 1886, and 1887 are itemised on pages 153 and 154 of the General Ledger; Stradivari violins are listed but none is priced at 20,000 francs. If David Laurie bought a 1717 Stradivari violin directly from 'M. Sasserno' in 1884 (as stated by the Hills) then the seller was surely J A A Sasserno (J V A Sasserno having died ten years earlier).

No biographical evidence has been located for a *Comte de Sasserno* who was associated with the town of Nice in southern France. Two biographical publications would appear to be relevant but the first, the *Biographie Niçoise ancienne et moderne* compiled by Jean-Baptiste Toselli (Vol. One, only, published in Nice in 1860) is limited to surnames between A and G. The second publication, the *Dictionnaire Historique et Biographique du Comté de Nice*, edited by Ralph Schor and published in 2002, contains only a short individual notice for the poet Agathe-Sophie Sasserno, a single reference to *la place Sasserno* and two references to *le collègue Sasserno*.

Stradivari's 1717 violin is correctly identified as the *Sasserno* but that name refers to Jules Antoine Alfred Sasserno (alternatively, perhaps, to Joseph Victor Adolphe Sasserno) – not to a (non-existent) 'Comte de Sasserno'.

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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 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). 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.