

Stradivari's 1714 *Soil* violin, peg-box letters, and Caressa & François

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The following research-led account examines the documentary evidence relating to the 'original' neck of the 1714 Antonio Stradivari violin which is known as the *Soil*.

An oft-cited commentary regarding the inked letters which are found in the peg-boxes of a few Antonio Stradivari violins appears in the Hill brothers' monograph of 1902, *Antonio Stradivari: his life and work* (pp. 60-61):

The neck of [Stradivari's 1715] "Alard" [violin] is original, and in the mortise of the head [i.e. inside the peg-box], still visible, are written the initials P.S. [...] We conjecture that these initials are those of Paolo Stradivari, and they possibly indicate that the violin was one of those which came into his possession on the death of his brother Francesco in 1742 [1743]. We have found these initials marked in six other violins, all of which obviously retain their original necks, otherwise the letters would have been cut away when grafting on the new one: the most notable are that owned by M. Soil, dated 1714; the "Blunt", dated 1721; and the "Sarasate", dated 1724. On the other hand, we would point out that the "Messie" violin, which was sold by Paolo Stradivari to Count Cozio, also has the original neck, but does not appear to have been so marked.

NOTE: the second letter inked inside the peg-box of the 1724 *Sarasate* violin is clearly a 'G'.

Stradivari's 1715 *Alard* violin has been owned by an anonymous collector since 1981 but was loaned to the 2013 *Stradivarius* exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England (which was the first time that the violin had been seen in a public exhibition). No photograph of the peg-box letters was included in the exhibition catalogue, but the letters, with only a little difficulty, were visible to the naked eye even though the violin was displayed within a glass cabinet:

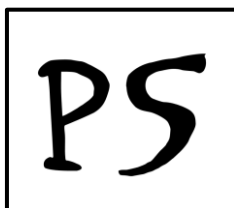


Figure 1. Author's rendering of the 1715 *Alard* violin peg-box *PS* [*PG?*] letters

From the present author's illustration (Figure 1) it must be acknowledged that the second letter is more readily understood as an *S* than as a *G*, but a *G* might have been the intention. The only published dimension of the 1715 *Alard* violin is the body length of 356mm (Beare (2013), p. 170); if this length was calliper-defined then the most likely source-mould for the violin would be that which is marked with the letters *PG* and has the (translated) date of 4 June 1689 inscribed into its surface.

If the Hills' statement 'we have found these initials' indicated their observation of the specific letters *PS* (as they interpreted them) inside the peg-boxes of six violins other than the 1715 *Alard* then it is curious that they identify only three of those six violins. The three unidentified violins may not have been amongst 'the most notable' but, with original necks, and peg-box letters which were still visible, they would have been extremely rare instruments and worthy of specific identification. Even within

the Hills' group of three identified violins there are perplexing discrepancies: for example, if the Hills' statement was letter-specific the 1714 *Soil* violin ought to have *PS* inked inside its peg-box. However, a one-piece neck/partial peg-box, showing the inked letter *G*, when displayed at Cremona's Museo Stradivariano (exhibit no. 128), had an adjacent information card which stated:

Manico originale del violino "Soil" del 1714. Sulla parte inferiore della cassetta dei pirolì è leggibile la lettera G, indicante la forma con la quale fu costruito il violino. Dono S. F. Sacconi, precedentemente Coll. L. Witten.

Original neck of the 1714 *Soil* violin. In the lower part of the box of pegs is readable the letter *G*, indicating the form [mould] with which the violin was constructed. Donated by S[imone] F. Sacconi, previously in the collection of L. Witten.

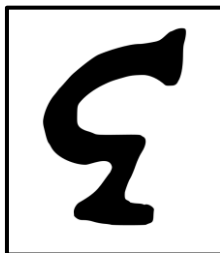


Figure 2. Author's rendering of the 1714 *Soil* violin *manico originale* peg-box letter *G*

In the catalogue for *Il Museo Stradivariano di Cremona*, compiled by Andrea Mosconi and Carlo Torresani (Electa Spa, Milan, 1987), this neck/partial peg-box is described (p. 45) as:

128. Antonio Stradivari

Manico originale del violino "Soil" del 1714. Sulla parte inferiori della cassetta dei pirolì la lettera 'G', indicante la forma con la quale fu costruito il violino; è visibile il piccolo foro per il chiodino che reggeva lo spago di centramento; al centro dell'asta:

Antonio Stradivari "Soil" 1714

Legno di acero

Dono S. F. Sacconi, preced. Coll. L. Witten

128. Antonio Stradivari

Original neck of the 1714 *Soil* violin. In the lower part of the box of pegs is the letter *G*, indicating the form with which the violin was constructed; also visible is the small hole for the nail which would hold the 'centring' length of string; in the centre of the [neck-] shaft.

Antonio Stradivari "Soil" 1714

Maple wood

Donated by S. F. Sacconi, previously in the collection of L. Witten.

Laurence Witten (1926-1995) was a collector of instruments, labels, and documents. How he came to own the *G* neck/peg-box, and when he passed it to Simone Sacconi, is unknown.

Further information regarding the *Soil* violin's peg-box letters – information which echoes the Hills – is provided by Ernest Doring (p. 176):

The "Soil" violin bears the initials "PS" on the inner surface of the neck where it enters the peg-box, indicating that Paolo placed them there [...].

Published dimensions of the 1714 *Soil* violin

Jost Thöne, *Antonius Stradiuarius*, Vol. VII, present author's measurements of the full-size photographs on pp. 132 and 133:

Front: 166.5mm 108.5mm 204.0mm 354.5mm

Back: 167.0mm 109.5mm 206.5mm 356.0mm

Ibid., measurements provided on the *Antonius Stradiuarius* DVD:

Front: 166.3mm 108.4mm 204.4mm 355.0mm

Back: 167.0mm 109.3mm 206.7mm 356.0mm

C Beare, *Antonio Stradivari: The Cremona Exhibition of 1987*, measurements provided on p. 318:

Front: 166.5mm 108.5mm 205.3mm 355.2mm

Back: 167.5mm 109.5mm 206.5mm 356.5mm

Averaged measurements from all three sources:

Front: 166.4mm 108.4mm 204.5mm 354.5mm

Back: 167.1mm 109.4mm 206.5mm 356.1mm

Subtracting 7.3mm from the averaged back-plate length, and from each of the averaged back-plate widths (7.3mm being here proposed as the combined width of the plate overhang on each side of the violin plus the rib-thickness on each side) reveals the following source-mould measurements:

159.8mm 102.1mm 199.2mm Averaged length: 348.8mm.

Simone Sacconi (p. 196) specifies the dimensions of the *PG* mould:

161mm 103mm 200mm Length: 348mm
(incl. the upper and lower block inserts)

This dimensional evidence strongly suggests that the source-mould for the 1714 *Soil* violin was the *PG* mould of 1689. The consistent body-length measurements, especially those for the back plate, are incompatible with the greater length of the *G* mould.

Between 1870 and 1891 the Parisian violin dealer Charles-Nicolas-Eugène Gand (1825-1892) compiled his *Catalogue descriptif des Instruments de Stradivarius et J. Guarnerius*. The total number of instruments described by Gand is 252, of which 202 were Antonio Stradivari violins, violas, and cellos. The *Catalogue* was published, as a photographic facsimile, by Les Amis de la Musique, Spa, Belgium, in 1994.

Gand's descriptions of instruments – two on each page (except for page 2 which is entirely taken up with a description of the *Le Messie* violin) – are handwritten in black ink, followed by details, in red ink, of previous owners and, in some cases, subsequent owners, together with dates when the instruments were sold and the prices paid; each description begins with the name of the owner of the instrument on the date when Gand noted down his observations. The descriptions are assumed to be either of instruments which Gand bought or sold, or instruments which were repaired and maintained by his workshop personnel. Some of the descriptions may be of instruments which Gand saw in the possession of Parisian colleagues, or instruments which were placed with him on consignment.

After Gand's death in 1892 his violin business continued to trade, but re-named as 'Bernardel' (Gustave Bernardel, having been Gand's business partner, was now the sole proprietor). During the last years of the nineteenth century someone working for Bernardel copied the entirety of Gand's *Catalogue descriptif* into a ledger; Bernardel (or one of his employees) then added new descriptions and details of instruments on subsequent pages of the same ledger. After Bernardel retired in 1901 the business was bought by Albert Caressa and Henri Français; they continued to use the same ledger to record descriptions of instruments and details of sales. There are 106 post-Gand descriptions of

Stradivari instruments, 27 descriptions of Guarneri *del Gesù* violins, one description of a Domenico Montagnana cello, and one description of a Carlo Bergonzi violin. Henri Français retired in 1920 and the firm became 'Albert Caressa'; Albert retired in 1938 and Henri's son, Emile, took control.

This Gand/Bernardel/Caressa & Français ledger is 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 within Box 55, Folder 2 [hereafter C&F55.2]. It is possible that when Jacques Français (1924-2004) – the son of Emile Français – emigrated to the USA in 1948 he took the ledger with him, for reference purposes.

Also contained within the same Smithsonian Institution archive is a handwritten copy of the C&F55.2 ledger (located within Box 55, Folder 4). This ledger is identified by the following inscription on the first page:

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

The inscription suggests that this ledger was retained in Paris. Perhaps, when Emile Français ceased trading in 1981, his documents and materials were sent to Jacques (which might explain how it is that Emile's ledger [C&F/EF55.4] is now archived at the Smithsonian Institution).

On p. 182 of the C&F55.2 ledger there is a detailed description of Stradivari's 1714 *Soil* violin (the text is copied, exactly, on p. 182 of C&F/EF55.4):

182
1911 A. Soil à Courmai
Violon A. Stradivarius 1714; fond de 2
pièces, larges et belles ondes vives, en fugeire, talon
original; toute petite chevillle, en bas, au joint, au
dessus et touchant le filet; éclisses, ondes vives,
servées, très belles; table de 2 pièces, beau sapin
régulier, serré au joint, plus large sur les bords;
petites meurtrissures produites par les chanterelles
en cassant, tout le cordier; coins du C droit et
bord de ce C, meurtris, usés par l'archet; ni
coins, ni demi-bords ramis; toute petite cassure
à l'aîne; côté ~~gauche~~ droite en bas, avec le sapin
assez froissé, cassures à fleur; tête admirable,
bien ondée, un peu usée aux arêtes au
arrière de la volute; manche original,
chaussé; dans la mortaise P. S. incrustée;
vernis rouge rose doré, qualité du
Boissier; violon admirable; taille 358^{mm}
2 inscriptions au crayon; l'une au-
dessus de l'étiquette, l'autre sur le taffean
du bouton: A. Soil 1874 (00xxx)
Vendu à M. Oscar Boudy à Courmai le 11-2-11: 100xxx
Yehudi Menuhin

1911 A. Soil à Tournai

Violon A. Stradivarius, 1714

Fond de 2 pièces, larges et belles ondes vives, en fougère, talon original; toute petite cheville, en bas, au joint, en dedans et touchant le filet; éclisses ondes vives, serrées, très-belles; table de 2 pièces, beau sapin régulier, serré au joint, plus large sur les bords; petites meurtrissures produites par les chanterelles en cassant, sous le cordier; coins du C droit et bord de ce C, meurtris, usés par l'archet; ni coins, ni demi-bords remis; toute petite cassure à l'âme; côté ~~gauche~~ droit en bas, avec le sapin assez frotté, rayures à fleur; tête admirable, bien ondé, un peu usée aux arêtes en arrière de la volute; manche original, rehaussé; dans la mortaise P.S. incrustées; vernis rouge rose doré, qualité du Boissier; violon admirable; taille 358mm; 2 inscriptions au crayon; l'une au-dessus de l'étiquette, l'autre sur le tasseau du bouton: A. Soil 1874 (oozx)

Vendu à Monsieur Oscar Bondy à ~~Cologne~~ Vienne 11.2.11: iozx

Yehudi Menuhin

1911 Amédée Soil, of Tournai [Belgium]

Antonio Stradivari violin, 1714

The back plate is made from two pieces; the flames are wide, beautiful, and bright, having a 'fern' or 'bracken' appearance; the [back-plate] button is original; there is a very small locating dowel, at the bottom [of the back plate], on the joint, on the inside of the purfling and touching it. The ribs have bright flames, narrow, very beautiful. The front plate is made from two pieces, beautiful, regular spruce, narrow [growth rings] at the joint, wider at the edges; there are small bruises, caused by the 'singing strings' breaking, underneath the tail-piece; the two treble-side C-bout corners, and the edge of the C-bout itself, have been bruised and worn by the [action of] the bow. Neither the corners nor the half-edge linings have been replaced; there is a very small split at the sound-post; at the lower ~~left~~ right side [of the front plate], where the spruce is fairly abraded, there are [longitudinal] scratches in the grain. The head is admirable, nicely flamed, slightly worn on the rear edges of the volute. Original neck, raised; in the [peg-box] cavity are the inlaid letters P.S.. The varnish is golden red-pink, the same colour as on the *Boissier* violin [1713]: admirable violin; the body length is 358mm.

There are two inscriptions in pencil: one above the label, the other on the block at the [tail-piece] end pin – 'A. Soil 1874' (oozx)

Sold to M. Oscar Bondy, of ~~Cologne~~, Vienna, 11th February 1911: iozx

Yehudi Menuhin

NOTES: Amédée Soil was an industrialist, and, for a time, the Belgian Consul to Moscow. The discrepancy between the aforementioned averaged body-length measurement (back plate) of the *Soil* (356.1mm) and the Caressa & Français measurement (358mm) may be the result of the latter measurement being taken with a flexible tape lying on the longitudinal arching of the violin rather than the measurement being taken with callipers. The two sale-price codes, **oozx** and **iozx**, represent 55,000 and 75,000 French Francs.

If the two letters inked inside the peg-box of the *Soil* violin (as observed in 1911) were similar in shaping to the two letters inked inside the peg-box of the *Alard* violin then Albert Caressa & Henri Français, like the Hill brothers nine years earlier, interpreted the second letter as an *S* rather than as a *G*. The written evidence from Caressa & Français confirms that the Hills' comment – 'We have found these initials ['P.S.'] marked in six other violins [... including] that owned by M. Soil, dated 1714' – is, in this case, letter-specific.

If Stradivari's 1714 *Soil* violin, in 1902 and in 1911, had two letters inked inside the original peg-box – regardless of how those two letters were intended to be understood – then the *G* neck/partial peg-box which is in Cremona cannot be the original neck of the violin. Who it was that removed the *PS/PG* neck from the *Soil* violin (at an unknown date after 1911), replaced it with a new, unmarked,

neck, and then, presumably, discarded the *PS/PG* neck, is unknown (see the Tarisio.com/Cozio Archive ID 1954 photograph of the *Soil* peg-box which shows clearly the tapered joint in the peg-box walls; the photograph does not show any sign of two upper-case letters inlaid, or inked, in the cavity).

Also unknown is the identity of the violin from which Cremona's *G* neck was removed. One possibility is that the *G* neck came from the Stradivari violin of 1708 which is today known as the *Straus* but, in the mid-twentieth century, was known as a *Soil* instrument (see Doring, pp. 132-133). This violin is also described in the Gand/Bernardel/Caressa & Français ledger (C&F55.2, p. 160; the descriptive text is copied in C&F/EF55.4, p. 160) where Amédée Soil is indicated to have been the owner prior to 1903; subsequent owners were Albert Zimmer (of Brussels) and Georg Talbot (of Aix-la-Chapelle). In 1954 the violin was sold by Emil Herrmann to the Croatian violinist Zlatko Balokovic; the ledger's annotation for this sale states: *ex Strauss ambassadeur à Paris*; Jesse Isidor Straus (1872-1936) was ambassador to France between 1933 and 1936. The ledger's description specifies the body length of the *Soil/Straus* violin to be 360mm; if this was a tape measurement, taken 'over the arching', then a calliper equivalent would be approximately 358.5mm. Stradivari's *G* mould would certainly generate such a length.

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