

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

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Minor corrections and clarifications implemented March 2022

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*.

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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.

**NB:** the second letter inked inside the peg-box of the 1724 *Sarasate* violin is clearly a 'G'; see the website photograph provided by the Musée de la Musique, Paris (collection number E.1729).

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:

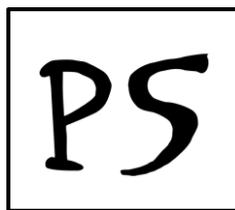


Figure 1. Author's rendering of the 1715 *Alard* violin peg-box *PS* [*PG*?] letters

To be clear: these two letters are inked on the end face of the neck, i.e. on the near-vertical wooden face which lies directly below the fingerboard saddle.

From the present author's illustration (Fig. 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' incised 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 just 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 piroli é 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.

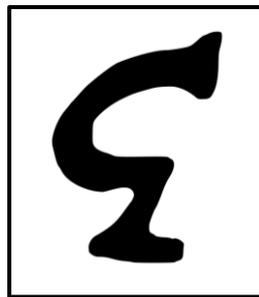


Figure 2. Author's rendering of the 1714 *Soil* violin *manico originale* peg-box letter *G*.  
As with the *Alard* violin the *G* letter is inked on the end face of the neck.

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 piroli la lettera "G", indicante la forma con la quale fu costruito il violino; è visibile il piccolo foro per la 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 [mould] with which the violin was constructed; also visible is the small hole for the nail which would hold the 'centreing' 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 that provided by the Hills – comes from 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 [...].

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Published dimensions of the 1714 *Soil* violin

The present author's metric measurements of the full-size *Soil* photographs on pp. 132 and 133 of Jost Thöne, *Antonius Stradiuarius*, 2016, Vol. VII, are:

	Upper Bout	Centre Bout	Lower Bout	Soundbox Length
Front:	166.5mm	108.5mm	204.0mm	354.5mm
Back:	167.0	109.5	206.5	356.0

*Ibid.*, the measurements specified on the *Antonius Stradiuarius* DVD published by Thöne:

Front:	166.3	108.4	204.4	355.0
Back:	167.0	109.3	206.7	356.0

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

Front:	166.5	108.5	205.3	355.2
Back:	167.5	109.5	206.5	356.5

Averaged measurements from all three sources:

Front:	166.4	108.4	204.5	354.5
Back:	167.1	109.4	206.5	356.1

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:

159.8	102.1	199.2	348.8
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Simone Sacconi (p. 196) specifies the dimensions of the *PG* (4 June 1689) mould:

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

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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.

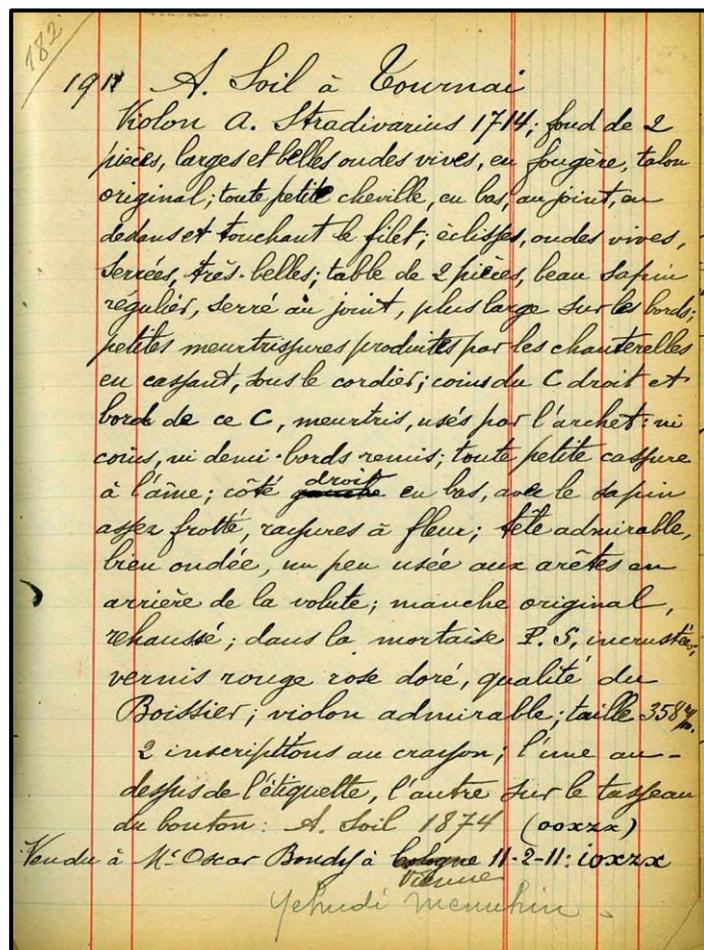
This Gand/Bernardel/Caressa & Français ledger is archived as part of the 'Jacques Français Rare Violins, Inc. Photographic Archive and Business Records', held at the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA; the ledger is within Box 55, Folder 2 [hereafter C&F/JF55.2]. 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&F/JF55.2 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<sup>ème</sup>

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&F/JF55.2 ledger there is a detailed description of Stradivari's 1714 *Soil* violin:



(this C&F/JF55.2 text is copied, exactly, on p. 182 of C&F/EF55.4)

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 onnée, 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) [the price code]*

*Vendu à Monsieur Oscar Bondy à ~~Cologne~~ Vienne 11.2.11: ioxzx [price code]*

*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.** [present author's emphasis]. 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' (55,000 French francs)

Sold to M. Oscar Bondy, of ~~Cologne~~, Vienna, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1911: 75,000 French francs

Yehudi Menuhin

**NB:** 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 instead of being taken with callipers.

The *Caressa & Français* interpretation of the second peg-box letter as an *S* rather than a *G* strongly suggests that the two letters were shaped in a very similar manner to those found in the *Alard* violin (see Fig. 1). The written evidence from C&F in 1911 (above) confirms that the Hills' 1902 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.

The aforementioned neck/partial peg-box which is currently exhibited in Cremona and which shows only the letter *G* (see p.2) cannot be the 1714 *Soil* violin's 'original' neck as it was when inspected by C&F in 1911. The Tarisio.com/Cozio Archive photograph of the present-day *Soil* peg-box clearly shows the tapered joint in the peg-box walls, thus indicating a neck replacement; the photograph does not show any sign of two upper-case letters incised, or inked, anywhere inside the cavity (Tarisio.com/Cozio Archive ID 1954). Who it was that removed the *PS/PG* neck from the *Soil* violin

at an unknown date after 1911 – i.e. after C&F's inspection – replaced it with a new unmarked neck, and then, presumably, discarded the *PS/PG* neck, is unknown.

Also unknown is the identity of the violin from which Cremona's *G* neck/partial peg-box was removed. One possibility is that it came from the Stradivari violin of 1708 which is today known as the *Straus* but, at the start of the 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\* 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). The ledger's final annotation states:

*1954, Zlatko Baloković - \$40,000 de [Emil] Herrmann, ex Strauss ambassadeur des U.S.A. à Paris.*

Jesse Isidor Straus (1872-1936) – not 'Strauss' – 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.

\*C&F/JF55.2, p. 160; the descriptive text is copied in C&F/EF55.4, p. 160.

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**Nicholas Sackman:** Associate Professor, Department of Music, University of Nottingham (retired).

Author of **The Messiah violin: a reliable history?** (2015); see [www.themessiahviolin.uk](http://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 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 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).