

Nicholas Sackman

The *Messiah* violin: a reliable history?

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The photographs of documents written by Il Conte Ignazio Alessandro Cozio di Salabue are authorised by the Biblioteca Statale di Cremona, Deposita Libreria Civica (*Autorizzazione n. 47/16.07.2014*). Reproduction of these images is forbidden; *Riproduzione vietata*. The Cozio documents at the Biblioteca Statale are identified as 'BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio xx'.

The following files present the entirety of the text of my book 'The *Messiah* violin: a reliable history?' which was published in 2015. The opportunity has been taken to correct a number of minor errors and to clarify some opaque passages. The chapters have been re-cast as individual pdf files, which have been formatted in A4 size for display on a computer screen; illustrations, which previously were grouped together in two compilations, have been individually inserted into the electronic text at the appropriate places. As a result of all these changes, the consecutive page numbers used in the print edition became seriously disturbed and the book's index (previously published separately) thereby rendered unusable. The summaries of the content of each chapter should help reader-orientation and the Control [plus] F function will always enable a name or significant feature to be quickly located within a chapter.

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PREFACE

Never let facts stand in the way of a good story [...].¹

It is singularly unfortunate that the iconic violin currently displayed at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England – generally identified as the work of Antonio Stradivari and known by its soubriquet, the *Messiah*² – should be surrounded by an unhealthy mixture of mystery and suspicion, unintentional (and, perhaps, intentional) mis-information, yet also enormous admiration and, indeed, adulation. For more than 150 years it has been accepted by nearly everyone that the violin which appeared in Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume’s Paris shop in 1855 was a violin, still in all but mint condition, which Stradivari made in 1716. Nearly everyone, perhaps too easily, has acquiesced in an historical narrative through which the violin was sold by one of Stradivari’s sons to Count Cozio di Salabue around 1775, was then sold by the Count to Luigi Tarisio in the 1820s, and was then acquired by Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume after Tarisio died in October 1854. Recently, perfectly reasonable questions have been advanced regarding the violin’s provenance – its record of ownership prior to Vuillaume – and its authenticity. If nothing else, these questions have obliged supporters of the violin to address and endeavour to explain the historical gaps within the violin’s apparent journey through time and the curiosities of its current physical reality. Regrettably, the questions have sometimes been met with retaliatory personal criticisms and accusations, and the unarguable evidence, to an extent, has been ignored.

The present investigation makes no claim to the definitive history of the *Messiah* violin but it does attempt to assemble the relevant trustworthy information which at present lies scattered across 1) books which, often, are long out of print; 2) specialist journals which, for the general reader, are difficult to access; and 3) current publications which are often frighteningly expensive to purchase. In addition, much information which has never been properly examined – for example, the correspondence between Count Cozio di Salabue and Paolo Stradivari, the detailed and very precise measurements made by Count Cozio of his violins, and the correspondence between Giuseppe Carli and the Count’s daughter, Matilde, regarding Luigi Tarisio – is here presented in detail (mostly for the first time in print) and tested for reliability and relevance.

Despite these highly valuable written records, much of what has been written about the *Messiah* violin stems from conversations, recollections, and hearsay, and these sources, usually lacking any corroboration, are often untrustworthy; unsubstantiated narratives – without any evidential basis – are offered as contributions to a tangled history. Sylvette Milliot alleges that ‘one evening, in a tavern’ Luigi Tarisio met and talked with a merchant, the latter having noted a dearth of Italian instruments available in Paris.³ Fortuitously, the merchant had with him the addresses of the instrument dealers ‘and the prices’ (assumed to be the prices which the Parisian dealers would be willing to pay for genuine Cremonese instruments). On receipt of this information (according to Milliot) Tarisio then walked all the way to Paris carrying a bag of valuable violins which, on arrival, he sold to Jean-François Aldric.⁴

¹ Attributed to Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), 1835-1910.

² Previously known as *The Salabue Stradivari* or *Le Messie*.

³ See Chapter 6 for the evidence from Count Cozio di Salabue which indicates an alternative situation in Paris.

⁴ See Milliot, p. 74 (French), p. 75 (English). See also Milliot in vV/Campos, p. 50 (French), vV/Campos/tr. p. 50 (English) for very similar information. There are no indications of supportive documentation in any of these presentations. See Chapter 6 for further information regarding Tarisio’s trips to Paris.

A related problem is that in the latter half of the nineteenth century – especially in Paris and London – there was an all but automatic assumption that the appreciation of string instruments, especially violins, was an appropriate activity only for ‘gentlemen’ or ‘connoisseurs’ and if the connoisseur was from an aristocratic background so much the better. The unpleasantly dismissive and imperialist voice which one finds in certain publications of that period carried with it the possibility that an unlikely reality was accepted if the source of the information was apparently unimpeachable (a variant of ‘the king has no clothes’ fable).

In the alleged 300-year history of the *Messiah* violin there are tantalising straws of causality and/or connection which it would be tempting to grasp, but, frustrating though it is to admit to a lack of certainty, that admission is always the wiser decision. If the result is that even more question marks hang over the violin which currently resides in the Ashmolean Museum then so be it, but at least the extant documents will have been examined and, if appropriate, their contents upheld, while supposition and guesswork will have been shown to be what they are. It should be noted that, because the present enquiry concentrates on one specific violin, much marginal information about the life and work of various participants in that instrument’s history is necessarily omitted. Consultation of the bibliographic sources will provide sources of more diverse information.

It is worth appreciating that there are three ‘camps’ of authoritative opinion involved in the life of the *Messiah* violin: firstly, the historian, who is not overly interested in the finer points (literally) of Stradivari’s purfling,⁵ instead wanting reliable documentary evidence for the sequential ownership of the violin; secondly, the violin dealer, who has spent a lifetime acquiring an encyclopaedic knowledge of string instruments and whose stylistic identification of an unlabelled violin (or a violin with a questionable label) as the work of X or Y can instantly make that instrument’s price soar towards the stratosphere or, alternatively, plummet to the ground; and thirdly, the scientist (dendrochronologist), who would like to be able to offer absolute proof that the wood used to make the front plate of a specific violin came from a tree which was growing on a high-Alpine slope in 1700 but the analytical statistics do not satisfy all concerned.⁶

All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are the responsibility of the present author and have received minimal interpretative ‘smoothing’. The manuscript texts of Count Cozio di Salabue often exhibit variable spellings and inconsistent grammatical constructions; in addition, the texts are frequently devoid of punctuation. These characteristics have been clarified only when comprehension might otherwise be jeopardized.

Throughout this examination the term ‘string instruments’ should be understood to mean violins, violas, and cellos, thus excluding guitars, harps, and suchlike. The term ‘data’ is treated as a collective noun combined with a singular verb.

This volume contains frequent references to information about specific instruments, information which was stored and made available on the www.Cozio.com website. In June 2014 the online auction house of Tarisio.com re-launched the Cozio.com website under its own name and after a considerable redesign of the pages of information. A number of instruments disappeared from the pages as did some of the commentaries which had been included in the Cozio.com version; in addition, reference numbers for the instruments were changed. This re-launch occurred just as the present book was being finalised and since the re-launch displayed characteristics of a work-in-progress it was decided by the present author that the already-written references to the Cozio.com

⁵ The black-white-black combination of three extremely thin strips of wood inserted into a channel cut just inside the circumference of the front and back plates of a string instrument.

⁶ Dendrochronology can never identify the end user of a tree trunk; see Chapter 15.

webpages would be left in their original condition. The reader will have to take on trust the accuracy of these references since some can no longer be verified.

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