

Chapter 7

Vuillaume: reality and myth

Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume was born in 1798, in Mirecourt, which was then, as it still is today, a centre for string-instrument manufacture. Continuing in the trade of his father and grandfather,¹ Vuillaume moved to Paris in 1818 to work for François Chanot. In 1821 he joined the workshop of Simon Lété, subsequently becoming his business partner. At the 1827 Paris Universal Exhibition Vuillaume presented his copy violins derived from Amati, Stradivari, and Guarneri models. Although Vuillaume's instruments were copies they were not 'antiqued', and were clearly labelled with Vuillaume's name:

J. B. VUILLAUME, N.º 170
Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, à Paris an 18xx

with a simple circular monogram enclosing the letters *J.B.V.*²

Vuillaume was awarded a silver medal, as was his far more experienced and famous competitor Jacques Thibout. Georges Chanot and Sebastien Bernardel – violin makers of equal standing to Thibout – received only 'honourable mentions' for their instruments. Emboldened, Vuillaume set up his own business, and within a few years had become the most successful violin maker and dealer in France.

Following his success at the 1827 Exhibition, Vuillaume appeared to have a secure commercial future ahead of him. French middle-class social life, as elsewhere in Europe at this time, was centred on the home, and on the potential – indeed, the expectation – for an individual to develop his or her artistic skills and participate in 'the communal entertainments of parlour or drawing-room in which everyone joined and to which everyone contributed, the vital element of which was music.'³ To facilitate this world of social music-making, pianos and orchestral instruments (especially string instruments) needed to be in the home, not just in the concert hall, and instrument manufacturers (and publishers of sheet music) needed to respond to these demands of consumption.

The concert world as we know it now began during the period [1828-1848]. The numbers of concerts proliferated throughout Europe, and their customs and design took on characteristically modern forms. With them came a giddy social atmosphere among the middle class and the aristocracy, eager trips to concert halls, ravenous consumption of sheet music and periodicals, passionate support of performers and musical styles, and a shrewd use of all this toward self-advancement. [...] Musical activities in the home, though common previously, were rapidly becoming almost standard within substantial middle-class households. Publishing and instrument manufacture had grown steadily since the middle of the eighteenth century, but as home musical activities increased, their production and sales picked up speed rapidly. [...] Technological advance had opened up mass-production of instruments and printed music, and new methods of promotion and sales enabled successful distribution of the products.⁴

¹ Vuillaume even claimed that an ancestor, Jean Vuillaume, had worked in Cremona under Stradivari's direction; see Milliot p. 31.

² Five Vuillaume labels are reproduced in Vidal (1889), Plate XXIX, opp. p. 320; a similar set of labels is reproduced in Millant, Plates 20-24, and another, very similar, set in Whistler and Doring p. 48.

³ Derek Carew, *The consumption of music*, in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, ed. J. Samson, Cambridge University Press, p. 239.

⁴ Weber p. 1 and p. 6.

This burgeoning musical environment might be inhabited by ‘amateurs’ – music lovers – but the amateurs displayed just as much pride in instrument ownership (if not the same amount of spending money) as professional musicians and wealthy collectors who could afford to buy the finest and rarest Cremonese instruments. Thus the Parisian violin makers all faced the same dilemma: since the average purchaser could not afford to buy a Cremonese instrument he or she would be obliged to buy one which was newly made, but the purchaser nonetheless wanted the instrument to look old, charmingly worn, and with a patina of historical significance.⁵ The temptation, for the violin maker, was in not stopping at the point of simply making an artificially antiqued copy (identified as such) but taking the process one stage further and making an instrument which was intended to deceive.

Antoine Vidal⁶ summed up the situation:

We confess that, for our part, we do not like these imitations, which have been so much abused; we much prefer a work [instrument] which is clearly new and original. But there was at that time an absolute necessity to act in this manner; it was “to be or not to be” – in order to live one had to make imitations; or die making new instruments! Thus demanded the whim [*fantaisie*] of that period. The skill displayed by Vuillaume in imitating the old instruments would have been sufficient by itself for his name to pass down to posterity.⁷

The Hills elaborate on, and internationalise, Vuillaume’s commercial ambition:

Vuillaume soon found the sale of violins, issued as new works, without any semblance of antiquity, an unprofitable undertaking, and, recognizing the growing demand in all parts of the world for instruments resembling the great works of Cremona, he determined to apply his great skill as a workman, and his extraordinary familiarity with Stradivari’s models, to the construction of faithful copies of that great maker’s works. This was the foundation of his success, for the modern [artificially antiqued] copies found a ready sale, and orders poured in upon Vuillaume from all parts of the world.⁸

Old Italian violins had acquired their captivating appearance through the natural ageing effect of time, and the physical enhancement of the wood (and the varnish) which comes from careful usage. Nineteenth-century violin makers, however, could not afford to wait for time to take its course and the eye then to be captivated; artificial processes – for example, impregnating the wood with chemicals, or baking the wood in an oven – were now used to rapidly age the appearance of an instrument. Charles Reade trenchantly comments:

The inventors of this art undertook to deliver a new violin, that in usage and colour of the worn parts should be exactly like an old and worn violin of some favourite maker. Now, to do this with white wood was impossible: so the wood was baked in the oven, or coloured yellow with the smoke of sulphuric acid, or so forth, to give it the colour of age, but these processes kill the wood as a vehicle of sound: and these copies were, and are, the worst musical instruments Europe has created in this century, and, bad as they are at starting, they get worse every year of their untuneful existence: yet because they flattered the eye with something like the light and shade and picturesqueness of the Cremona violin, these pseudo-antiques, though illimitable in number, sold like wildfire, and hundreds of self-deceivers heard them by the eye, and fancied these tin-pots sounded divinely.⁹

⁵ Exactly the same desires have prompted the artificially antiqued appearance of the string instruments currently emanating from factories in the Far East (and elsewhere).

⁶ French historian and writer on music, 1820-1891.

⁷ Translated from Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 259; an alternative translation appears in Whistler and Doring p. 62.

⁸ Hill (1891) p. 17. Cf. Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 259: ‘from that moment on he was unable to satisfy the demands for imitation [instruments] which arrived from all parts of the world’.

⁹ Reade, *Fourth Letter to the Pall Mall Gazette*, 31st August 1872.

René Morel,¹⁰ on the occasion of the 1998-99 Vuillaume Exhibition in Paris, spoke as follows:

On two occasions it has fallen to me to repair or restore Vuillaume instruments: their wood has a different colour and has become very brittle [...] I can confirm that the wood of these instruments has been treated with ammonia.¹¹

The Hills acknowledge the visual unattractiveness of a newly-made, perfectly varnished, and unblemished string instrument, and their commentary points towards the commercial desirability of artificially ageing the appearance of a new instrument:

It has often been asked whether this broken-up or chipped-off aspect of [Stradivari's] varnish is solely the effect of usage, or whether Stradivari so treated it in order to lend additional charm to his work; for it cannot be denied that this appearance is more pleasing than the absolutely smooth surface presented by an instrument evenly varnished all over. That it is possible to attain this [broken-up] result artificially is conclusively seen by examination of the instruments of Vuillaume; and admirably he succeeded.¹²

With respect to 'taking the process one stage further and making an instrument which was intended to deceive' Edward Heron-Allen (1861-1943) – polymath, scholar, scientist, and author of *Violin-Making as it was, and is* – relates the evidence provided by an Italian violin maker regarding violin forgery: '[...] how, from a violin unfinished at ten *lire*, a genuine master-violin of classic school may be made' (the evidence from the Italian being supplied to Heron-Allen in a letter):

First, when you varnish leave a conic patch below where the neck comes [i.e. below the fingerboard], lighter in colour than the rest.

Second, when the varnish is dry, with gritty hands [...] rub the head [scroll] strongly

Third, plug the peg-holes and re-fit the pegs in the newer place

[...]

Fifth, with the rough hand or glove slap and rub the upper bout which the hands [*sic*] shifts upon in the third position

Sixth, canter over the edges with a file, and then with fine sandpaper, finishing with oil and pumice stone

[...]

Eighth, play hard on all the strings with much rosin; when it lays white on the belly [between the end of the fingerboard and the bridge] warm it before a fire till it sticks. Then rub it off with many dirty hands.¹³

With respect to this central 'moustache' of rosin Vuillaume was apparently quite content to share, at least with a family member, his personal technique of falsification. In a letter of 1st July 1872 to his brother, Nicolas-François, Jean-Baptiste explained how to mix some organic powder – 'burnt Sienna, with a touch of black' – with oil, followed by rubbing the paste into the wood of the instrument until the required effect of apparent age and use was achieved.¹⁴

¹⁰ Highly respected French violin maker, 1932-2011.

¹¹ Translated from vV/Campos p. 24; alternatively translated in vV/Campos/tr. p. 24.

¹² Hill (1902) p. 176.

¹³ The much longer text of the complete letter, in Heron-Allen's translation from 'a vile Torinese dialect', can be found in *The Violin Times*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 15th January 1894, pp. 41-42, *Fiddle Forgeries*.

¹⁴ Vuillaume's letter-text is quoted by Sylvette Milliot (in Milliot p. 299) and by Emmanuel Jaeger (in vV/Campos p. 179, translated in vV/Campos/tr. p. 179). 'Sienna' is a type of clay containing iron oxide and a small quantity of manganese oxide. When heated the powder turns a red/brown colour.

Thus the mid-nineteenth-century commercial world of string-instrument manufacture and sale was characterised by endemic misrepresentation, explicitly undertaken in order to separate purchasers of string instruments from their money as quickly as possible.¹⁵ Notwithstanding the evidence, Franz Farga still attempts to exonerate Vuillaume by citing Antoine Vidal ‘who has examined these allegations’ (the allegations that Vuillaume sold ‘his brilliant copies of old instruments as genuine pieces’) and, Farga claims, ‘asserts that there is not the slightest evidence to support them’, but Farga does not indicate where Vidal’s assertion is located.¹⁶

Despite the suspicions which were beginning to surround him, the reputation of Vuillaume continually rose, as can be gauged by the opinion of the jury at the 1834 Paris Exhibition:

The instruments that he made deceive the eye by their appearance and the manner of the workmanship; they have the infinitely more precious advantage of imitating, with so much perfection, the quality of sound of the old instrument which was used as the model, so that even the most experienced ear can be mistaken [as to which is which].¹⁷

Following the 1839 Exhibition, at which Vuillaume won a gold medal, the following commentary appeared in the *Le Moniteur Universel*:

In pricing an imitation Stradivari violin at 300 francs instead of 8 to 10,000 francs [for a genuine instrument], and a cello, like that of M. Duport, at 600 francs instead of the market value [for a Stradivari cello] of 20,000 francs, M. Vuillaume has rendered a great service to young artists who, besides possessing an excellent instrument, find in this harmless deception the innocent fulfilment of their vanity.

We think, however, that M. Vuillaume has for too long hidden behind the reputation of the old luthiers of Cremona. Today, now that his skill has been more than acknowledged by the general agreement of artists and by the gold medal he has just received (which was preceded by three silver medals awarded in earlier expositions for his instruments) it is under his own name that he must produce his work. It is necessary, finally, that in the future an artist will do as much justice to a Vuillaume [instrument] as to a Stradivari, since it is well recognised that the two instruments have the same worth.¹⁸

Roger Millant has proposed that because Vuillaume branded his instruments’ internal upper or lower blocks with his name (in the smallest lettering possible, making ‘VUILLAUME’ just 8mm long – VUILLAUME – and completely invisible from outside the instrument, even when looking directly into either of the *f*-holes) no-one could therefore accuse him of dishonest behaviour.¹⁹ Without a hint of irony, Millant states that this branding was done ‘to be sure that his works are not attributed to others’²⁰ and that the ‘minuscule, almost invisible’ branding was ‘sufficient to refute all idea of cheating’.²¹ Millant acknowledges that some of Vuillaume’s labels failed to include his own name, but argues that this ‘proves nothing – except that these copies were perhaps more perfect than the others’.²²

¹⁵ For a succinct exposition of the identical situation in the London violin trade see Dilworth *et al.* pp. 13-30.

¹⁶ Farga p. 88.

¹⁷ Translated from *Rapport du jury central sur les produits de l’Industrie française exposés en 1834*, Tome Troisième, Deuxième Partie du rapport, Imprimerie Royale, Paris, 1836, p. 294.

¹⁸ Translated from *Le Moniteur Universel*, 5th August 1839.

¹⁹ Roger Millant illustrates an ‘actual size reproduction’ of this branding (Millant, Plate 10).

²⁰ Translated from Millant p. 22; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 90.

²¹ Translated from Millant p. 15; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 83.

²² *Ibid.*

George Dubourg, in 1852, commented on the ‘almost invisible’ branding of instruments:

Fortunately, the probity of Monsieur Vuillaume is known to equal his talent; *else* were imitation, by so cunning an artificer, a very ticklish thing. Instruments of his, in fact, *have* been bought and sold, by musical-instrument-makers themselves, as those of Stradiuarius, or Guarnerius: law-proceedings have resulted; and Vuillaume’s own invoked testimony has established, by certain undetected private marks, that *he* was the real author of the instruments in question.²³

Thus Vuillaume’s ‘undetected private marks’ were not to be deplored for their deliberate secrecy; rather they were to be acknowledged, positively, as bringing to an end expensive, and quite unnecessary, lawsuits. Dubourg’s evaluation of this situation – his inverted logic – is perhaps not surprising since his book was published by Robert Cocks, who was Vuillaume’s London agent.

Toby Faber states that despite Vuillaume’s consistent use of a label with the text ‘Antonius Stradivarius Cremonensis Faciebat Anno 1717’ Vuillaume ‘was not attempting to forge Strads’.²⁴ Faber offers no reasoning which can underpin his exoneration of Vuillaume, and his commentary echoes that of the Hills writing in 1902:

Vuillaume, the greatest of modern copyists, frequently inserted Stradivari and Guarneri labels in his instruments; yet nobody who knew the man would suggest that he did so with a fraudulent motive. He invariably dated his Stradivari label 1717, and took no trouble to produce a really correct facsimile of the original. [...] and the labels are very often misspelt.²⁵

If Vuillaume had believed that including a mis-spelling within a fraudulent label would expose him to public condemnation, and, perhaps, commercial ruin, he would not have deliberately and knowingly included the mis-spelling. Only violin dealers with the depth and breadth of knowledge of, for example, the Hills, would have been able to identify the difference between a genuine and a fraudulent Stradivari label. Vuillaume relied on the Hills, and others (such as Dubourg), refusing to believe him capable of deliberate and intentional fraud.

With violins which were not sailing under false colours, Vuillaume’s habitual label between 1835 and 1859 was worded:

Jean Baptiste Vuillaume à Paris
Rue Croix des Petits Champs²⁶

with, to the right of ‘Champs’ a small circular monogram which was a (self-conscious?) imitation of the circular monogram used by Antonio Stradivari. Vuillaume’s monogram had two circles, one inside the other (exactly as with Stradivari) enclosing the letters ‘JBV’ which were separated by the figure of a Lorraine cross.²⁷ Artistic and commercial success appears to have confirmed in Vuillaume’s mind his elevation in rank to the same level as Stradivari himself, and Vuillaume’s self-assessment of his artistic and commercial importance seems to have sometimes manifested itself as a calculated manipulation of his customers. Roger Millant and Étienne Vatelot both offer the evidence

²³ G. Dubourg, *The Violin*, Fourth Edition, Robert Cocks, London, 1852, pp. 360-361. Emphasised words are as in the original text.

²⁴ Faber p. 141. A genuine Stradivari label of 1717 had the family name spelled ‘Stradiuarius’. Vuillaume could be sure that no purchaser would know enough about the chronology, and changing appearance, of Stradivari’s label-texts to recognise the incorrect letter (and the absence of a ‘long S’ in ‘Cremonensis’).

²⁵ Hill (1902) p. 213.

²⁶ See also footnote 2 of this chapter. The Rue Croix des Petits Champs is close by the Musée du Louvre in Paris.

²⁷ The *J* of *JBV* is ‘absorbed’ into the upright stem of the adjacent letter *B*. A much enlarged reproduction of this type of label can be found in Sylvette Milliot, ‘The pride and the passion’, *The Strad*, August 1998, p. 809.

of a letter (30th October, 1912) sent to Alfred Hill, in London, by Alexandre Delanoy (1850-1928) who worked with Vuillaume between 1867 and 1870:

C'était ce que l'on est convenu d'appeler un honnête homme. [...]

He was that which it is agreed to call an honest man. Above all, he was a charming man with his clients. He was aware of his value, his fame, and knew perfectly how to use this to his own advantage. In conversation he did not have that obsequious politeness used by many businessmen towards their clients. He listened attentively to what the customers said, responding very charmingly (sometimes with a certain gaiety tinged with light irony) and, by questioning them very skilfully, he managed to make them tell him the things they knew, and which interested him, without giving anything of himself away. This did not prevent his clients from leaving him very satisfied with their conversations. The trick, he [Vuillaume] would tell colleagues, was to know when to speak and when to be silent. He possessed this quality to a very high degree.²⁸

Roger Millant states that Vuillaume was 'fundamentally honest (*foncièrement honnête*) in his relations with customers',²⁹ and Antoine Vidal's opinion is equally unambiguous:

*Nous devons ajouter, pour terminer ce portrait rapide, que Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume était un honnête homme dans toute l'acception du mot.*³⁰

We must add, to conclude this brief portrait, that Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume was an honest man in every sense of the word.

A thumbnail portrait of Vuillaume, communicated by letter (11th October 1912) to the Hills from the violin collector Georges Meïer, is equally positive:

He always behaved towards me, in his words as in his deeds, as a perfect gentleman. He was frank, sincere, and truthful in everything he said and did, without any shadow of equivocation or of dishonesty. He was as honest in his words as he was in his commitments.³¹

However, the Glasgow-based violin dealer David Laurie (1833-1897) recounts, in detail, how Vuillaume deliberately deceived amateur instrument makers into thinking they were buying bottles of his best varnish when, in fact, he was selling them a cheap imitation:

I thought to myself that his customers, when they used this [...] varnish, must have been greatly astonished at the result as it was as little like Vuillaume's varnish as their fiddles were like his, I suppose, in workmanship.³²

Laurie seems to have had an ambivalent attitude towards Vuillaume (and perhaps the feeling was reciprocated) since he recounts, again in detail, how a public concert specifically arranged to demonstrate the qualities of Vuillaume's violins, and the violin strings which he marketed, became an event which only served to demonstrate their deficiencies. Laurie concludes: 'Poor Vuillaume's faith in the tone of his own violins was rather rudely shaken by this experiment.'³³

²⁸ Delanoy's letter-text was presented orally by Etienne Vatelot at the *Autour de Vuillaume* ('Round Table on Vuillaume') which took place at the *amphitheatre du musée de la Musique*, 2 février 1998, and was transcribed in vV/Campos p. 22, alternatively translated in vV/Campos/tr. p. 22; there is no indication of source or ownership of the original letter. Delanoy's letter-text is also partially quoted by Millant (Millant p. 14), alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 82; again there is no indication of source or ownership of the original letter.

²⁹ Millant p. 14; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 82 as 'J.B.V. was honest in his dealings with his customers.'

³⁰ Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 258.

³¹ Quoted, in French, in Milliot p. 331 (no translation is provided). It is unclear whether the letter from Meïer to the Hills was written in French or in English.

³² Laurie p. 49. See also Chapter 10, footnote 12 for further information about David Laurie.

³³ Laurie p. 139. The date of this 'test' concert is not provided by Laurie and his account may not be reliable.

The international success achieved by Vuillaume was so extensive that he undoubtedly had every reason to believe in his artistic and commercial skills. Even as early as 1836 Vuillaume was seemingly promoting himself through the pages of the *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*.³⁴

We have seen violins of his which, after some weeks [of use], leave nothing more to be desired and are able to be placed alongside the best Italian violins. [...] Until now, artists were obliged to make enormous sacrifices to buy an Italian violin. [...] Monsieur Vuillaume, in pricing his instruments so reasonably, thus offers young artists a service of great importance, since, as much for the form as for the varnish, these instruments resemble so perfectly the old Italian violins that even expert eyes have trouble in distinguishing the copy from the original.³⁵

In part of a 3rd February 1859 letter to Monsieur Henry, of Geneva, Vuillaume wrote about the commercial pressures which he faced:

I am raising [the price] of my violins to 4 and 500 francs, not knowing how else to respond. My reputation increasingly obliges me to deliver nothing but the finest work: I am forced [to raise the prices] because of the time that I spend, and the work that all this gives me, and, believe me, it is still really good value, for you can compare your Vuillaume violin with Stradivari violins costing between 4 and 6000 francs.³⁶

In September 1867 Vuillaume wrote to François-Joseph Fétis:

I have not sent you any news about my Exposition [the Great Exhibition in Paris]. I exhibited two quartets³⁷ which represent the totality of everything that I have done up until now, as they are near perfect in the precise reproduction and the exact imitation of the most beautiful classical instruments. The wood, the workmanship, the varnish, and the sonority – there is nothing left to desire – and [they] can bear comparison both visually and aurally with the most celebrated instruments of Cremona.³⁸

The Hills praise Vuillaume's imitation instruments thus:

These instruments, imitations though they were, had high intrinsic merit; and it is to be remembered that they were copies made from unrivalled models, with a fidelity and care such as only a devoted worshipper and a great master of his art could attain. [...] The number of these instruments bearing his name is enormous, upwards of two thousand five hundred being known to exist; and many of them he made throughout with his own hand. [...] We have it on the best authority that every instrument was varnished by his own hand.³⁹

However, a more critical view of the apparently prodigious level of productivity achieved by Vuillaume is provided by Albert Cooper, writing in *The Strad*, February 1983:

I have yet to see an instrument that is entirely the work of Vuillaume, although some must exist from his Mirecourt days. Had he not set up a vast commercial enterprise and remained an individual maker, such as Pierre Silvestre of Lyon, would he be so acclaimed today? I doubt it. [...] the craftsmen probably found it more congenial to work with, rather than against, Vuillaume,

³⁴ Founded by François-Joseph Fétis.

³⁵ Translated from *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, 15th May 1836, p. 166, *Du perfectionnement des instrumens a cordes et des archets*. There is no identification of the author of the article (which has close echoes of the previously quoted report from the jury at the 1834 Paris Exhibition).

³⁶ Translated from Vuillaume's handwritten letter (photographically reproduced as Plate 15 in Millant; there is no indication of source or ownership of the letter).

³⁷ The Sotheby's Vuillaume Exhibition catalogue (October 2012) suggests (p. 5) that the two 'quartets' – two violins, a viola, and a cello – referred to by Vuillaume were the 'Caraman de Chimay' and the 'Sheremetev' quartets of 1865.

³⁸ Translated from Vuillaume's handwritten letter (photographically reproduced as Plate 30 in Millant; there is no indication of source or ownership of the letter).

³⁹ Hill (1891) p. 18; no identification of 'the best authority' is offered.

as they would have had to do on their own. [...] A violin made by Derazey and varnished by Vuillaume is accepted without question as being by Vuillaume.⁴⁰

This opinion was countered in the November 1983 issue of *The Strad* when Robert Lewin responded: ‘Even today, you notice a commentator [...] accusing Vuillaume of being a mercenary captain of industry who succeeded in becoming famous by putting his label inside instruments he never made.’⁴¹

In order to save time, and to ensure consistency, Vuillaume developed the use of a machine to automatically cut the archings on his violins, and to thin the front and back plates. His friend, the scientist Felix Savart, wrote the official report on the musical instruments exhibited at the 1839 Paris Exhibition:

M. Vuillaume has brought to the construction of string instruments a precision that, until now, had been searched for in vain; it is through mechanical means that he determines the thicknesses of the front plates, that he shapes the curved surfaces: by this he is always certain of the regularity of his surfaces, and of their perfect identity in all cases. These processes permit him to copy the greatest masters with scrupulous exactitude. [...] the art of Amati and Stradivari has been rediscovered in France.⁴²

At the 1844 Paris Exhibition Vuillaume was awarded a Gold Medal, and the report from the jury concluded with:

We must, in addition, [mention] an important innovation from this clever violin maker. He has conceived and manufactured a machine with which he can shape, very quickly, the front and back plates of instruments. He thus obtains, with a precision which leaves nothing to be desired, forms which are identical to those of the source model. In substituting these rigorous procedures for the luthier’s usual trial and error [*tatonnements*] M. Vuillaume has effected a great step forwards for his art.⁴³

In light of the level of production achieved by Vuillaume’s employees – supported by his cutting machines – chastising Vuillaume for ‘putting his label inside the instruments he never made’ is perhaps not inappropriate.

Vuillaume employed, at various times, violin makers of the calibre of Hippolyte Silvestre, Honoré Derazey, Charles Buthod, Charles Simonin, Charles Adolphe Maucotel, Georg Gemünder, Joseph Louis Germain, Auguste Darté, and Maurice Mermillot. He also employed specialist bow-makers, including Dominique, François, and Charles Peccatte; Joseph and François Voirin; P. Simon, and Hermann Richard Pfretschner. However, none of these craftsmen enjoyed a financially secure and comfortable life while they worked for Vuillaume, whose ‘quality of economy turned to avarice as he

⁴⁰ ‘The Case for Nicolas Lupot’, *The Strad*, February 1983, p. 726; also quoted in Milliot p. 321.

⁴¹ ‘J. B. Vuillaume’, *The Strad*, November 1983, p. 485. The first page of Robert Lewin’s article includes monochrome photographs of a violin which is stated, in the caption, to be ‘The “Messie” Strad, housed in the Ashmolean Museum’. The photographed violin is actually one of Vuillaume’s copies of his *Le Messie* violin (and illustrated in the Postscript of the 1976 reprint of the Hills’ 1891 “*Salabue*” monograph).

⁴² Translated from *Rapport du jury central sur les produits de l’industrie française en 1839*, Tome Second, Bouchard-Huzard, 1839, p. 352.

⁴³ Translated from *Exposition des produits de l’industrie française en 1844; rapport du jury central*, Tome 2, Fain et Thunot, 1844, p. 553. The 1998-99 Paris Vuillaume Exhibition catalogue (vV/Campos p. 71) states that this machine – ‘the machine for producing tables and backs’ – dates from 1844. It is unclear how this machine worked; no illustrative diagrams are known. Antoine Vidal (Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 265) states that, a few months before his death, Vuillaume also invented a machine for cutting bows.

grew older'.⁴⁴ Sylvette Milliot quotes a letter (dated 3rd September 1870) from Vuillaume to his brother, Nicolas-François, in which he complains: 'For carrying out a simple re-hair of a bow I used to pay 19 centimes to Peccatte; today I pay 40 centimes.'⁴⁵ The bows for which I [used to pay] 1 franc and 50 centimes are 3 francs and 75 centimes today.'⁴⁶ In a letter of 30th October 1919 to the Hills in London, Alexandre Delanoy wrote that 'Vuillaume was a hard master, egoistical, dreaming only of profit rather than the wages earned by his workmen.'⁴⁷ F. N. Voirin, Vuillaume's master bowmaker, was paid between 6 francs and 6 francs 50 centimes per day.⁴⁸

As already mentioned, and as usually recounted, Luigi Tarisio persistently teased the Parisian violin dealers with his descriptions of a perfect Stradivari violin which he claimed to own but would never bring to Paris. The most common account of how this violin acquired its soubriquet relates that Tarisio met with Vuillaume's son-in-law, Delphin Alard, at Vuillaume's shop. Alard is supposed to have said to Tarisio: *Votre violon est donc comme le Messie; on l'attend toujours, et il ne paraît jamais!*⁴⁹ ('Your violin is therefore like the Messiah; one is always waiting for it (him), and it (he) never appears!')

The earliest publication of the narrative which relates how Vuillaume bought Tarisio's instruments, after the latter's death, is supplied by Antoine Vidal, writing in 1876,⁵⁰ but Vidal acknowledges that the entirety of his information was supplied by Vuillaume 'who has authorised us to publish the details as absolutely accurate'.⁵¹ Vidal (Vuillaume) writes that Tarisio died 'in October 1854' and 'the news did not take long to reach Paris'. Vuillaume, following communication with Tarisio's relatives, left Paris on 8th January 1855 to travel to Milan.⁵² On arrival, Vuillaume was taken to the farm owned by Tarisio's relatives⁵³ – the 'Farm of the Cross' in the village of Fontaneto d'Agogna – where 'he found [Tarisio's] heirs gathered together with all the appearances of the most sordid misery!' (*avec toutes les apparences de la misère la plus sordide!*).⁵⁴ There, at the farmhouse, Vuillaume apparently discovered six priceless violins:

1. *Un magnifique Ant. Stradivari;*
2. *Un Joseph Guarnerius del Gesù, admirable;*
3. *Un Charles Bergonzi, unique de conservation;*
4. *Deux J.-B. Guadagnini, presque intacts;*

⁴⁴ Translated from Millant p. 16; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 84.

⁴⁵ The typical cost, today (2013), for re-hairing a bow, is £50-60.

⁴⁶ Milliot p. 244; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 246. In October 2013, two Dominique Peccatte bows – one for violin and one for cello, and both described as 'fine' – were auctioned at Brompton's auction house in London. The prices paid were £80,000 and £60,000.

⁴⁷ Translated from Milliot p. 244, footnote 52.

⁴⁸ See Millant p. 16 (and p. 84).

⁴⁹ The first known publication of this quip is by Antoine Vidal (Vidal (1889) p. 342).

⁵⁰ Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 123 *et seq.*

⁵¹ Translated from Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 124, footnote.

⁵² Just how Vuillaume travelled from Paris to Milan is unknown. It is possible that he took various trains from Paris to Geneva (via Dijon), and then a horse-drawn stagecoach over the Simplon Pass and down to Milan. Alternatively, the entire journey could have been made by stagecoach, travelling at little more than ten miles per hour. Whichever was the case, the journey would not have been swift.

⁵³ According to the Hills (Hill (1902) p. 263) Vuillaume was taken to the relatives' farm by Tarisio's sister. Sylvette Milliot (in *vV/Campos* p. 55, and *vV/Campos/tr.* p. 55) states that Tarisio had 'only two nephews'.

⁵⁴ Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 124. Cf. '[...] he found the relatives assembled with every appearance of the most sordid poverty' (Hill (1891) p. 16).

5. *Et enfin le fameux violon neuf⁵⁵ de A. Stradivari, resté pendant soixante années dans la collection du comte Cozio de Salabue, et qui été acquis par Tarisio en 1824.*⁵⁶

And, at last, the famous *new* violin of A. Stradivari, residing for sixty years in the collection of Count Cozio di Salabue, and which was acquired by Tarisio in 1824.

The Hills provide exactly the same information:

[...] one after the other he [Vuillaume] drew forth five splendid instruments – first a magnificent Stradivari, then a beautiful Giuseppe Guarneri; next a Carlo Bergonzi, in perfect preservation, and two almost untouched Guadagnini, and lastly the gem of the collection, the long talked of “new” Stradivari of 1716 – Le Messie.⁵⁷

If Vuillaume left Paris on [Monday] 8th January 1855 and, according to the inscription written by Vuillaume inside the *Le Messie/Messiah* violin, bought the instrument on Friday 12th January 1855, then his journey to Fontaneto d’Agogna was extraordinarily rapid.

Vuillaume, through Vidal, describes his return from Fontaneto d’Agogna to Milan and the *Hôtel des Délices*. There he found a jumbled pile of ‘244 violins, violas and cellos of old masters’ which he bought for 80,000 francs.⁵⁸ Vuillaume then returned to Paris *avec cette précieuse collection qui ne tarda pas à se disperser de tous les côtés*⁵⁹ (‘with this precious collection [of instruments] which was quickly dispersed in all directions’).⁶⁰ Vidal (Vuillaume) also states that Luigi Tarisio left to his relatives a fortune of 300,000 francs, the product of his commercial dealings between approximately 1825 and 1854.⁶¹

Sylvette Milliot offers an expanded narrative:

In 1854, to everyone’s surprise, Tarisio did not appear [in Paris]. At the beginning of January 1855, a Milanese silk merchant passing through Paris informed Vuillaume that [Tarisio] had died at the end of the previous year.⁶² Without saying anything to anyone, Vuillaume gathered together 100,000 francs, packed his bag, and left for Milan.⁶³ He presented himself at the Hotel of Delights.⁶⁴ The occupants told him that, having neither seen nor heard their neighbour for several days, they had called the police. They forced the door, to discover Tarisio stretched out on his bed – felled, without doubt, by a heart attack – gripping a violin in his arms. The bailiffs were about to start making an inventory.⁶⁵

⁵⁵ Emphasis as in original text.

⁵⁶ Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 124. See also Chapter 1, footnote 56.

⁵⁷ Hill (1891) p. 16. Later commentators provide the same information.

⁵⁸ Vidal (1876-78) Volume I, p. 125. Roger Millant (Millant p. 57) specifies ‘one hundred and forty-four violins, violas, and cellos, including twenty-four Stradivaris of all periods’ but no evidence for this alternative information is provided.

⁵⁹ Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 125.

⁶⁰ But see Vuillaume’s letter to Robert Bockmühl (later in this chapter) regarding the dispersal.

⁶¹ See Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 125.

⁶² See later in this chapter for information regarding the date of Tarisio’s death. Some of Milliot’s information appears to be sourced from Franz Farga (Farga p. 100): ‘a commercial traveller, who represented a firm of Milan silk merchants in Paris, brought the news of Tarisio’s death to the French capital [...]’ but Farga does not offer any date, not even a year, for Tarisio’s death. In the English translation of Milliot’s French text (Milliot p. 154) the generality of ‘at the end of the previous year’ becomes the much more specific ‘8th October 1854’, but no evidence for this precise date is provided. Antoine Vidal (Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 123) states that Tarisio died in October 1854; George Hart (Hart (1884) p. 343) repeats Vidal’s information; the Hills (Hill (1891) p. 14) repeat the information from Vidal and Hart.

⁶³ But Vidal states that Vuillaume corresponded with Tarisio’s heirs prior to leaving Paris for Italy.

⁶⁴ Vidal (Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 124) states that Vuillaume went straight to the town of Novara.

⁶⁵ Translated from Milliot p. 152; alternatively translated (*ibid.*) p. 154. Vidal (Vidal (1876-78) Volume I, pp. 123-125) makes no mention of the manner of Tarisio’s death. Farga (Farga p. 99) imagines Tarisio holding two violins. George Hart, writing in 1884 about Tarisio’s death in Milan (Hart pp. 341-342), states: ‘[...] I am indebted for particulars to Signor [Federico] Sacchi, who received them from a reliable source’ (but Sacchi’s ‘reliable source’ is not identified). The Hills, in

No documentary evidence is provided to support this account. The description of Tarisio, dead on his bed clutching a violin in his arms, is reminiscent of the death of Paganini in 1840, romantically described with the violinist holding in his arms his *Il Cannone* Guarneri *del Gesù* violin. More prosaically, if Tarisio died on 8th October 1854, and Vuillaume did not arrive until three months later, in early January 1855, the Italian bailiffs (if they existed) were being extremely dilatory in discharging their duties (and how fortuitous that the inventory was to be started just after Vuillaume arrived in Milan).

Sylvette Milliot continues her account:

[Tarisio's] instruments were found jumbled together in a chaotic pile; among them, in a corner, underneath a dusty blanket, were some beautiful Stradivaris and a double bass by Gasparo da Salò.⁶⁶

Philip Kass offers some words of caution:

News of Tarisio's death sent [Vuillaume] rushing to Milan in hopes of finding the magnificent violin of which the Italian dealer had for so long boasted. Since by this time both Tarisio and [Count] Cozio were dead, we only have Vuillaume's word for it that the violin⁶⁷ he encountered at the Tarisio family home in Fontanetto Po⁶⁸ was the same one they had both referred to. If we believe this, we must also believe Vuillaume when he says⁶⁹ that he found it in the double case with the 'Alard' [Guarneri] 'del Gesù'.⁷⁰

Sylvette Milliot continues her account: 'Vuillaume removed the most valuable instruments, leaving till later the transportation of the remainder.'⁷¹

A la fin de l'année en effet, il reprenait le chemin de la péninsule et allait revoir la famille de Tarisio à Fontaneto. Il trouvait encore à la ferme une belle contrebasse de Gasparo da Salò ainsi qu'un "ramassis" d'une trentaine d'instruments. Il les acheta à bon compte mais non sans de longues palabres: "Ils n'en finissent pas en affaires" écrivait-il à son gendre; "ils sont si méfiants qu'ils croient toujours qu'ils ne vendent pas assez cher!"⁷²

At the end of the year⁷³ he [Vuillaume] again took the peninsula road [the road to Italy] and went again to meet the Tarisio family at Fontaneto. He found, still at the farm, a beautiful double bass by Gasparo da Salò⁷⁴ as well as a 'job lot' of about thirty instruments. He bought these at a good

their 1891 monograph, also give details of Tarisio's death, and provide a footnote: 'The information given here concerning Tarisio has been obtained by Signor Sacchi, chiefly from the late Enrico Ceruti [1808-1883] [...].' However, there is very close agreement between the Hills' text (Hill (1891) pp. 15-16) and Antoine Vidal's 1876 text (Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, pp. 123-125) which was supplied directly to Vidal by Vuillaume.

⁶⁶ Translated from Milliot p. 152; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 154. No supportive evidence is cited for this account.

⁶⁷ *Le Messie*.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 6, footnote 2.

⁶⁹ Kass does not identify the location for Vuillaume's written(?) statement.

⁷⁰ 'Holes in history', *The Strad*, August 2001, p. 864.

⁷¹ Translated from Milliot p. 152. Milliot cites 'Antoine Vidal, *les instruments à archet* (Paris 1876) Tome I, pp. 123-125' as confirmation for her information concerning the subsequent transportation of the remaining instruments, but Vidal makes no mention of this transportation.

⁷² Milliot p. 152.

⁷³ September 1855; see Milliot p. 154. Antoine Vidal makes no mention of this second visit.

⁷⁴ But Milliot states that a Salò double bass was found, in January 1855, at Tarisio's lodgings in Milan— *sous une couverture poussiéreuse* ('underneath a dusty blanket'). It seems unlikely that there were two Salò double basses. The Cozio.com website (accessed June 2013) identified two Gasparo da Salò double basses; the first (ID 13082) belonged to the virtuoso Giovanni Bottesini (1821-1889) and was brought to London by David Laurie after being discovered by him in Padua in about 1870; the second double bass was owned by Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1846) and was sold, at his death, to the Chapel of St Marco in Venice. Neither instrument appears to have had any connection with Luigi Tarisio or Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume.

price but not without long negotiations: “They never finalise anything” he wrote to his son-in-law [Delphin Alard]; “they are so suspicious that they always think they are not selling at a high-enough price!”

Vuillaume’s comment about the financial negotiations with Tarisio’s heirs appears within a letter, dated 18th September 1855, sent by Vuillaume from Cremona to Delphin Alard in Paris. The letter also describes the appalling weather conditions (a gigantic thunderstorm) which affected Vuillaume’s journey from the Fontaneto d’Agogna farm back to the town of Novara in the company *du vieux Tarisio* (‘of old Tarisio’). Twice the coach in which Vuillaume and Tarisio were travelling almost toppled over:

[...] *quant à la seconde fois, nous étions sur un lit de pierres, la voiture aux trois quarts penchée, ne sachant où nous étions. Le Tarisio a sauté de la voiture en vociférant dans son langage contre le cocher et s’est mis à soutenir l’équilibre de la voiture pendant que je descendais dans la boue à demi jambe.*⁷⁵

[...] on the second occasion we ended up on a bed of stones, the coach three-quarters toppled over, not knowing where we were. Tarisio leapt from the coach, shouting at the coachman in his own language, and began to support the balance of the coach, while I got down into the mud, up to my knees.

It would thus seem that ‘old Tarisio’ was still alive in September 1855 (almost one year after he is commonly supposed to have died) and still had the strength and agility to leap from a stranded coach, castigate the driver, and push against the coach to prevent it entirely toppling over.

Two weeks after writing to Delphin Alard, Vuillaume sent a letter to his brother, Nicolas-François (1st October 1855):

My dear brother,

I have been back home for two days. I made my trip very quickly. I have been in Piedmont at the home of Tarisio’s heirs. I bought all the leftovers [*J’ai acheté tout le ramassi*] and a beautiful double bass by Gaspard de Salo, and from there I went to Milan, then to Cremona⁷⁶ where at last I found most of the dates that I was searching for (which everybody said were unfindable); I was delighted. From there I went to Mantua, Verona, Jusruch [Innsbruck?] and Mittenwah [Mittenwald], where with great effort I finally obtained what I needed to be able to reproduce *Le Messie* several times; then I went to Munich, and two days later I was back in Paris.⁷⁷

Vuillaume’s September 1855 visit to Cremona was evidently not his first, since there exists a letter sent by Vuillaume two years earlier, on 7th September 1853, to Signor Giulio Fusetti, (curate at the Cathedral in Cremona) a letter which itself clearly follows on from previous correspondence:

Dear Sir,

I have received the letter that you so kindly wrote to me, which contains the information which I took the liberty of asking for at the time of my journey to Cremona.⁷⁸ I thank you infinitely for all the details that you have given me. [...] There is much information which [even] our most erudite men did not know. [...] I assume, from your letter, that you obtained this information from a well-informed person, a true lover of old and beautiful *lutherie*.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Milliot p. 152.

⁷⁶ From where Vuillaume sent his 18th September letter to Delphin Alard.

⁷⁷ Translated from vV/Campos p. 67; alternatively translated in vV/Campos/tr. p. 67. The text of Vuillaume’s letter ends with Vuillaume writing ‘Monday 1 October’. The year date of ‘1855’ is supplied, editorially, in the Paris Vuillaume Exhibition catalogue. An 1855 calendar confirms that 1st October of that year was a Monday.

⁷⁸ It would seem likely that Vuillaume’s journey to Cremona took place in the summer of 1853.

⁷⁹ Translated from Bonetti *et al.* pp. 102-103.

Vuillaume continues this letter by asking Fusetti to send him the death certificate for Antonio Stradivari (the certificate to include the authenticating seal of the parish), the birth and death details of other Cremonese violin makers, a Stradivari autograph, and more detailed information about Guarneri *del Gesù*: ‘You give me very few details about J. Guarnerius del Gesù whose instruments are so highly regarded.’

The letter of reply from Fusetti included biographical details for Nicolò Amati – namely, the son of Girolamo Amati and Maddalena Lazzarini, born 3rd September 1596, died 12th April 1684; the identity of Nicolò Amati’s wife – Lucrezia Paliari (Pagliari); the birth date for Girolamo II (Hieronymous) Amati (26th February 1649); and the birth date for Giovanni Battista Amati (13th August 1657), a priest, who died ‘around 1706’.⁸⁰

To return to Luigi Tarisio: the layers of contradictory information surrounding his death, and his posthumous collection of instruments, are confounded still further by an undated ‘Note’, written by Vuillaume and transcribed in the 1998-99 Paris Vuillaume Exhibition catalogue. The catalogue’s editor, Rémy Campos, comments: ‘The reasons which led the *luthier* to write this text are unknown.’⁸¹

Louis Tarisio, born in the village of Fontanetta near Borgemonera in Piemonte, was the son of a village musician [*ménétrier*]. He had started to learn how to repair violins when the idea came to him, in 1827, to come to France to try to place [in the market] some specimens that he owned, and [this worked advantageously] which gave him the idea of continuing. He thus returned to Italy with his pockets well filled, made some new acquisitions with which he succeeded perfectly, and continued until 1850, the time when he finished his career.

He died in Milan, at the Hotel of Delights, Porta Tenaglia, in the month of December 1850, leaving a collection of 250 instruments which were sold by his heirs in January 1851 to the luthier Vuillaume.

Tarisio had begun with nothing, and by hard work, by travelling cheaply (always on foot) and by lodging in the poorest inns, had amassed a fortune of 300,000 francs. He had extensively studied – and had acquired extensive knowledge of – old instruments, which he always bought personally, and in their original state, [which] he would ‘set up’ and [then] re-sell, often enough for other makers, at a higher price.⁸² He can be considered one of the first connoisseurs of his time.⁸³

Tarisio is thus unambiguously stated by Vuillaume to have given up his instrument-dealing career in 1850, and to have died in December of the same year. George Hart, equally unambiguously, states:

In the year 1851 Tarisio visited England, when Mr. John Hart, being anxious that he [Tarisio] should see the chief collections of Cremonese instruments in this country, accompanied him to the collection, amongst others, of the late Mr. James Goding, which was then the finest in Europe.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Fusetti’s biographical information is included in Fétis (1856) pp. 58-59, and in Fétis (Bishop, 1864) pp. 58-59.

⁸¹ It is possible that Vuillaume’s ‘Note’ was a draft of the information he supplied to Antoine Vidal (see earlier in this chapter); Vidal’s text also itemises *un ensemble de 250 instruments* as well as the specification of Tarisio’s wealth as *300,000 francs*. However, Vidal does not include any mention of the Porta Tenaglia area of the city of Milan, identifies the date of Tarisio’s death as ‘October 1854’ rather than ‘December 1850’, and dates Vuillaume’s purchase of the former’s instruments as 1855 rather than 1851.

⁸² Vuillaume appears to be indicating that Tarisio deliberately misrepresented the identity of some of the instruments he sold, and inflated their prices.

⁸³ Translated from vV/Campos p. 258; alternatively translated in vV/Campos/tr. p. 258. Milliot (Milliot p. 152-153) quotes only the third paragraph of Vuillaume’s text (translated, *ibid.* p. 154). Vuillaume makes no mention of Tarisio obtaining the *Le Messie* violin from Count Cozio di Salabue.

⁸⁴ Hart p. 340. John Hart was George Hart’s father. James Goding died in 1856.

The present-day investigator is left wondering why the best-informed violin dealer in nineteenth-century Europe should include within an autograph document a date of death for Tarisio which is so obviously incorrect.

One further commentary on this period comes from Elia Santoro, writing in 1973:

Another dealer was the Cremonese violin maker Enrico Ceruti [1806-1883], who, around 1850, obtained from Tarisio about thirty violins of various makers (*procurò al Tarisio una trentina di violini di vari autori*). Tarisio died in 1852 of a heart attack in a hotel room in Milan and it is not known what became of his instruments.⁸⁵

Santoro provides no supportive evidence for his commentary.

As is so often the case with Vuillaume, the available evidence neither entirely exonerates nor utterly condemns him; rather, the evidence leaves ever more serious suspicions and doubts in its wake.

An engraved and highly detailed map of Milan, published in 1832 ‘under the superintendence of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge’ shows a broad tree-lined avenue running south from the Porta Tenaglia,⁸⁶ an avenue which forms the eastern border of the Piazza d’Armi (today the Parco Sempione). Although the map does not identify the tree-lined avenue by name it is probable that the residents of the buildings which faced onto the avenue used a local name – *Via Legnano* – as their address (and the road, today, is still named *Via Legnano*). This area of Milan (see Plate 21) was part of the parish of *San Smpliciano*, and the church of *San Smpliciano* is situated no more than 200 metres from the lower part of *Via Legnano*. A search of the death records of the parish – *Atti di Morti della Parocchia di S. Smpliciano*⁸⁷ – reveals no record of anyone by the name of Luigi Tarisio dying during the twenty-year period between 1845 and 1865. The death records from the nearby parish of *Santissima Trinità* have also been searched, from 1845 to 1855, but, again, there is no record of Luigi Tarisio’s death. Death records from one further, close-by, parish – *Santa Maria Incoronata* – were not initiated until 1859. Nonetheless, these have also been searched, between 1859 and 1865, but there is no mention of anyone called Tarisio.

It is therefore suggested by the present author that all previously published statements regarding the place and date of Luigi Tarisio’s death are of questionable veracity.

⁸⁵ Translated from Santoro (1973) p. 75. See also Chapter 11, footnote 115 for further information regarding Enrico Ceruti.

⁸⁶ One of the twelve gates in the city walls.

⁸⁷ Archived at the Curia Arcivescovile, Archivio storico e Biblioteca, Via San Calimero, Milan.

In February 1855 Vuillaume wrote to the cellist, Robert Emil Bockmühl:

Now, Monsieur, I can tell you that I have just negotiated an important business affair in Italy [...]. I have purchased the most beautiful and rare collection of instruments, and I am now in possession of the most extraordinary violins, violas, and basses, of which one only ever dreams. I have all the makers, from the moderately good to the very best. I have Stradivari and Guarneri instruments of the first order: best period [*beau tempo*], beautiful craftsmanship, and in the finest condition, perfect quality. But that which makes me happy above all other things is a Stradivarius of the highest perfection – *the very ideal of beauty* – a violin as I have always dreamed [of seeing], a rare, precious jewel, and of such [good state of] conservation that one would think it brand new. All these instruments, which I have brought back [to Paris] with so much care and trouble, are known to no-one, and if, Monsieur, your brother desires to see them he must travel to Paris, because violins of this value cannot, under any pretext, leave my care;⁸⁸ the majority are very expensive and, I believe, would suit [your brother] by reason of their perfection.

I am very busy classifying my beautiful collection. I am not in a position to sell any of them since not one of the instruments has its fittings. Furthermore, nothing will hurry me; I wish to keep the most beautiful items for as long as possible. I will never be able to replace them ...⁸⁹

The following year, 1856, Vuillaume sent a letter to the collector Charles H C Plowden in London:⁹⁰

I still keep, with the greatest of care, my superb Strad. I do not debase it [by allowing] the eyes of the vulgar [to look upon it]. Only the great connoisseurs have the right to admire and reflect [upon it]. I must make some copies. For me, it is the most perfect model that I have seen, and in Italy it was called ‘Le Messie’ (*Aussi, en Italie, l’appelait-on “Le Messie”*).⁹¹

If the violin, while apparently secreted with Tarisio in Italy, was already known to his compatriots as *Le Messie*, then the oft-repeated account – that the soubriquet came from Delphin Alard’s sardonic quip – becomes false. Vuillaume’s final comment, in his letter to Charles Plowden, is likely an invention – part of the creation, by Vuillaume, of a myth.

On 4th October 1864 Vuillaume wrote again to Charles Plowden:

[...] *quand j’ai de très belles pièces, je les conserve aussi longtemps que possible – parce que je les aime. Dans ce moment, comme Extra⁹² – j’ai toujours mon Messie – un Amati, un Guarnerius, tout cela, hors-ligne – et ce que je possède de plus curieux, c’est un Stradivarius qui est neuf et conserve presque comme le Messie, c’est une trouvaille – Ce violon m’a été apporté d’Espagne dans un état indescriptible mais avec le manche, la touche, la basse de Stradivarius, il n’avait jamais été touché par la raison que depuis plus de cent ans, on l’avait oublié, dans une famille; il a été un peu forcé après sa confection, et la place du menton se trouve marquée du côté opposé où l’on tient les violons aujourd’hui; enfin, il est dans toute son ancienneté – je crois que cela vous*

⁸⁸ Vuillaume probably means that he would not be willing to send any of these instruments out of his shop ‘on approval’.

⁸⁹ Translated from Millant p. 57; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 125. There is no indication of source or ownership of Vuillaume’s manuscript.

⁹⁰ ‘Mr. H. C. Plowden was a well-known amateur who died in 1867’ (Hill (1902) p. 80, footnote). The 1864 publication, in English translation, of the Vuillaume/Fétis *Notice of Anthony Stradivari* was dedicated, by the publication’s (unidentified) editor, to Charles H C Plowden, ‘an ardent admirer and collector of old Cremonese instruments’.

⁹¹ Translated from Millant p. 57; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 125. There is no indication of source or ownership of Vuillaume’s manuscript. Vuillaume’s French text is also quoted in vV/Campos p. 230, where the last sentence is presented as *Aussi, en Italie, l’appelle t’on “Le Messie”* (translated in vV/Campos/tr. p. 230 as: ‘In Italy as well it is called the Messiah’).

⁹² Vuillaume writes the word *Extra* distinctly larger than the rest of the text, and firmly underlines the word.

*intéresserait beaucoup à voir; c'est le 1^{er} de tous les Stradivarius que je trouve dans ces conditions [...].*⁹³

[...] when I have very beautiful instruments I keep them as long as possible – because I love them. At the moment, as extraordinary⁹⁴ – I still have my *Messie* – an Amati, a Guarnerius, all these, exceptional – and the most curious [instrument] that I possess is a Stradivarius which is new and preserved nearly [as well] as the *Messie*, it is a chance find. This violin was brought to me from Spain in an indescribable condition but with the neck, the fingerboard, the bass bar of Stradivarius; it has never been touched, for the reason that for more than a century it was forgotten, in [the possession of] a family. It has been a little worn since its making, and the place of the chin⁹⁵ is found marked on the opposite side to where violins are held today; in sum, it is in its ancient [i.e. authentic, near-pristine] state. I believe that you would be most interested to see it; it is the *premier* of all the Stradivari [violins] that I find in these conditions [...].⁹⁶

The violin to which Vuillaume is referring is the 1721 Stradivari violin later to be known as the *Lady Blunt*. It is noticeable that the source of the *Lady Blunt* violin – the Spanish(?) family who owned the violin and who, in order to sell it, took it all the way to Paris – is not identified by Vuillaume; the violin, like the *Le Messie*, appeared ‘out of the blue’. With respect to the preservation of this violin – forgotten about for more than one hundred years – the following comment made by Charles Beare with respect to the Stradivari 1696 *Archinto* viola is perhaps relevant:

There is a small area of wood-beetle damage near the lower right flank of the back and this [...] probably suggests that it remained unused in its case for a considerable part of the eighteenth century.⁹⁷

In similar fashion, the Hills, writing in 1902 of the Stradivari 1690 *Medici* tenor viola, comment that the instrument has suffered

somewhat serious beetle ravages, set up probably through the instrument being locked up in a museum rather than remaining in the hands of a loving appreciator [who would have regularly played it].⁹⁸

In the aforementioned letter of May 1841 from Giuseppe Carli to Countess Matilde (see Chapter 6) Carli points out to the Countess that the ‘old fashioned’ cases which housed some of her father’s instruments ‘are extensively damaged on the inside, ruined by moths and woodworm’. In the light of this evidence one might expect, therefore, to find beetle damage in the wood of the *Lady Blunt* violin but, as far as is known, there is none.

⁹³ A photocopy of Vuillaume’s handwritten letter was provided on <http://tarisio.com/wp/2011/04/the-lady-blunt-stradivarius-of-1721/#Certificates> (accessed November 2013). The letter’s French text is here reproduced by permission of Tarisio.com.

⁹⁴ The word *Extra* was commonly used as an abbreviation for *Extraordinaire* (rather than indicating something which was ‘additional’).

⁹⁵ i.e. the abrasion of the varnish caused by the player’s chin.

⁹⁶ Translation by the present author. The aforementioned Tarisio.com website (see footnote 93) reproduced an extract from Vuillaume’s letter, as translated and typed on William E. Hill & Sons letter paper. The translation includes: ‘... it had never been opened, the reason being that it had reposed, forgotten, in an attic for over 100 years’, but Vuillaume’s manuscript letter contains no mention of an attic – *grenier* or *mansarde*. The Hills’ translated extract is an accompaniment to a letter dated 18th September 1959 from A E Phillips Hill to Mr Samuel Bloomfield (who had just purchased the *Lady Blunt* violin). The text of A E Phillips Hill’s letter includes: ‘The instrument was purchased by the well-known violin-maker and dealer, J. B. Vuillaume of Paris, in Spain [...].’

⁹⁷ Beare *et al.* (2013) p. 82.

⁹⁸ Hill (1902) p. 99. It is the case that a regularly played string instrument will rarely suffer from beetle damage.

Vuillaume's certificate, written on the occasion of the 1864 sale of the violin, states:

I, the undersigned, declare that I have sold to Lady Anne Isobella Noël⁹⁹ a violin by Antoine Stradivarius, made in Cremona in the year 1721, for the sum of two hundred sixty *livres* sterling [260GBP]. I guarantee the perfect authenticity of this instrument which arrived in my hands with its primitive fingerboard and without it having ever been opened – everything is intact. I have not touched it except to modify the chin¹⁰⁰ according to the needs of our day and age. I have therefore had to change the bar of harmony [the bass bar], lengthen the fingerboard to the modern length, but preserving the neck exactly.¹⁰¹ This beautiful instrument is thus entirely complete and of a conservation of the most rare exception.¹⁰²

In 1896, the *Lady Blunt* violin was acquired by Baron Johann Knoop, from the Hills, for the price of £1,600. At the time of this sale, Arthur Hill wrote in his diary: 'Baron Knoop has purchased from us the Strad violin that reminds us so much of the 'Messie', as the varnish is of similar colour.'¹⁰³

Tangentially, but perfectly representational of the suspicions and uncertainties which surround Vuillaume, the catalogue of the 1998-99 Paris Vuillaume Exhibition contains photographs of the Giuseppe Guarneri *del Gesù* violin known as the *Alard*. An article about this violin, published in *The Strad*¹⁰⁴ and written by the French violin maker Frédéric Chaudière, states:

The 'Alard' was donated to the Musée in 1888 by Jeanne-Emilie Alard, the daughter of Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume and widow of Delphin Alard.¹⁰⁵ Vuillaume had bought the violin 33 years earlier [i.e. 1855] as part of Luigi Tarisio's fabulous collection, and he subsequently gave it to his son-in-law [...].¹⁰⁶

Following the usual narrative, Chaudière continues by stating that Vuillaume found the Guarneri *Alard* violin at the Fontaneto d'Agogna farmhouse, in a double case with the Stradivari *Le Messie* violin, and then obtained '144 instruments, mostly Cremonese and 24 of them Stradivaris' in 'a sordid Milanese hotel, Tarisio's last address'.¹⁰⁷

The 1998-99 Paris Vuillaume Exhibition catalogue text (p. 243) for this Guarneri *Alard* violin states:

Inscription sous la table: 'Acheté à Milan en 1853' suivie du paraphe de Vuillaume.

Inscription under the table:¹⁰⁸ 'Bought in Milan in 1853' followed by Vuillaume's paraph.¹⁰⁹

⁹⁹ Lady Anne Blunt (1837-1917).

¹⁰⁰ *modifier le menton* – fit a chin rest?

¹⁰¹ Vuillaume lengthened and re-angled the neck by the addition of a wedge at the foot.

¹⁰² Translation from <http://tarisio.com/wp/2011/04/the-lady-blunt-stradivarius-of-1721> (accessed December 2013).

¹⁰³ Tarisio.com 2011 publicity brochure.

¹⁰⁴ 'Silent witness', *The Strad*, June 2002, pp. 618-625.

¹⁰⁵ According to Sylvette Milliot (Milliot p. 216, in captions to four photographs of the *Alard* violin) the violin *fut donné au Musée du Conservatoire par Mesdames Croué et Guesnet, filles de Delphin Alard le 17 mai 1889, peu après le décès de leur mère survenu le 21 mars 1889*. ('[the violin] was donated on 17th May 1889 to the Museum of the [Paris] Conservatoire by Madame Croué and Madame Guesnet, daughters of Delphin Alard, shortly after the death of their mother on 21st March 1889.')

¹⁰⁶ Chaudière p. 618.

¹⁰⁷ Chaudière is possibly sourcing his numbers of instruments from Millant (see Millant p. 57). The double case, and its Stradivari and Guarneri contents, appears to be a contemporary myth.

¹⁰⁸ i.e. on the underside of the front plate.

¹⁰⁹ 'Paraph' refers to the looping flourishes with which Vuillaume always decorated his name; however, in this case, Vuillaume's name is not present.

Vuillaume's inscription – which may not be trustworthy – does not identify the Milanese seller of the violin. If Tarisio was alive in 1853 (notwithstanding Vuillaume's aforementioned 'Note'), and was the owner of this Guarneri violin, then Vuillaume evidently travelled to Milan to buy it from Tarisio rather than waiting for Tarisio to bring it to Paris.¹¹⁰ If Tarisio was not the owner then Vuillaume bought the violin from someone else. If Vuillaume truly bought the future-*Alard* violin in 1853 then the Guarneri *del Gesù* violin which, it is alleged, Vuillaume found at the Fontaneto d'Agogna farmhouse in January 1855 cannot be the *Alard*. The Hills offer what may be an unreliable anecdote:

The story of Vuillaume's purchase of the priceless treasures left by Tarisio has already been told. A small yet interesting detail in connection therewith was related to us by M. Van der Heyden, of Brussels, an ardent admirer of fine instruments, who by chance met Vuillaume in Turin when returning from his now historic journey.¹¹¹ They dined together, and Vuillaume related how he found the "Messie" Stradivari and the "Alard" Guarneri.¹¹² Both were in the bottom drawer of a poor rickety piece of furniture [...].¹¹³

With respect to the inside of the Guarneri *Alard* violin Chaudière writes:

[Vuillaume] couldn't restrain himself from leaving his generous and festooned signature¹¹⁴ on the inside of the back and may well also have glued in the poor-quality false label; this is dated 1740, but the 'Alard' is now unanimously accepted as having been made in 1742.¹¹⁵

Various discrepancies exist with this instrument:

1. Vuillaume wrote inside the violin that he bought it in 1853; Chaudière states that Vuillaume bought it in 1855. The present author has studied an endoscope photograph of Vuillaume's inscription inside the violin – *achette a Milan en 1853* – and the date is unmistakably 1853, not 1855.¹¹⁶
2. Chaudière itemises a false 1740 label which he suggests is the work of Vuillaume. The Paris Vuillaume catalogue does not mention a false 1740 label, instead stating:

*Étiquette à l'intérieur du fond: "Joseph Guarnerius fecit + / Cremonae anno 1742 IHS"*¹¹⁷

Label on the inside of the back [plate]: "Joseph Guarnerius fecit + / Cremonae anno 1742 IHS".

The Hills, in their 1931 monograph, repeatedly specify the date of the *Alard* violin as 1742.¹¹⁸ A further layer of confusion flows from Eric Blot's commentary on this violin: '[Vuillaume] replaced the label with a facsimile. Curiously enough, he labelled the [facsimile] copy with a slightly earlier date (1740).'¹¹⁹ It is unclear how the replacement of the original label with a facsimile can be demonstrated, nor how the date on a now-lost original label can be known to have been post-1740.

¹¹⁰ Perhaps Vuillaume obtained the Guarneri violin in Milan during his 1853 journey to Cremona (see the aforementioned correspondence with Giulio Fusetti, curate of the Cathedral at Cremona).

¹¹¹ Assumed to have been the January 1855(?) journey to Fontaneto d'Agogna.

¹¹² Strictly, Vuillaume could only have told M. Van der Hayden that he found 'a' Guarneri violin.

¹¹³ Hill (1902) p. 263.

¹¹⁴ See footnote 109.

¹¹⁵ Chaudière p. 623.

¹¹⁶ Three endoscope photographs were supplied to the present author by the Musée de la Musique. One of the photographs – that which shows *achette a Milan en 1853* and Vuillaume's looping flourishes but not Vuillaume's name – is also reproduced in Milliot p. 217.

¹¹⁷ vV/Campos p. 243; see also Milliot p. 216. Neither source identifies the 'æ' ligature at the end of the name of the town.

¹¹⁸ The *Alard* label is also stated to be '1742' but 'false' in Chiesa *et al.* Volume 1, p. 125.

¹¹⁹ Brandmair and Greiner p. 348.

An endoscope photograph of the current *Alard* label, supplied to the present author by the Musée de la Musique, shows:

Joseph Guarnerius fecit + [4-pointed cross]
Cremonæ anno I742 IHS

According to the Hills, an authentic Guarneri *del Gesù* label appears thus:

Joseph Guarnerius fecit + [4-pointed cross]
Cremonę anno I7xx IHS¹²⁰

‘Joseph’ is the Hebrew form of ‘Giuseppe’ and ‘Guarnerius’ is the Latinised form of the family name. The final ‘e’ of ‘Cremona’ in the authentic label has a ‘c’ shape attached to its lowest curve which the Hills describe as a ‘cedilla’.¹²¹ The first two numerals of the label date were always printed, the last two drawn by hand. The Christogram – ‘IHS’ – is an abbreviation for ‘Iesus Hominum Salvator’ (Jesus, Saviour of Man). Authentic Guarneri labels ‘were printed from wood blocks and on hand-made paper’.¹²² The Hills illustrate nine complete *del Gesù* labels; all have the word ‘Cremonę’ (with a forward-facing ‘cedilla’ on the final ‘e’).¹²³

The Hills also provide a reproduction of a false label: ‘The last reproduction [...] is a replica of that frequently found in Guarneri copies, the work of Vuillaume, and which were so labelled by him [...]’ (i.e. the Guarneri-copy violins were the work of Vuillaume, as were also the false labels):

Joseph Guarnerius fecit + [4-pointed cross]
Cremonæ anno I735 IHS¹²⁴

Correctly, the first two date-numerals are printed, the final two numerals drawn by hand. However, Vuillaume (deliberately?) used a ligature ‘æ’ ending for the name of the town, used the modern letter-shape for the ‘s’ in ‘Joseph’, and his text font is not the same as that used by Guarneri. Nonetheless, few in nineteenth-century France were ever likely to be able to challenge or question Vuillaume’s Guarneri label precisely because of the scarcity of genuine Guarneri violins and genuine Guarneri labels.

Franz Farga offers another type of Guarneri *del Gesù* label – an amalgamation of both those shown above:

Joseph Guarnerius fecit + [4-pointed cross]
Cremonæ anno I7xx IHS¹²⁵

Perhaps, if this is also a false label, the person responsible tried to improve its capacity to deceive by using a ‘long S’ in ‘Joseph’, but Farga offers no comment as to the origin of the label or its text content. The Hills comment on the matter of the Guarneri *Alard* violin label:

In a quite appreciable number of reproductions of the master’s label it will be found that ‘Cremonae’ is spelt with a diphthong (see the father’s labels of 1714 and 1731)¹²⁶ but we have never in our experience come across an authentic label so spelt. Vidal reproduces a ticket so worded, taken from the fine Guarneri violin ex Alard, now reposing in the Museum of the Paris

¹²⁰ Hill (1931) opposite p. 130.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* p. 129.

¹²² *Ibid.* p. 127.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, opposite p. 130. Two further *del Gesù* labels, of exactly the same type, are illustrated in Chiesa *et al.*, Volume Two, p. 151.

¹²⁴ Hill (1931) opposite p. 130. Note that the label currently inside the *Alard* violin has the same text as the Hills’ false label (apart from the two handwritten numerals).

¹²⁵ Farga, opposite p. 48. Farga’s label is seemingly sourced from the *facsimile* in Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, opposite p. 98.

¹²⁶ These two labels (Hill (1931) opposite p. 129) both have the text ‘Joseph Guarnerius Filius Andreae Fecit / Cremonæ, sub Titulo S. Therefię’ followed by ‘1714’ and ‘1711’ (the latter label has the second ‘1’ altered by hand to ‘3’).

Conservatoire of Music.¹²⁷ We have been privileged to scrutinize this superb example on several occasions, and we do not believe its label to be an original. We would add, however, that a doubt as to the correctness of our judgement might be legitimately raised, for the inscription is obviously old, and printed in characters of the period; yet the fact remains that we have never in a single instance met with another authentic violin of the master bearing an original and a similar label [i.e. with ‘Cremonæ’], nor do the figures [the date numerals: 1742] satisfy our scrutiny.¹²⁸

Frédéric Chaudière’s summary comment, in his *Strad* article on the Guarneri *Alard* violin, may be entirely devoid of suspicious nuance: ‘Its unpolished finish, lack of patina, pale ground¹²⁹ and general condition almost make one think that the ‘Alard’ is a 19th century or even a modern instrument.’¹³⁰ Chaudière also draws attention to the ‘softened’ surface of the scroll, achieved by the extensive use of abrasives and scrapers, ‘giving the impression of someone hiding the raw surfaces left by a heavier hand’.¹³¹

Roger Millant, writing about Vuillaume’s copies of Guarneri violins, acknowledges that all the ‘imperfections’ – for example, in the cutting of the *f*-holes or the purfling – were made ‘without any doubt, intentionally’.¹³² The essential point here lies in establishing *why* Vuillaume intentionally created the imperfections.

In the Giuseppe Guarneri *del Gesù* section of their 1931 monograph, having described the mid-nineteenth-century surge of interest in Guarneri instruments brought about by Paganini’s daily use of a late-period Guarneri violin, the Hills comment:

The demand for ‘Guarneris’ became an ever more insistent one, and copies were produced by all the principal makers of Europe. But the more imaginative worker soon perceived that the real demand was for something that would more or less pass muster as an original work; in a word, the colourable imitation [i.e. a deliberate forgery] rather than the honest reproduction. He [‘the more imaginative worker’] also realized that the master’s eccentric irregularities gave rein to the would-be falsifier, and, as a result, not only were authentic ‘Guarneri’ made up of old parts called into being, but admirable imitative copies bearing all the appearance of age were made by Vuillaume, Georges Chanot, and other French and German contemporary makers, whilst here we had the Fendts and notably George and John Lott.¹³³ To the latter we are especially indebted.¹³⁴

John Lott’s Guarneri replicas have been described as ‘gems of art’,¹³⁵ whilst the following assessment comes from James N McKean:

¹²⁷ Here the Hills cite Antoine Vidal, *La Lutherie et Les Luthiers* (1889), but the *Alard* label illustrated in Vidal’s publication (Plate V, opposite p. 54) – ‘Joseph Guarnerius fecit + / Cremonæ anno 1742 IHS’ – is obviously false (the font is entirely different to that used in the Hills’ authentic label). In addition, the appearance of Vidal’s label is quite unlike that of the *Alard* violin’s current label. The Hills’ use of the word ‘taken’ is not to be understood literally.

¹²⁸ Hill (1931) pp. 129-130. Writing of the Guarneri *del Gesù* violin known as the *Doyen*, John Dilworth comments (*Chiesa et al.* Volume I, p. 143): ‘It was previously recorded as having been made in 1735 [...] and bore a false label to that effect. The Hills substituted the imitation label of 1741 which it now carries, although current opinion places it in the last year of del Gesù’s life.’ The Hills, in their 1931 Guarneri-family monograph, list the *Doyen* violin (p. 88) but make no mention of their insertion of an imitation 1741 label.

¹²⁹ The ‘undercoat’ of the varnish.

¹³⁰ Chaudière p. 625.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* p. 623.

¹³² Translated from Millant p. 22; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 91.

¹³³ John Frederick Lott (1805-1871) was a close collaborator of Vuillaume.

¹³⁴ Hill (1931) p. 98. Were the Hills, somewhat out of character, being ironic?

¹³⁵ Henley p. 720.

[John Lott] was virtually alone among copyists to thoroughly assimilate the style of [Giuseppe Guarneri] del Gesù, to the point that he made original fakes rather than duplicates.¹³⁶

In 1962 a John Lott violin was on sale at the firm of William H. Moennig, of Philadelphia, USA. In the 'Fall 1962' issue of the company's house-publication, *World of Strings*, this violin is photographed, front and back, accompanied by a short, anonymous, commentary. The commentator quotes another writer (also anonymous): 'There is no doubt about his [Lott's] exceedingly clever craftsmanship, and among the variety of talents he displayed was one for brilliant forgery. Some of his skilful counterfeits have deceived the ablest judges.' The commentator then adds: 'Even the facsimile label of del Gesù [*sic*] dated 1741 looks authentic.'¹³⁷

It is at least questionable whether the *Alard* violin at the Musée de la Musique in Paris was made by Giuseppe Guarneri *del Gesù*.

In December 2012 a London violin dealer offered for sale a viola which was stylistically identifiable as having been made around 1710 by Alessandro Gagliano in Naples. This instrument had previously been sold by Vuillaume to a French collector, but not as a Gagliano viola, rather as the only viola ever made by Giuseppe Guarneri *del Gesù*. In a 2002 article about this viola John Dilworth wrote:

[...] someone has been at work here with the filleting knife [...] new wings have been grafted [into the *f*-holes] and the upper half has been extended upward [...]. The original [scroll] has been chopped off, and what the viola wears now is a pretty good approximation of what a 'del Gesù' viola scroll might have looked like. [...] The label too, which is a clever reproduction of the 'del Gesù' ticket,¹³⁸ is exactly like those [that John] Lott used for his violins. [...] there is evidence that Lott succeeded not only in spoiling a fine old viola, but also in foisting it onto an unsuspecting customer [through Vuillaume].¹³⁹

Vuillaume's unsuspecting customer was Dr Eugène Fau, who, in April 1874, bought the 'Guarneri' viola from Vuillaume for 4,000 francs. What is so reprehensible about the sale of this faked instrument is that:

1. Vuillaume was perfectly willing to perpetrate the deception on one of his own countrymen, who had also been one of his long-standing customers
2. to ensure that the deception was successful Vuillaume issued an untruthful certificate for the viola which (according to the information which was on the Cozio.com website) 'states that the instrument is an authentic del Gesù'.¹⁴⁰

Having returned to Paris with his self-certified *Le Messie* violin, Vuillaume apparently then made substantial changes to this immaculate, perfect, Stradivari violin:

¹³⁶ McKean pp. 25-27.

¹³⁷ The Cozio.com number for this John Lott violin was 12053 (accessed December 2013).

¹³⁸ Regrettably, Dilworth's article does not include a photograph of the label.

¹³⁹ 'Faking it', *The Strad*, September 2002, pp. 968-975.

¹⁴⁰ Cozio.com ID 42319 (accessed December 2012). It was to Dr Fau that Vuillaume had earlier (1865) offered his *Le Messie* violin, for 10,000 francs; see later in this chapter. Subsequently (in 1885, and ten years after Vuillaume's death) Dr Fau became the owner of the Guarneri *Diable* violin (see Chapter 9).

1. He opened the violin and, as previously indicated, wrote his inscription on the underside of the belly. He also wrote ‘*Le Messie*’ on the inside of the back plate, close to the upper block.¹⁴¹
2. He apparently extracted the three iron nails which held the neck in place, fitted a wedge to the foot of the neck – to raise, re-angle, and lengthen the neck in accordance with nineteenth-century (and modern) practice – and re-attached the neck.¹⁴²
3. Since the neck was now longer Vuillaume would have needed to make and fit a new ebony fingerboard; presumably the shorter fingerboard which had been fitted to the violin was discarded.
4. He made and fitted a set of four ornate and stylistically incongruous pegs, and a stylistically incongruous carved tail-piece showing the Madonna, child, and two cherubs.
5. He made and fitted a bridge. Today’s *Messiah* violin has a bridge made and fitted by the Hills. What happened to the bridge made and fitted by Vuillaume is unknown; perhaps the Hills, in 1890, discarded it.
6. Vuillaume removed the bass bar, replaced it with a stronger bar,¹⁴³ but apparently kept the original. The Hills, in 1890, replaced Vuillaume’s bass bar with their own;¹⁴⁴ presumably Vuillaume’s bass bar was discarded. David D Boyden writes:

Vuillaume, however, had saved the original [Stradivari] bass bar, which has been recovered and is now displayed with the violin. The original bass bar was presented to the Museum by Mr. A. Phillips Hill in 1956.¹⁴⁵

The Hills describe Vuillaume’s defensively protective attitude towards his violin:

This wonderful instrument remained in Vuillaume’s possession until his death. He kept it for inspection in a glass case, and never allowed it to be touched, even by the most experienced hands, as we can personally testify. These precautions gave rise to the rumour of its being a violin of his own construction [...].¹⁴⁶

Daniel Draley has commented: ‘It is not commonly known that the Hills, about 1870-1874, went to Vuillaume’s establishment and *were not allowed to personally handle the 1716 Strad.*’¹⁴⁷

The present author would not be the first to wonder why Vuillaume spent so much time and effort modernising his *Le Messie* violin if it was then to be exhibited, in Vuillaume’s shop, in a glass case. One year later – 1856 – Fétis (or Vuillaume) was nonetheless able to report that ‘in this new instrument, we find all the qualities combined of *power, mellowness, roundness, delicacy, free vibration, a very superior, noble and penetrating tone.*’¹⁴⁸

¹⁴¹ See MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 164.

¹⁴² However, according to Count Cozio the necks on all his Stradivari violins had been re-angled by Guadagnini. See Chapter 11 for further information regarding neck modifications.

¹⁴³ But, as shown in Chapter 10, this bar apparently proved to be too weak and allowed the front plate to sink.

¹⁴⁴ Hill (1891) p. 23.

¹⁴⁵ Boyden (1979) p. 24. The Hill Archive at the Ashmolean Museum does not contain any correspondence relating to this 1956 presentation of a bass bar.

¹⁴⁶ Hill (1891) pp. 18-19. The Hills’ comment would surely have greatly alarmed Robert Crawford; see Chapter 10.

¹⁴⁷ ‘The Salabue Stradivari’, *The Strad*, May 1990, p. 359 (italicised text as in original). Daniel Draley offers no evidence to support his statement. In 1870, William Henry Hill was thirteen years old, Arthur was ten, and Alfred was eight. Draley’s reference to ‘the Hills’ can surely only refer to William Ebsworth Hill, who was 53 years old in 1870. The letter sent by W E Hill to Robert Crawford on 9th July 1890 (see Chapter 10) makes no mention of the former having seen the *Le Messie* violin in Vuillaume’s Paris shop.

¹⁴⁸ Fétis (Bishop, 1864) p. 74. Italicised text as in Bishop’s translation.

The evidence indicates that, in 1862, Vuillaume brought his *Le Messie* violin to the World Exhibition in London,¹⁴⁹ where it was not only exhibited but also put up for sale.¹⁵⁰ A report on the Exhibition's string instruments was written by the Librarian of the Paris Conservatoire, M. Boquillon, for the 1863 publication *Études sur L'Exposition Universelle de Londres en 1862*:¹⁵¹

Today, with his reputation completely established, and more or less retired from business, [Vuillaume] has considerably reduced his rate of production [of instruments], and one begins, with reason, to prefer the instruments having a newer appearance to those that formerly he could only 'place' [in the market] after having subjected them to considerable 'antiquing'.

His display [at the Exhibition] consists of an *authentic Stradivarius*¹⁵² of perfect conservation, price 15,000 francs, accompanied by two violins which compared very favourably with their elder brother, and, let us add, sustained [the comparison] with honour.

The presence of Vuillaume's *Le Messie* violin at the 1862 exhibition is confirmed by the 9th July 1890 letter from William Ebsworth Hill to Robert Crawford.¹⁵³

In a letter (11th October 1912) to Alfred Hill, Georges Meier¹⁵⁴ describes how he visited the 1862 World Exhibition in London and saw Vuillaume exhibiting his *Le Messie* violin side by side with a copy-violin.¹⁵⁵ Meier states that both instruments were for sale, the one for 15,000 francs, the other for 500 francs.¹⁵⁶ Since the *Le Messie* did not attract a buyer Vuillaume then offered the violin to the aforementioned French collector and player, Dr Eugène Fau, in 1865, for a reduced price of 10,000 francs, but the offer was declined.¹⁵⁷ Subsequently displaying a complete change of mind, Vuillaume wrote to his brother, Nicolas-François, on 9th February 1870: 'As for the Messiah, I cannot bring myself to sell it. It is a souvenir of affection of my poor wife and I must conserve it all my life.'¹⁵⁸ Roger Millant also maintains the tradition that Vuillaume was never willing to sell the violin: 'His passion for Stradivari was such that he never wanted to be separated from the famous "Messie", acquired in 1855 after the death of Tarisio.'¹⁵⁹ Charles Beare follows suit:

Vuillaume never sold it [*Le Messie*], and gave it to his son-in-law.¹⁶⁰

Vuillaume may never have managed to sell the violin, but he tried, in both 1862 and 1865. In addition, Beare's statement that Vuillaume gave the *Le Messie* violin to Delphin Alard is countered by the Hills, writing in 1891:

[...] and after [Vuillaume's] death (19th March 1875),¹⁶¹ in the absence of definite instructions as to its disposal, it [*Le Messie*] was inherited by his only children, Jeanne Emilie and Claire Marie, in common. [...] Vuillaume probably considered it unnecessary during his lifetime to present

¹⁴⁹ Alternatively identified as the 1862 International Exhibition, or the 1862 Great London Exposition, or *L'Exposition Universelle* (held at what is now the Natural History Museum, in South Kensington, London).

¹⁵⁰ Thus, just seven years after acquiring the *Le Messie* violin Vuillaume was trying to sell it.

¹⁵¹ Librairie de la Société des Ingénieurs Civils, Paris, 1863, p. 227; the translated quotation is by the present author.

¹⁵² Italicised text as in the original French: *véritable Stradivarius*.

¹⁵³ See Chapter 10.

¹⁵⁴ Georges Meier was a collector, then a dealer, who lived first in Bremen, Germany, then in London. It was from Georges Meier that Joseph Joachim obtained his *de Barrou* violin.

¹⁵⁵ Whether there were two copy-violins, or only one, is unclear.

¹⁵⁶ See Milliot p. 194 and p. 197.

¹⁵⁷ See Hill (1902) p. 270.

¹⁵⁸ Translated from vV/Campos p. 230; Vuillaume's wife, Adèle, died in October 1865.

¹⁵⁹ Translated from Millant p. 23.

¹⁶⁰ Translated from vV/Campos p. 27.

¹⁶¹ See also footnote 173.

Alard with this violin, as he was already well provided with instruments, and had the choice of some of the finest that passed through Vuillaume's hands.¹⁶²

Vuillaume closed the doors of his Paris shop in 1858, before 'retiring' to his mansion at Ternes. On 28th July 1858 he wrote to his London agent, Robert Cocks:

I am leaving the day-to-day business, maintaining only the artistic part of my work. Here is my address: 3 rue Demours aux Ternes. It is there, from now on, that you must address your enquiries.¹⁶³

One year later – 26th August 1859 – Vuillaume wrote again to Robert Cocks:

It is not true that I have retired from business. I have left rue Croix des Petits Champs so as not to be bothered with mundane matters. But I continue, and better than ever, to make violins and bows; for those I am always at your service.¹⁶⁴

Whether Vuillaume was personally making his violins and bows is questionable; in 1867 (according to Roger Millant) he had three violin makers working for him – Ludwig Neuner, Paul Bailly, and Alexandre Delanoy – together with two bow makers, F N Voirin and Charles Peccatte.¹⁶⁵

In his last years, Vuillaume became obsessed with completing 3,000 instruments before he died. To that end, he once again hired one of his old colleagues, Téléphore Barbé (1822-1892):

I am re-employing Téléphore to finish off my 3000 ... Today I glued Number 2960. Thus I need another 40. I will make them. I will take my measurements of length. I need extraordinary wood to revive my worn-out arms. Send me the wood quickly.¹⁶⁶

The last violin 'by' Vuillaume is dated 1875 and carries the number 3001.

It would be reasonable to expect that Vuillaume's commercial activities, developed over almost fifty years, would have generated enormous amounts of paperwork – records, receipts, documentation, copies of letters both received and sent – and it is equally reasonable to suppose that all the documentation would have been transferred, in 1858, to his retirement mansion at Ternes. Sylvette Milliot, working from 'an inventory, found in the Archives',¹⁶⁷ is able to offer a detailed description of the mansion. She identifies a ground-floor library with a velvet-covered table 'on which instruments could be placed for examination' and, on the first floor, Vuillaume's workshop. Vuillaume also fitted out a 'private workshop on the second floor, in the old bedroom previously used by a domestic servant.' Antoine Vidal describes this private room: 'Rising at dawn, he climbed up to a small studio to which he alone had a key, and set to work, [the work] consisting, above all, in re-touching, varnishing, and finishing the instruments which he had to deliver.'¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² Hill (1891) pp. 19-20.

¹⁶³ Translated from Milliot p. 184; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 185. In 1858 the suburb of Ternes lay outside the city walls of Paris. Today it lies north of the Arc de Triomphe, and the Rue Demours is now Rue Pierre Demours.

¹⁶⁴ Vuillaume's letter is photographically reproduced as Plate 75 in Millant, transcribed *ibid.* p. 53, and alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 121; there is no indication of source or ownership of the manuscript. See also Sylvette Milliot, in *vV/Campos* p. 56 and *vV/Campos/tr.* p. 56.

¹⁶⁵ See Millant p. 53, footnote 2.

¹⁶⁶ Translated from a letter to his brother Nicolas-François, 1873 (transcribed in *vV/Campos* p. 201; alternatively translated in *vV/Campos/tr.* p. 201).

¹⁶⁷ See Milliot p. 185.

¹⁶⁸ Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 263. Cf. Milliot p. 184: 'Vuillaume jealously guarded the key [to this room]; no-one but him had access. It is there that he finished off his instruments, and their varnish, in absolute secrecy.'

A letter, dated 16th February 1897 and signed ‘A.G.’ (who gives his address as ‘Lisbon’) was published in the 15th March 1897 issue of *The Violin Times*. ‘A.G.’ writes:

As regards Vuillaume, I am now quite sure that he kept a register of the instruments he made. Speaking about him to a friend of mine who is the owner of one of his violins, he told me that having purchased it in 1858, the violin was in need of some small repairs in 1872. He took it with him to Paris that year, and went to Vuillaume for advice. Vuillaume looked at the instrument, recognized it at once, and drew from a shelf a book which was his register. Turning over the leaves he soon found the entry of it, and gave full particulars about the year it had been made, the person to whom it had been sold, and the amount it had brought. All the statements were correct. Some days after the gentleman in question had got back his violin repaired, the workshop of Vuillaume took fire, and was nearly wholly burnt down. It is probable that the register was destroyed in the flames.¹⁶⁹

Ernest Doring quotes this letter, and comments: ‘Confirmation of the event related [the fire] is not at hand; the facts are probably to be found in files of Parisian newspapers of the time.’¹⁷⁰ Searches by Roger Millant evidently produced no confirmation: ‘I have not been able to locate any record [of the fire] in the newspapers of the time’.¹⁷¹ Vuillaume’s name appears just once in the more-than-400 pages of the *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* of 1872, and that is in connection with the 1872 Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments in London (see Chapter 9); there is no mention of Vuillaume’s workshop being burned down. The pages of the *Revue et Gazette Musicale* from 1873 and 1874 are equally devoid of any mention of a fire at Vuillaume’s mansion.

If ‘the workshop of Vuillaume took fire’ then, according to Milliot’s description of the mansion, the fire started on the first floor. The registers were most likely kept in the ground-floor library, where Vuillaume received customers, and ‘it is probable that the register was destroyed in the fire’. Thus the fire apparently raged through the mansion on at least two floors. It is implausible that such a fire, fed by wooden furniture, floor coverings, heavy curtains, and lots of wooden instruments, would not have quickly destroyed the entire building. Given Vuillaume’s national and international reputation it is also implausible that such a fire would not have been mentioned in Parisian newspapers. Such destruction would also have all but prevented Vuillaume from making any further instruments during the final three years of his life, yet production continued, and Sylvette Milliot states that his house, at 3 rue Demours aux Ternes, was sold, in 1880 – eight years after the ‘fire’ – for 445,000 francs.¹⁷²

The author of the 1897 letter to *The Violin Times* concludes with the following information about his friend’s violin:

The instrument I refer to is a modern antique imitation of Guarnerius, and bears the label:

Antonius Superios Cremonensis
Alumnus Joseph Guarnerius Anno 1797

The name Superios was invented by Vuillaume. It is known that many of his instruments were provided with [such?] labels, not always so harmless as the one just quoted.

Neither Ernest Doring nor Roger Millant quotes this final part of ‘A.G.’’s published letter.

¹⁶⁹ *The Violin Times*, Vol. 4, No. 41, 15th March 1897, p. 88, *More about Vuillaume*.

¹⁷⁰ Whistler and Doring p. 27.

¹⁷¹ Translated from Millant p. 51.

¹⁷² See Milliot p. 260.

After Vuillaume's death in 1875¹⁷³ the *Le Messie* violin was offered to his brother, Nicolas-François,¹⁷⁴ for 12,000 francs but he declined to buy.¹⁷⁵ In 1877 Delphin Alard bought the half share of the violin held by his wife's sister, Marie-Claire, and thus became, through his wife, Jeanne-Emilie, the full owner of the violin. Delphin Alard died in 1888 and the violin became the property of his wife and their two married daughters, Madame Guesnet and Madame Croué. One year after the death of Jeanne-Emilie Alard (21st March 1889) the violin was sold to W. E. Hill & Sons by Henri Croué, acting on behalf of his wife and his wife's sister. The price was 50,000 francs (£2,000).

In 1880 an auction was held at the Hotel Drouot, in Paris, of the remaining items from the Vuillaume workshop, which included a copy of the *Le Messie* violin (Vuillaume's instrument number 2508), thirty Stradivari-model violins, eight Guarneri-model violins, three Stradivari-model violas, and five Stradivari-model cellos, all 'in the white' – not varnished – together with dozens of pernambuco 'blanks' for making bows.

Antoine Vidal's 1876 assessment of Vuillaume was:

*Aussi l'a-t-il étudié et analysé jusque dans ses plus minces détails: qualité des bois, épaisseurs des tables, hauteur des voûtes, dimensions de tout genre, volutes, vernis, conditions acoustiques, rien ne lui a échappé; tout a été tellement fouillé par lui, qu'il en est arrivé à connaître Stradivari, on oserait presque dire, mieux que le grand artiste ne se connaissait lui-même.*¹⁷⁶

He studied and analysed [Stradivari's work] down to the smallest details: quality of wood, thickness of front plates, height of the arching, dimensions of all types, volutes, varnish, acoustic qualities, nothing escaped him; everything was so extensively studied that he arrived at knowing Stradivari, one might almost say, better than the great artist knew himself.

The Hills, writing in 1891, closely echo Vidal:

[...] he [Vuillaume] acquired such an intimate knowledge and judgment of Stradivari's work in every detail, that he might almost be said to be better acquainted with that maker's instruments than the master himself.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Roger Millant (Millant p. 17) states that Vuillaume died on 19th March 1875; the obituary in *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* (issue dated 28th February 1875) states 19th February 1875.

¹⁷⁴ Violin maker and dealer established in Brussels.

¹⁷⁵ See Millant p. 58 and p. 127.

¹⁷⁶ Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, p. 260.

¹⁷⁷ Hill (1891) p. 17.