

Chapter 8

Rocca, Vuillaume, Ole Bull, and copies

A linkage is sometimes claimed between Luigi Tarisio and the violin maker Giuseppe Antonio Rocca (1807-1865). Rocca learned his craft with Giovanni Francesco Pressenda in Turin, but then, during a somewhat tempestuous life, worked independently in Turin, Genoa, and again in Turin. Around 1843, it is said, Tarisio showed his *Le Messie* violin to Rocca, and, as a result, Rocca changed his personal constructional style for violins and, instead, copied the physical characteristics of the *Le Messie*. This stylistic change is used by some to indicate that Rocca was in close contact with Tarisio and that Tarisio owned *Le Messie*. The Hills, writing in 1891, comment:

There can be no doubt that the Salabue [*Messiah*] Violin has exercised a strong influence upon modern copyists. The Turin maker, Pressenda (1777 to 1854), who was acquainted with Count Salabue, and his pupil Rocca (d. 1862), who knew Tarisio, were evidently familiar with the instrument.¹ Rocca in particular would seem to have made it his ideal, for we find reproduced in nearly all his copies of Stradivari the characteristic sharp *bordering ridge*,² slanting sound holes, and general flat model [arching] of the Salabue.³

Tim Ingles, of Sotheby's, offers the (slightly uncertain) comment that:

At some point he [Rocca] must have made the acquaintance of the collector Luigi Tarisio, who had acquired much of Count Cozio's collection in 1827.⁴ It was through Tarisio that Rocca became acquainted with the 'Messie' Stradivari of 1716 and the 'Alard' Guarneri del Gesù of 1742, and he made numerous copies of both instruments.⁵

In their 1902 monograph the Hills make no comment about Rocca's violins, while George Hart merely lists Rocca (with dates of 1837-1863) and adds: 'Chiefly followed the pattern of Stradivarius'.⁶

At the Violin Society of America Convention in 2000 Philip Kass contributed the following:

At the beginning of Rocca's career his pattern was much more like Pressenda's, and then in 1843 there are two instruments that are dramatically different, and dramatically good copies of the Messiah Strad, both with original labels.⁷ He adjusted the model slightly, but only very slightly, and used that Stradivari pattern for the rest of his life.

I think there must be a pretty firm indication it was the Messiah, or at any rate that it was a violin Tarisio owned [...].⁸

On 22nd November 1984 a 'Joseph' Rocca violin was auctioned at Sotheby's (Lot no. 127).⁹ The violin had 'its original rubbed label' with the date 1842 – thus one year prior to the 'dramatically good

¹ No evidence is offered by the Hills for the acquaintance between Pressenda and Count Cozio, the acquaintance between Rocca and Tarisio, or the familiarity of both Pressenda and Rocca with the *Le Messie* violin.

² Hill emphasis.

³ Hill (1891) pp. 25-26.

⁴ No evidence for this acquisition is offered.

⁵ Ingles p. 441.

⁶ Hart (1909 revised edition of the 1884 publication, p. 164). No information on Rocca is provided in the 1884 edition of Hart's work.

⁷ Kass gives no details of these instruments.

⁸ JoVSA (XVII, 3) p. 174.

⁹ Sotheby's guide price for this violin was £18,000-£22,000; the successful bid was £33,000.

copies of the Messiah Strad' identified by Philip Kass. The Sotheby's catalogue – *Highly Important Musical Instruments* – includes two colour photographs of this violin, front and back, and specifies the length as 355mm (but this was almost certainly a tape measurement, and a calliper equivalent would be approximately 353.5mm). The catalogue states that the instrument is 'Sold with the certificate of W. E. Hill & Sons, London, dated 5th May 1916.'¹⁰ From the evidence of the Sotheby photographs, the back plate of the violin is in one piece, with very irregular flames rising from left to right across the entire width. It is impossible to learn anything about the degree of arching of the front or back plates from the two portrait photographs in the catalogue, but the profile of the borders of the violin appears to be pronounced and entirely rounded between the outer line of the purfling and the extremities of the plates. The *f*-holes on the violin slope outwards only very slightly (Plate 22).



Plate 22: G A Rocca, 1842 violin (Sotheby's auction, November 1984).
Image by permission of Sotheby's, London.

¹⁰ The text of the Hills' certificate is not provided.

The same Rocca 1842 violin appeared on the Cozio.com website under the identification number 7927. The accompanying text quoted by Cozio.com came from Eric Blot: ‘The similarity of Rocca’s violin to the original seems to indicate that he was able to copy the model directly from the ‘Messiah’ violin.’¹¹ The physical evidence to support this statement is not convincing, and the 1842 label predates the year proposed by Philip Kass for Rocca’s change of constructional style.

On 15th November 1999 a ‘Josef’ Rocca violin of 1843, with a two-piece back and flames which descend from the centre joint, was auctioned at Phillips’ auction house in London, the violin being accompanied by the ‘Received Invoice of John & Arthur Beare, Wardour St., London, November 11th 1925, stating: “A genuine old Italian Violin by Josef Rocca of Turin, Stradivari model guaranteed genuine - £230”.’¹² The front-plate colour photograph included in the Phillips catalogue¹³ shows a treble *f*-hole which slopes slightly outwards but a bass *f*-hole which is more upright (and shorter than its partner). The profile of the violin’s edges, especially in the C-bouts, appears exceedingly rounded, not at all with a ‘sharp bordering ridge’ (Plate 23).

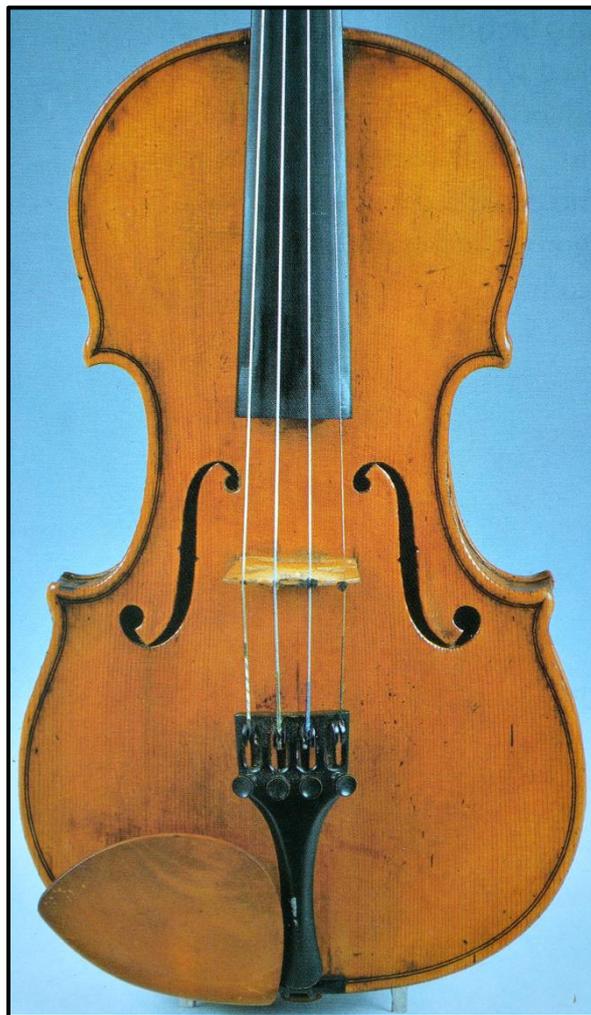


Plate 23: G A Rocca, 1843 violin (Phillips auction, November 1999).
Image by permission of Bonhams Auctioneers, Musical Instruments Division.

¹¹ *Liuteria Italiana, Volume IV, 1800-1950, 150 Years of Violin Making in Piedmont* (no page number was specified by Cozio.com for the quotation); the Cozio.com website was accessed in July 2011.

¹² The auction guide price for this violin was £60,000-£70,000; the successful bid was £128,000. This violin appeared on the Cozio.com website with the identification number 6427.

¹³ *Fine Musical Instruments*, 15th November 1999, Lot 127, pp. 52-53.

The Phillips catalogue defines the measurements as UB 165mm, LB 205mm and a Length of 355mm/14 inches but these are likely to be tape measurements.¹⁴ Calliper equivalents would likely be UB 163.8, LB 203.8, Length 353.5mm (calliper measurements of the *Messiah* back plate are 167.5, 208, and 356mm). The flatness, or otherwise, of the plate arching cannot be investigated from the portrait photographs. It is not known whether this instrument was one of the two identified by Philip Kass as being 1843 copies of the *Le Messie* violin, but the dimensional evidence points away from this violin having any constructional connection with the violin currently displayed at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

High-resolution life-size photographs (as well as outline tracings) of two Rocca violins, the first from 1844 (identified as ‘Stradivari model’), the second from 1849 (‘Guarneri model’) were published in 2000. The publication’s commentary was written by Philip Kass:

Rocca followed two basic models throughout his entire career, both established in his repertoire quite early. These were based on a Stradivari, traditionally regarded as the “Messiah”, and a Guarneri violin that is likely the example known today as the “Alard”.¹⁵

This Cremonabooks publication was contemporaneous with the comments made by Kass at the aforementioned VSA meeting, yet his Cremonabooks commentary is noticeably cautious, careful to avoid definitive statements: ‘based on’; ‘traditionally regarded’; ‘is likely’. In his 2001 ‘Holes in History’ article in *The Strad* Kass expresses himself with even more circumspection:

From about 1844 onward, Rocca consistently made use of two violin forms, one appearing to be the ‘Messiah’, the other appearing to be the Alard Guarneri ‘del Gesù’, both of which are considered to have been in Tarisio’s collection.¹⁶

Rocca’s 1844 ‘Stradivari model’ violin (in the Kass/Cremonabooks publication) has bout and length measurements (calliper defined) of:

UB (back/front) 165.5/166mm, CB 108.7/109.2mm, LB 207/206.6mm
Body length (back/front) 355/354mm.

The *Messiah* violin measurements are 167.5/167, 108.3/108.9, 208/207.5, and 356/356mm.¹⁷

The comparative measurements are not entirely in agreement but, nonetheless, the violin appears (from the Cremonabooks’ photographs) to have slightly ‘ski-ramped’ edges. The dimensional discrepancies could be explained away with the aforementioned commentary from Kass that ‘[Rocca] adjusted the model slightly, but only very slightly’, but the remainder of his commentary – ‘and used that Stradivari pattern for the rest of his life’ – suggests that Rocca’s subsequent ‘Stradivari model’ violins, post 1843/44, should all display very similar features (as is suggested by the earlier quotation from the Hills). However, Tim Ingles illustrates four such Rocca violins, from 1847, 1850, 1852, and 1854, and the differences between these violins are more noticeable than any similarities.¹⁸

With specific reference to the distinctive outwards sweep of the *Messiah* violin’s *f*-holes¹⁹ (which can be defined by measuring the ‘inside’ gap between the *f*-holes’ upper eyes, the inside gap between the lower eyes, and subtracting the first measurement from the second) there ought to be close

¹⁴ The identical Cozio.com measurements were probably sourced from this Phillips Catalogue entry.

¹⁵ Kass/Cremonabooks (individual sheets of high-quality paper, no pagination).

¹⁶ ‘Holes in history’, *The Strad*, August 2001, p. 864.

¹⁷ Measurements from the March 2011 *Messiah* poster published by *The Strad*.

¹⁸ Ingles pp. 442-451. From the evidence of the Ingles photographs only the 1852 and 1854 violins appear to have edgework similar to that found on the *Messiah* violin.

¹⁹ See Chapter 12 for further consideration of *f*-hole eye gaps.

correspondence between the measurements of the Rocca 1844 ‘Stradivari model’ violin (Kass/Cremonabooks) and the *Messiah* violin, and, following Philip Kass, further consistent evidence in the Stradivari-model violins made by Rocca in subsequent years. However, the gaps between the *f*-hole eyes of Rocca’s 1844 violin are (upper) 40mm and (lower) 118.25mm, producing an enormous difference of 78.25mm, whereas the gaps on the *Messiah* violin are 41.9mm and 116.7mm, producing a much smaller (though still substantial) difference of 74.8mm.

Rocca’s 1842 violin (Sotheby’s) has eye gaps of 41.6mm and 110.9mm; a difference of 69.3mm.

Rocca’s 1843 violin (Phillips) has eye gaps of 41.2mm and 111.6mm; a difference of 70.4mm.

The four Rocca violins illustrated by Tim Ingles have the following eye gap differences:

1847	70.2mm
1850	73.1mm ²⁰
1852	77.3mm ²¹
1854	65.6mm. ²²

One further Giuseppe Rocca violin, from 1856 (and clearly in Stradivari, rather than Guarneri, style), is illustrated by Giovanni Accornero, and reveals an eye gap difference of 72.5mm.²³

The variation in measurement revealed by these eight examples perhaps weakens attempts to connect Rocca’s style of construction with one particular Stradivari violin. Philip Kass, in 2001, commented:

[...] it is also unfortunate that Rocca’s idea of a copy was oriented entirely around a general form, liberally interpreted [...] rather than a literal copy which would act as a proof of their association.²⁴

The derivation of Giuseppe Rocca’s post-1843 violins from the example of the *Le Messie* violin is inconsistent; perhaps the claimed relationship between Rocca and Luigi Tarisio should be viewed cautiously.

Charles Beare has shed some light on possible relations between Rocca and Vuillaume and, indirectly, on the efforts made by Vuillaume to obtain very old wood for his instruments:

My father told me that, in 1848, Giuseppe Rocca had used the same wood as Vuillaume, taken from an old bridge in Turin.²⁵ I have seen some Vuillaume [instruments] made from that wood. It was certainly of very good quality for sonority which explains why it was used.²⁶

In a letter of 1866 Vuillaume wrote to a customer: ‘Three months ago I went to Vienna to find a piece of wood. I travelled 720 leagues. What do you think of that?’²⁷ In another letter, of 1875, he explained that the front-plate wood on a customer’s instrument had come from a sideboard bought previously in Italy; the Italian seller was apparently incredulous when, the business transaction being completed, Vuillaume removed and took away with him only the top shelf of the sideboard, leaving the rest

²⁰ ‘Typical of Rocca’s Stradivari copies’ (Ingles p. 441).

²¹ ‘The 1852 *Messie* copy [...]’ (Ingles p. 441).

²² All measurements extrapolated from the photographs in Ingles pp. 442-451.

²³ Measurement extrapolated from Accornero *et al.* pp. 90-91.

²⁴ ‘Holes in history’, *The Strad*, August 2001, p. 864.

²⁵ Cf. Ingles p. 441: ‘Some of his [Rocca’s] instruments are made from a worm-infested plank said to have been taken from a bridge in Turin [...]’

²⁶ vV/Campos p. 25.

²⁷ Translated from Millant p. 19; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 87. 720 leagues is equivalent, approximately, to 1,800 miles.

behind.²⁸ The 1998-99 Paris Vuillaume Exhibition catalogue included a photographic reproduction of an unfinished, undated, autobiographical statement written by Vuillaume. In this document he writes that he made several journeys to the Swiss valleys of Stanz d'Engelberg (near Lucerne, central Switzerland) and Muotathal (south-east of Zurich) to find very old pieces of wood – pieces of furniture, staircases, flooring, tables, chairs – which he could use for making instruments.²⁹ Antoine Vidal, writing in 1876, comments:

[Vuillaume's] researches on the quality of wood to use were incessant. He had travelled [across] Switzerland, the Tyrol, Illyria,³⁰ buying maple and spruce [tree-trunks] of great age, with the bark still attached,³¹ old furniture, old floorings: all this, transformed by him into violins and cellos, provided the results which were the source of his useful and intelligent observations, and he finished by acquiring the proof that new wood, dried in pieces 3 to 4 centimetres thick for about ten years, was preferable to all others.³²

Vidal's information, that Vuillaume seasoned his wood 'for about ten years', is closely echoed by a present-day German supplier of spruce tonewood: 'air dried – for up to 12 years'.³³

The 1864 English-translated publication of *Antoine Stradivari, Luthier Célèbre* included an inserted advertisement:

Some two thousand or more of M. Vuillaume's instruments have already been sold, and have been, after a little use, preferred, even by good judges, to the genuine old instruments. In these copies the proportions, thicknesses, &c. of the old violins are preserved with scrupulous exactness; the wood (sought out with much labour and at great expense, amongst the weather-beaten châlets of Switzerland) possesses the requisite qualities of age and consequent resonance, and the varnishes have the purity, colour, and fine and limpid appearance of the old Italian varnish.³⁴

However, the Hills comment:

We may here add a word as to the delusion that material taken from buildings, such as for instance Swiss châlets – in some cases centuries old – is preferable to that cut and seasoned during a lesser, but still a sufficient, number of years. We have tried both kinds – Vuillaume did so repeatedly – and we fail to find that the former possesses any real advantage over the latter; in fact, our opinion is rather in favour of the more youthful wood.³⁵

The Hills' negative opinion of 1902 – Vuillaume, it is implied, was suffering from a 'delusion' – had hardened by the time of their 1931 volume on the Guarneri family:

Use, which implies age as well, is the real factor in maturing the tone: for age without use, though it does season the fabric, cannot to the same extent improve its sound, or promote the necessary fusion between player and instrument. The negative result obtained by making violins of

²⁸ See Millant p. 19 and p. 87.

²⁹ See vV/Campos pp. 2-3.

³⁰ Illyria is the western Balkan area, its coastline facing the Adriatic Sea. Roger Millant (Millant p. 18) identifies the same geographical areas.

³¹ Vidal's *sapins vieillis en grume* can also mean 'in logs'.

³² Translated from Vidal (1876-78) Volume 1, pp. 260-261. An alternative translation appears in Whistler and Doring p. 63. Roger Millant (Millant p. 18) echoes Vidal's information, as does Franz Farga (Farga p. 89): 'Finally, [J-BV] came to the conclusion that new resonant wood, cut in boards 1½ inches thick and dried for ten years, met all requirements.'

³³ http://www.alpentonholz.de/produkte_en_n.html (accessed June 2012).

³⁴ The advertisement was inserted opposite p. xiv of the 1864 Introduction. The advertisement is also reproduced in Whistler and Doring p. 3.

³⁵ Hill (1902) p. 165.

exceptionally old wood, an experiment tried by several French makers, is, so we believe, sufficient confirmation that our opinion is correct.³⁶

The nineteenth-century Norwegian violinist, Ole Bull, in addition to being an internationally-famous soloist, studied and practised the art of violin-making under Vuillaume's guidance. Bull was well known in Paris as a performer but carried a slightly mysterious quality about him, originating as he did from a country which, to most Parisians in the mid nineteenth century, was barely known. When, after a visit to his homeland, Bull returned to Paris in the summer of 1848, his arrival was announced in the *Revue et Gazette Musicale*, and even his luggage was mentioned:

*Ole Bull, l'excentrique violoniste est toujours à Paris. Il est revenu parmi nous pour se fabriquer lui-même, dans les ateliers de M. Vuillaume, un violon, pour lequel il emploie du bois âgé de 200 ans, qu'il a apporté de sa patrie, la Norvège.*³⁷

Ole Bull, the extraordinary violinist, is back in Paris. He has returned amongst us in order to make, by himself, in the workshops of M. Vuillaume, a violin, for which he is using 200-year-old wood that he has brought from his home country, Norway.

For Ole Bull to make a violin using spruce from a 200-year-old tree which had only recently been felled would hardly be of interest to anyone. A more interesting alternative (and one which would have been much more newsworthy) would be that the tree-trunk segment which Bull brought with him from Norway – at least 700 miles³⁸ – came from a tree which had been felled two hundred years earlier and perhaps used within a seventeenth-century Norwegian building of known date of construction. Such a tree trunk would be all but contemporaneous with the 'youngest ring' dendrochronological dates established for the growth rings on either side of the centre joint of the *Messiah* violin's front plate.³⁹ The news item in the *Revue* might have been nothing more than a piece of marketing 'puff' designed and 'placed' by Vuillaume, but the essentials, at least, were genuine, for on 12th July 1848 Ole Bull wrote to his wife:

I have finished the violin at Vuillaume's,⁴⁰ and it surpasses my expectations. It has a voice both powerful and sweet; it is very comfortable to hold, not tiring [...].⁴¹

On 23rd July 1848 the *Revue et Gazette Musicale* announced:

Nous avons annoncé qu'Ole Bull s'occupait de fabriquer un violon sur un nouveau modèle, et maintenant nous pouvons dire que nous avons vu et entendu cet instrument, don't le son est puissant et admirable. Néanmoins, l'artiste est encore en train de perfectionner son œuvre, et il y a lieu d'espérer qu'il parviendra bientôt à se satisfaire lui-même: quant à ses auditeurs, ce n'est pas une question.

We have announced that Ole Bull was making a violin based on a new model and now we can say that we have seen and heard this instrument and its tone is powerful and admirable. Nevertheless,

³⁶ Hill (1931) p. 111.

³⁷ *Revue et Gazette Musicale*, 9th July 1848, p. 210.

³⁸ The straight-line distance from Oslo to Paris.

³⁹ See Chapter 15, footnote 4 for an explanation of 'youngest ring' dendrochronological dates.

⁴⁰ Vuillaume's workshop personnel probably gave Bull a lot of assistance.

⁴¹ Bull's French-language letter is quoted in vV/Campos p. 230 (referencing the University of Bergen, Norway) and in Milliot p. 132; alternative translations are in vV/Campos/tr. p. 230, and Milliot p. 133. A further translation (and a partial reproduction of the original manuscript of Bull's letter) is in the article 'Great Minds' by Amnon Weinstein, published in *The Strad*, January 2002, p. 55, referencing the Museet Lysøen, Norway. The present author's translation of the extract from Bull's letter text is by permission of the Museet Lysøen, Norway.

the artist is still in the process of perfecting his work and it is hoped that he will soon achieve personal satisfaction; as for his listeners this cannot be doubted.

For someone such as Vuillaume, who had been sourcing very old wood from locations across Europe, the 1848 arrival of Ole Bull and his seventeenth-century Norwegian tree trunk (if that is what it was) must have been a moment of especial excitement.

Even today it is still possible to locate very old spruce wood. In the November 2006 issue of *The Strad*, the Czech violin maker Alexander Švýcarský reported:

Last year I found some 300-year-old spruce from the south of the Czech Republic, an area that's famous for this kind of wood. I met a guy who owns a building that dates from the early eighteenth century – he was doing some reconstruction and so I was able to buy this really, really good old spruce that was being replaced.⁴²

Henri Grissino-Mayer,⁴³ at the 29th Convention of the Violin Society of America (November 2001), commented on the sourcing of very old wood:

I think everyone in the audience is familiar with Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume, who would go to antique shops and obtain old wood in the hope that he could duplicate the resonance and quality of instruments, especially those by Antonio Stradivari. Is it possible that he could have obtained wood from the 1600s? It is possible. But it was also as possible for him to have obtained wood from the 1400s and 1300s. If he obtained wood that happened to have an outer ring that was contemporary with Stradivari, that would be a coincidence, because all throughout Europe there are many, many old houses and old pieces of furniture. [...] There are bogs where you can find wood. There's plenty of old wood all over Europe.⁴⁴

Quite how many violins Vuillaume made which were specifically copies of the *Le Messie* violin is uncertain. Roger Millant lists the following as 'the more noteworthy':⁴⁵

1. Number 2236 of 1860
2. Number 2374 of 1861
3. Number 2455 of 1863 (number 10918 on Cozio.com)
4. Number 2509 of 1863
5. Number 2541 of 1864 (number 10926 on Cozio.com)
6. Number 2556 of 1864 (number 10927 on Cozio.com)⁴⁶
7. Number 2594 of 1865
8. No number copy of 1868, the *Garcin* violin⁴⁷ (number 10865 on Cozio.com)
9. Number 2853 of 1871
10. Number 2936 of 1873, the *King of Portugal* violin (number 10958 on Cozio.com)

No. 8: the *Garcin* violin

First internal label *Imitation précise du Stradivarius du
Comte Cozio di Salabue daté 1716
Le "Messie" fait par*

⁴² *The Strad*, November 2006, p. 21.

⁴³ American dendrochronologist; see Chapter 15.

⁴⁴ Grissino-Mayer *et al.* (2001/2003) p. 169.

⁴⁵ Millant p. 59. The four-digit numbers are Vuillaume's.

⁴⁶ Monochrome photographs (front and back) are in Millant, Plates 73 and 74.

⁴⁷ The violin was newly bought by Jules Garcin from Vuillaume in 1868. Garcin had been a pupil of Delphin Alard.

Second internal label *Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume à Paris*
 3, rue Demours-Ternes⁴⁸
 [with date of 1868 inked by hand]

There are differences between a copy violin which imitates the general physical and visual characteristics of a source instrument, and a replica where the maker slavishly and exactly copies each and every element of the source instrument. The subtle, nuanced, differences between ‘based on’, ‘after’, and ‘copy of’ are often difficult to define. If, for example, Vuillaume was making a copy of *Le Messie* did he need to source and cut maple wood for the back plate so that it would be as close as possible, in appearance, to the downward-sloping flames (centre to edge) on the *Le Messie* violin? If Vuillaume copied the outward slant of the *f*-holes on *Le Messie* but the length of his *f*-holes was fractionally shorter or longer does that difference deny use of the term ‘replica’? If Vuillaume’s thicknesses for the front plate and back plate were not exactly the same as on *Le Messie* would that matter (especially since no-one, without specialised equipment, could ever discover the differences)?

In March 2011 *The Strad* published a large information poster for the *Messiah* violin. One side of the poster is entirely taken up with outline tracings of the violin together with approximately two hundred individual measurements: forty-five locations at which the thickness of the front plate was measured, the same for the back plate, twenty measurements relating to the shape and positioning of the *f*-holes, forty measurements of every feature of the scroll, ten drawn profiles of the front and back archings, etc. While there are some violin makers who wish to follow the exactitude of this data (which is one reason why *The Strad* publishes such information) most are content to follow only the most important features and measurements.

Comparison between the wood used by Vuillaume on his 1868 *Garcin* violin⁴⁹ and the wood used for the *Le Messie* violin reveals:

- the back plate of Vuillaume’s *Garcin* violin has flames which ascend from the centre joint rather than descend (and are much less distinct than on the *Le Messie* violin)
- the flames on the treble-side ribs of the *Garcin* violin slope towards the tail-piece end of the violin whereas the treble-side rib flames on the *Le Messie* violin slope toward the neck of the violin
- the maple wood used by Vuillaume for the neck and scroll of the *Garcin* violin is, if anything, *more* distinctive than the wood used for the *Le Messie* violin (judging by Sylvette Milliot’s photograph)⁵⁰
- Vuillaume has cut his *Garcin* *f*-holes with a noticeable outwards sweep – especially the treble *f*-hole – but the holes are not the same shape as those on the *Le Messie* violin.

Despite these differences Vuillaume described his *Garcin* violin as an ‘*imitation précise*’.

No. 10: the *King of Portugal* violin

First internal label *Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume à Paris*
 3 rue Demours-Ternes

Second internal label *Imitation précise du Stradivarius du*
 Comte Cozio di Salabue daté 1716
 *Le ‘Messie’ fait par J.B.Vuillaume 1873*⁵¹

⁴⁸ Label texts from Milliot p. 439; also viewable on www.Tarisio.com.

⁴⁹ Colour photographs are in Milliot pp. 439-442.

⁵⁰ See Milliot p. 442.

⁵¹ Label texts from Milliot p. 454.

A letter accompanying this violin states that King Pedro V of Portugal ordered Vuillaume to make an exact copy of the “Messiah” Stradivari since the original was not for sale. W. E. Hill & Sons’ certificate states, “This violin which reproduces the features of the Stradivari known as ‘The Messiah’, is in a practically perfect state of preservation.” Vuillaume is supposed to have used wood from some left by Stradivari.⁵² And since I have held the original “Messiah” in my hands I say, “Well done, Vuillaume”.⁵³

Vuillaume’s *King of Portugal* violin was included in the Sotheby’s October 2012 Vuillaume Exhibition.⁵⁴ Applying the *Messiah* violin’s back-plate length of 356mm to the Sotheby’s back-plate photograph produces extrapolated bout measurements of 167.7, 109.3, and 209.2mm (*Messiah* 167.5, 108.3, and 208mm). Vuillaume’s *f*-holes are a very close copy in terms of shaping and orientation, and careful measurement reveals *f*-hole apex-to-apex wing lengths of 72.9mm (bass side) and 71.9mm (treble side); the *Messiah* violin’s *f*-hole apex-to-apex wing lengths are 72.5mm (bass) and 72.2mm (treble). For this violin, perhaps because it was being made for a King, Vuillaume evidently made a particular effort to replicate the quality of the back plate of *Le Messie*. The Sotheby photographs reveal a flamed maple back plate which is remarkably similar to that of the *Le Messie* violin; the distinct flames descend from the centre line and are only very slightly narrower than those on *Le Messie*.⁵⁵

In addition to the instruments discussed above, there are further Vuillaume violins which are evidently copies of the *Le Messie* violin in terms of measurement and proportion but, apparently, are not labelled as *imitation précise*.

1. Vuillaume’s most extraordinary copy of the *Le Messie* violin is dated 1856 (Vuillaume number 2173), a violin which was also part of the Sotheby’s October 2012 Vuillaume Exhibition (see Plate 24a). The text commentary in the Sotheby’s catalogue states:

This violin is one of the earliest copies of ‘Le Messie’ and also one of the most accurate. Vuillaume obviously went to great lengths to match the wood of the front and back, and his attention to detail even extended to matching Stradivari’s slightly overshot purfling mitre on the lower bass corner on the front.⁵⁶

⁵² This claim is impossible to verify (and sounds implausible).

⁵³ *World of Strings*, Spring 1970, William Moennig & Son, Philadelphia, USA. The King of Portugal in 1873 was *Luis I*.

⁵⁴ ‘An Exhibition of the work of J.B.Vuillaume’, 25th-30th October 2012, Sotheby’s, London. Front and back colour photographs were provided on pp. 46-47 of the exhibition catalogue.

⁵⁵ Permission to reproduce an image of Vuillaume’s 1873 *King of Portugal* violin was unobtainable.

⁵⁶ Sotheby’s October 2012 exhibition catalogue, pp. 12-13. The author of the catalogue text is un-named but assumed to be Tim Ingles (then Head of the Music Instrument Department at Sotheby’s).



Plate 24a: J-B Vuillaume, 1856 violin, number 2173

Image by permission of Ingles & Hayday.

In his attention to detail Vuillaume has

- matched the *Le Messie* violin's back-plate scuff marks on the back plate of his own violin
- selected spruce for the front plate which is of great longitudinal regularity yet also displays a pale band of narrow growth rings on either side of the centre joint (exactly as on the *Le Messie* violin; see Plate 24b)
- replicated the 'ski-ramp' edges
- replicated the tiny circular area of damage on the bass-side upper bout of the front plate
- attached the neck to the sound-box in a 'Baroque' manner (as on the *Le Messie* violin).⁵⁷

⁵⁷ See Chapter 11 for further information on neck/body joints.



Plate 24b: The *Messiah* violin, front plate
Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

The only discrepancies between the source instrument and the copy are that Vuillaume evidently could not find spruce with a longitudinal resin pocket (to abut the right-hand side of the fingerboard) and has refrained from carving the eyes of his scroll in the asymmetrical style found on the *Le Messie* violin. The varnish on Vuillaume's violin is a miracle of replication; indeed, this violin could exchange places with the violin inside the Ashmolean Museum's glass cabinet and almost no-one would notice that a substitution had been made. Vuillaume's achievement is powerful evidence of his abilities as a maker and as a copyist; it also raises the possibility that if Vuillaume could copy his *Le Messie* so accurately there is no reason why he should not also have created the *Le Messie*. Writing of Stradivari's 1719 *Zahn* violin Charles Beare has commented:

In type it recalls the celebrated 'Messiah' violin of 1716, now at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England, and it shares many of the visual features that were much admired and copied by J. B. Vuillaume and his followers in the nineteenth century. One should hastily add, however, that there are also very significant characteristics that the imitators never managed to reproduce!⁵⁸

With this 1856 violin it is difficult to identify any lack of reproductive ability in Vuillaume's workmanship.

⁵⁸ Beare p. 228.

2. The 1998-99 Paris Vuillaume Exhibition Catalogue (p. 233) displays another violin of 1856 (Vuillaume number 2176) which the catalogue identifies as a copy of the *Messiah* violin.

The Paris catalogue measurements	UB 168mm	CB 112 ⁵⁹	LB 208	Length 356
Extrapolation of Paris photograph ⁶⁰	168.1	108.4	207.9	(354.5)
<i>Messiah</i> (<i>The Strad</i> measurements)	167/167.5	108.9/108.3	207.5/208	356

In terms of the major measurements this violin is a replica. The catalogue text commentary indicates that the neck is set into the body in “baroque style”, the violin has ‘imitation red-orange varnish’, and it has back-plate flames ‘descending towards the edges’ (but these flames are narrower than those on the *Messiah* violin). Only the bass-side *f*-hole is photographed in the catalogue and here the wood is perhaps less elegantly cut than on the *Messiah* violin.

3. The same Paris Vuillaume Exhibition Catalogue (pp. 236-237) also displays a violin of 1870 with immaculate varnish (Vuillaume number 2809)⁶¹ which is also identified as a *Messiah* copy.

The Paris catalogue measurements	168	107	208	355 ⁶²
<i>Messiah</i> (<i>The Strad</i> measurements)	167/167.5	108.9/108.3	207.5/208	356

The treble *f*-hole length is 72.3mm (*Messiah* is 72.2); the bass *f*-hole is 72.6mm (*Messiah* is 72.5). In terms of its main measurements this violin is an even closer copy of the *Messiah* violin than Vuillaume’s violin number 2176 (above).

This 2809 violin was also exhibited at the Sotheby’s October 2012 Vuillaume Exhibition (photographed on p. 37 of the catalogue) with, on the inside front cover of the catalogue, a photographic reproduction of the receipt (dated 10th July 1870) issued by Vuillaume to Monsieur A. Goguel, the commissioner of this violin:

Monsieur A. Goguel

1 [one] violin which I have made especially for him and to which I have given the name of St Paul⁶³ because it is the exact reproduction, in sight and in sound, of the famous violin of Stradivarius known under the name of *Le Messie*, and that I have given to its manufacture the most painstaking attention so that it is as close as possible to the masterpiece of the master.

Received the sum of four hundred francs for the price of this instrument. [signed] Vuillaume.⁶⁴

The 1998-99 Paris Vuillaume Exhibition Catalogue does not provide any details of this violin’s label-text. However, the catalogue does state that the front plate of the violin is made in one piece (unlike the *Messiah* violin), the growth rings become narrower towards the right (unlike the *Messiah*), and that the back plate is made of one piece of maple (unlike the *Messiah*). Both *f*-holes are near-identical to the *Messiah* – perhaps with a fractionally narrower transverse opening (see Plate 25).

⁵⁹ ‘112mm’ suggests that these are all measurements made with a flexible tape, lying on the arching.

⁶⁰ Assuming that a calliper measurement of the body length would be 354.5mm.

⁶¹ Vuillaume’s numbering seems to indicate that more than 600 instruments were produced between 1856 and 1870; forty-five instruments, on average, every year.

⁶² These dimensions suggest calliper measurement.

⁶³ There also exists an earlier ‘St Paul’ violin, of 1864.

⁶⁴ The receipt is owned by Gina McKay Lodge. The text of the receipt is transcribed in vV/Campos p. 238 (alternatively translated in vV/Campos/tr. p. 238). Vuillaume’s violin was auctioned by Sotheby’s on 30th October 2012 and sold for £145,000.



Plate 25: J-B Vuillaume, 1870 violin, 'St Paul', number 2809
Collection of Gina McKay Lodge; image by permission of Ingles and Hayday

4. The Paris Vuillaume Exhibition Catalogue (p. 199) includes a violin of 1872 (Vuillaume number 2908, Cozio.com number 10689) 'designed on the Messiah model':

The Catalogue measurements are	168	112 ⁶⁵	208	357
Extrapolation of photograph ⁶⁶	166.9	107.8	206.9	(355.5)
<i>Messiah</i> (<i>The Strad</i> measurements)	167/167.5	108.9/108.3	207.5/208	356

Dimensionally, this violin is rather more than just 'designed on the Messiah model'. A replica it is, but, nonetheless, the back plate is in one piece and the spruce growth rings of the front plate are described as 'medium and regular'; neither condition corresponds with the *Messiah* violin. The Paris Vuillaume catalogue includes the text of a letter sent by Vuillaume (11th September 1872) to the commissioner of this instrument, Nicolas de Haller:

I have received your kind letter of the 23rd [August], which tells me of the preference you have for Stradivarius. I have therefore finished the instrument with which I have taken particular care especially for you. As with several extraordinary instruments which I have made, I have given them names to distinguish them. That which is intended for you is called St Nicolas. I hope it will produce its effect amongst your amateurs [music lovers]. I do not think I have made a more complete, nor a more successful, one. The wood, the workmanship, the varnish – all are splendid. As for the sound, you will be the judge.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Flexible tape lying on the arching?

⁶⁶ Assuming that a calliper measurement of the body length would be 355.5mm.

⁶⁷ Translated from Vuillaume's handwritten letter as photographically reproduced in Millant, Plate 16; there is no indication of source or ownership of the letter. The text of the letter is transcribed in vV/Campos p. 199 (alternatively translated in vV/Campos/tr. p. 199).

This violin was also exhibited at the Sotheby's October 2012 Vuillaume Exhibition (catalogue pp. 44-45).

When Henri Grissino-Mayer and his colleagues reported the results of their 2001 examination and dendrochronological analysis of the spruce front plate of the *Messiah* violin,⁶⁸ they drew attention to some marks – impressed with the point of a sharpened pencil, or an ink pen, into the varnish – which they had observed. Henri Grissino-Mayer comments:

Finally, while we were obtaining the measurements for the *Messiah*, we came upon some very curious marks probably related to measuring the instrument. We believe these were made with pencil because you can see bits of graphite around these marks near the pin⁶⁹ on the lower bout. Then we came upon a large black dot that could be seen with the naked eye. It's likely a black ink dot, not a pencil mark.⁷⁰

The 2003 publication of the Proceedings of the November 2001 Convention of the Violin Society of America includes three photographs of the *Messiah* violin's marks and dots:

1. 'Figure 46'⁷¹ captioned 'Pencil(?) marks near [end] pin on lower bout at centerline'. This is the identical image to the lower of the two colour photographs in 'Mastering the rings'⁷² *The Strad*, April 2002, p. 411, where the photograph is captioned 'other marks on the violin top suggest someone has recorded the dimensions of the 'Messiah' using a graphite instrument.' It is assumed that these marks lie underneath the tail-piece and are not normally visible. Henri Grissino-Mayer and his colleagues were able to observe these lower-bout marks since the authorities at the Ashmolean Museum had removed the strings, bridge, and tail-piece from the *Messiah* violin to enable the American scientists to measure the growth rings across the widest point.
2. 'Figure 47'⁷³ captioned 'Pencil(?) marks at centerline on upper bout near neck.' This photograph is not reproduced in the *The Strad* article of April 2002. Inspection of the *Messiah* violin by the present author revealed that these marks are halfway between the bridge and the leading edge of the fingerboard, i.e. within the centre-bout area rather than the upper-bout area.
3. 'Figure 48'⁷⁴ captioned 'Mysterious black dot at centreline under bridge'. This is an identical image to the colour photograph in *The Strad* where it is captioned 'A black ink dot'.

When the results of the American dendrochronological investigations were published in the April 2002 issue of *The Strad*, Henri Grissino-Mayer and his two colleagues addressed the issue of these pencil and ink marks:

While examining the 'Messiah' under the microscope we made an unexpected discovery. Marks, possibly made with a graphite instrument, were quite noticeably placed in strategic locations on the violin top as if someone had recorded its dimensions. We were quite taken aback, however, when a rather large, conspicuous black dot came into view, centred perfectly on the centreline joint on the lower bout. The marks and the black dot were impressed into the varnish from above. We learnt later that a black dot was a 'trademark' of instruments made by Jean-Baptiste

⁶⁸ 29th Convention of the Violin Society of America, November 2001. The report (Grissino-Mayer *et al.* (2001/2003) was published in 2003 in the Journal of the Violin Society of America. See Chapter 15.

⁶⁹ The tail-piece securing button.

⁷⁰ Grissino-Mayer *et al.* (2001/2003) p. 167.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁷² Authored by Henri D Grissino-Mayer, Malcolm Cleaveland, and Paul Sheppard.

⁷³ Grissino-Mayer *et al.* (2001/2003) p. 168.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Vuillaume, the French copyist and previous owner of the ‘Messiah’. The position of the black dot and other marks on top of and into the varnish suggest that the ‘Messiah’ was indeed measured by someone, perhaps by Vuillaume for his ‘Messiah’ copies.⁷⁵

Grissino-Mayer’s comment about a Vuillaume ‘trademark’ appears to be derived from the Vuillaume entry within *Le Violon*, a multimedia encyclopaedia published in 1997 by Editions Montparnasse and compiled by Emmanuel Jaeger,⁷⁶ Frederic Laurent and Jean-Michel Molkhou. In the encyclopaedia, under ‘General characteristics of his [Vuillaume’s] instruments’, the authors write: ‘there is generally a black dot on the joint of the top under the bridge’.⁷⁷ If ‘under the bridge’ means exactly what it says – that the dot is directly under the centre of the cutaway at the bottom of the bridge – then the reason for such a dot might be to mark the eventual position of the bridge, and, on either side, the position of the two inside ‘nicks’ of the *f*-holes, thus defining the lower limit of the Body Stop measurement. However, such a dot would be made on the bare wood of the front plate; there would be no point in marking such a dot after the *f*-holes and their ‘nicks’ had been cut, the sound-box closed, and the varnish applied (and Grissino-Mayer is quite specific that the marks and dots on the *Messiah* violin were ‘impressed into the varnish from above’ – ‘on top of and into the varnish’).

John Dilworth and Carlo Chiesa have also described these marks and dots:

Small prickmarks observable on the centreline of the front [of the *Messiah* violin] are probably attributable to Vuillaume’s modernisation [of the violin] in the mid-nineteenth century.⁷⁸

Dilworth and Chiesa offer no explanation for why Vuillaume, when renewing the bass bar, (re-)lengthening the neck, or installing his own pegs, bridge, and tail-piece, might have needed to push a finely-sharpened pencil – or an ink pen – into the varnish of the front plate along the centre joint. The marks could not have had any function within a process of modernising the *Messiah* violin, and neither could they have had any function during a process of measuring the *Messiah* violin. Measurements of an instrument, whether achieved by flexible tape or by callipers, do not need reference points positioned along the centre joint. Furthermore, would Vuillaume (or, indeed, anyone) have been so reckless and irresponsible – sacrilegious, even – as to push a pencil, or an ink pen, into the immaculately varnished surface of a violin made by Antonio Stradivari in 1716? If such behaviour is inconceivable then the conclusion can only be that the indentations were made (for reasons which are currently without explanation) by someone (not necessarily Vuillaume) who did not believe the violin’s label to be authentic.

One other uncertainty with regard to the authorship of the *Messiah* violin lies within a single-sentence comment made by Dilworth and Chiesa in 2011:

The inside of the soundholes shows an accretion of white paste which does not presently lend itself to interpretation.⁷⁹

The lack of forensic investigation into the chemical composition of the ‘white paste’ is regrettable.

The reader may wish to study pages 12 and 13 of the present author’s review of *The Absolute Stradivari* (free-to-read at www.themessiahviolin.uk) for further consideration of this ‘white paste’.

⁷⁵ ‘Mastering the rings’, *The Strad*, April 2002, pp. 411-412.

⁷⁶ Emmanuel Jaeger was one of the two ‘Exhibition Commissioners’ for the 1998-99 Paris Vuillaume Exhibition and wrote many of the commentaries for the instruments displayed in the Exhibition catalogue.

⁷⁷ <http://www.editionsmontparnasse.fr/violin/vuillaume/bioinstru.html> (website accessed March 2013).

⁷⁸ MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 163.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.