

PART III

Chapter 9

The 1872 Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments

At South Kensington, the 3rd day of August, 1871. – By the Right Honourable the Lords of the Committee of Her Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council on Education.

An Exhibition of Musical Instruments made before 1800, together with drawings and casts of Ancient Instruments, will be opened next year, in the month of June.

[...]

3. [...] *it was resolved that the scope of the Exhibition should include instruments noted for their Decorative, Archæological, Ethnological, and Technical merits.*¹

4. *It was decided that each member of the Committee should be requested to furnish, for the information of the Committee, the names he may know of owners of remarkable instruments the loan of which it might be desirable to obtain.*

5. *It was determined to recommend the Department to publish a general advertisement, inviting possessors of instruments coming under the categories above mentioned, to communicate their willingness to lend to the Committee such instruments for the months of June, July, and August inclusively.*

6. *The Committee proceeded to the Museum to inspect the collection of Musical Instruments already in the Museum, and the space which might be available for the proposed Exhibition. The Committee then adjourned.*

The Executive Committee was appointed, consisting of

*H. R. H. the Duke of Edinburgh,
The Lord Gerald Fitzgerald,
Mr. Henry Leslie,
Mr. Philip Cunliffe Owen, and
Mr. Alan Cole, Secretary.*

The French Sub-Committee was also appointed, in Paris, consisting of

*M. Gallay,
M. Georges Berger,
M. Lecomte (who acted as Secretary),
M. Vuillaume.*

*Mons. Vuillaume, of Paris, was invited to superintend the arrangement of the Italian Stringed Instruments.*²

Thus began the preparations for the Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments, scheduled for June, July, and August 1872, at the South Kensington Museum in London. The Committee had a membership of forty-five, including the Duke of Edinburgh, the Duke of Leinster, the Marquess of Exeter, the Marquess of Westminster, the Earl of Warwick, the Earl of Wilton, the Honourable

¹ The tonal merits of the instruments were not relevant to the Exhibition.

² Catalogue – 'Under Revision' – of *The Special Exhibition of Ancient Musical Instruments* (Science and Art Department, South Kensington Museum, 1872), published by John Strangeways, Castle Street, Leicester Square, London.

Seymour Egerton, the Right Honourable Sir John Pakington, eight ‘Sirs’ (including the composer Sir William Sterndale Bennett) and seventeen members who had no title other than ‘Mr’. Amongst the latter was the piano manufacturer Mr W. Broadwood, and Mr A. Chappell.³ No representatives of the London string-instrument trade were included on the Committee. It is unclear why the Committee thought that the identification and accumulation of instruments displaying ‘Decorative, Archæological, Ethnological and Technical merits’ would be aided by the establishment of a ‘French Sub-Committee’ (the members of which were also members of the main Committee); perhaps the Executive Committee was sensitive to the possibility that only a few instruments held in England might be offered to the exhibition (hence the recommendation for a ‘general advertisement’) and therefore created the Parisian ‘action group’ to ensure that ‘remarkable’ instruments owned by European, especially French, collectors and musicians would be made available. Given the historical antipathy between England and France, it is surprising that the Executive Committee did not feel that their patriotic pride and sense of imperial superiority might thereby be undermined.

Ten months later, on 5th June 1872, the *Times* newspaper of London printed a substantial article about the newly-opened exhibition. In this article the un-named writer makes the point that the Committee

[...] had this great advantage over most other Committees of exhibitions – namely, that they had not to set to work and gather the whole of their material from the four winds of heaven, but found a considerable nucleus ready to their hands in the collection which had already been formed at South Kensington, and which is now incorporated with the fresh treasures.

The *Times* journalist continues by explaining that the exhibition includes

over 500 different instruments. Of these, about 125 belong to the loan and public collections already in the Museum

and concludes

Our acknowledgments are no less due to the many possessors of valuable instruments who have come forward and so generously placed their treasures at the disposal of the committee.

The exhibits were divided into ‘classes’. ‘Class I’ consisted of ‘Stringed instruments provided with a key-board’, while ‘Class II’ comprised ‘Stringed instruments played with a bow’. Taken at face value, the invitation extended by the Executive Committee to Vuillaume – ‘to superintend the arrangement of the Italian Stringed Instruments’ – merely indicated that Vuillaume was responsible for the physical positioning and grouping of the Italian violin-family instruments inside their glass cabinets.⁴ The invitation does not suggest that Vuillaume was to act as a ‘gatekeeper’ for the loaned instruments, accepting some, rejecting others.

It has been asserted that the Executive Committee snubbed the expertise and knowledge of ‘the English violin trade’⁵ but it should be noted that, in 1871, the Hills, in particular, were still years away from establishing their first New Bond Street shop, whereas Vuillaume had been commercially active, and very visibly so, since 1828. Sylvette Milliot states that the South Kensington Exhibition was organised ‘with the Hills’ assistance’, but no evidence for, nor description of, this assistance is provided.⁶

³ From the firm of Chappell, of 124 Bond Street, established 1811.

⁴ There were just over 100 exhibits of violin-family orchestral instruments – violins, violas, cellos, and double basses; of these, 76 were of Italian origin.

⁵ See Benjamin Hebbert, ‘The coming of the ‘Messiah’’, *The Strad*, March 2011, p. 48.

⁶ See Milliot pp. 246 and 247.

Not all the promised instruments had arrived by the time the Exhibition opened, hence the catalogue's title-page superscription: 'Under Revision'. Carl Engel (1818-1882), who wrote the Introduction to the catalogue (initialled 'C.E.') explains the situation:

A catalogue was prepared. It contains an Introduction in which an account is given of the principal collections of musical instruments which have been formed in different countries. Some inaccuracies in the catalogue, owing to the necessity of its being in print before the opening of the Exhibition, when not all the instruments described had arrived, have been rectified in a revised edition, of which a number of copies were printed for distribution among the lenders. This [revised] edition contains photographs of interesting instruments which were exhibited.⁷

The 1872 catalogue offered little or no help to the 'general public' – those to whom all violins look much the same; the exhibition had little or no educational value unless the visitor was already knowledgeable about the history and practice of violin making. The instruments were not to be played, and visitors could only admire them from a distance (if they knew what to admire). Essentially, the exhibition was staged for the benefit of 'gentlemen' and connoisseurs. Some of the catalogue entries included very brief descriptive or historical comments about the instruments, others had nothing at all; where comments do appear some are within inverted commas, others not. The 1872 catalogue clearly states:

NOTE. – The descriptions given in inverted commas have been supplied by the lenders of the Instruments.

The writer of the *Times* newspaper article echoes this information:

It should be noted that the descriptions given by the lenders are accepted and inserted in the catalogue, but, very judiciously, between inverted commas.

A representative extract from the 'Class II, Stringed Instruments played with a bow' section of the catalogue follows:

80. VIOLIN *By Antonius Stradiuarius, 1734. A very fine specimen.
Lent by Mr. W. A. Tyssen Amhurst, Didlington Hall, Norfolk.*
82. VIOLIN *By Stradiuarius. First epoch; probably 1690.
Lent by M. Chanot, London.*⁸
83. VIOLIN *By Stradiuarius, 1723. Purchased by H.R.H. the late Duke of Cambridge
from Count Platen of Hanover, who had bought it from Stradiuarius.
Lent by H.R.H. the Duke of Cambridge.*
84. VIOLIN *By Antonius Stradiuarius, 1732. A specimen of the grand pattern.
"Purchased from Signor Piatti for 200L.⁹ From the Castelbani Collection in Naples."
Lent by Mr. John H. Arkwright, Hampton Court, Leominster.*
85. VIOLIN *By Stradiuarius. Lent by the Rev. J. B. Wollocombe.*
- In the 1873 revised catalogue, exhibit 85 was changed to
85. VIOLIN *By Antonius Stradiuarius, 1679. "Remarkable from being one of the inlaid
instruments." Lent by Captain T. B. Shaw-Hellier, Womburne Woodhouse,
Staffordshire.*

⁷ Engel (1874) p. 348. Original copies of the small (21cm x 14cm) catalogue of 1872 ('Price Sixpence') and the larger (28cm x 21.5cm) revised 1873 catalogue ('With Illustrations, Price Twelve Shillings') are held at the National Art Library (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

⁸ 'M. [Monsieur] Chanot' is very likely the violin maker and dealer Georges II Chanot (1831–1895) who loaned seven instruments to the Exhibition.

⁹ 'L' = *Livre* = GB pound.

86. VIOLIN By Antonius Stradiuarius. Made like the Amati model, 1686.
Lent by the Rev. Henry Cooper Key, Stretton Rectory, Hereford.
87. VIOLIN By Stradiuarius, 1725.
Lent by M. Eugène Lecomte, Paris.

Benjamin Hebbert has identified Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume's 'direct contribution' to the exhibition's collection of violins as being the loan of the *Violon du Diable* by Guarneri del Gesù, the *La Pucelle* violin by Stradivari, and the *Le Messie* violin.¹⁰ The exhibition catalogue's description of the *Violon du Diable* (the description presented within inverted commas) was:

93. VIOLIN By Joseph Guarnerius, 1734; "*Violon du Diable.*"
"*C'est sur cet instrument que M. Saint Leon a produit tant d'effet sur le public dans l'opéra nommé 'Le Violon du Diable.'* C'est un des rares instrumens¹¹ de cet auteur qui réunisse¹² toute les bonnes conditions. Cet instrument a¹³ acheté en Italie, en 1820, par M. Rossel de Minet, qui à sa mort a passé dans la le [sic] commerce, et acheté¹⁴ par M. St. Leon, et appartient¹⁵ aujourd'hui à Mme. Fleury." The property of Madame Fleury. Lent by M. Vuillaume, Paris.¹⁶

It is on this instrument that Monsieur Saint Leon produced such an effect on the audience in the opera called 'The Devil's Violin'.¹⁷ It is one of the rare instruments by this maker which combines all the best qualities. This instrument was bought in Italy, in 1820, by Monsieur Rossel de Minet. At his death it was put up for sale and bought by Monsieur St. Leon, and today belongs to Madame Fleury.

Carl Engel, in his 1874 *Some Account of the Special Exhibition*, comments: 'This very fine violin is the property of Madame Fleury, who lent it through M. Vuillaume.'¹⁸ Thus, Vuillaume did not contribute the instrument to the exhibition; rather, he persuaded Madame Fleury to lend her prized possession. However, Vuillaume almost certainly wrote the descriptive text, as is likely also to have been the case with Stradivari's *La Pucelle* violin:

90. VIOLIN By A. Stradiuarius, 1709; named "*La Pucelle.*"
"*Il a été surnommé 'La Pucelle' à cause de sa parfait conservation. Cet instrument a été apporté à Paris en 1840; il était dans le commerce, et il a passé dans les mains de M. Leray Banquier, et à sa mort il a été adjugé à M. Glandaz, son propriétaire actuel. Vernis splendide; conservation parfait.*" The property of M. Glandaz. Lent by M. Vuillaume, Paris.¹⁹

It was nicknamed 'The Maiden' [or 'The Virgin'] because of its perfect conservation. This instrument was brought to Paris in 1840, put up for sale, and passed into the hands

¹⁰ Benjamin Hebbert, 'The coming of the 'Messiah'', *The Strad*, March 2011, p. 48.

¹¹ *instruments* in the 1873 revised catalogue.

¹² *réunissent* in the 1873 revised catalogue.

¹³ *fut* in the 1873 revised catalogue.

¹⁴ *et à sa mort passa dans le commerce, et fut acheté* in the 1873 revised catalogue.

¹⁵ *appartient* in the 1873 revised catalogue

¹⁶ 1872 catalogue, p. 18.

¹⁷ Arthur Saint-Leon (1821-1870) was a dancer, choreographer, and violinist. *Le Violon du Diable* (Paris, 1849) was a ballet-pantomime (an elaboration of an earlier production, *Tartini il violinista*, Venice, 1848) in which Saint-Leon not only danced the leading role but, as part of that role, also played his Guarneri violin. The Cozio.com website (accessed May 2013) indicated (but without citing any evidence) that, after the death of M. Rossel de Minet, the violin passed through the hands of Luigi Tarisio and Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume before reaching Arthur Saint-Leon.

¹⁸ Engel (1874) p. 363.

¹⁹ 1872 catalogue, p. 17.

of Monsieur Leray Banquier,²⁰ and, at his death, it was ‘knocked down’ to Monsieur Glandaz, the current owner. Splendid varnish, perfect conservation.

Again, Carl Engel comments: ‘[...] the property of M. Glandaz, lent through M. Vuillaume, of Paris.’²¹

Benjamin Hebbert asserts that Vuillaume was responsible for writing the catalogue’s descriptive comments for the instruments submitted by English owners and dealers:

[Charles] Reade and his fellow British dealers John Hart and Georges Chanut each loaned fine instruments to the exhibition, yet Vuillaume described them in the catalogue with nothing more than ‘A VIOLIN, By Stradiuarius’. In other places he poured doubt on attributions of instruments belonging to rival London dealers, in order to diminish the reputation of the London trade. In one case he wrote acidly, ‘if we may rely on the label inside, by Gaspar di Salo’, and elsewhere ‘ascribed to Guarnerius, probably Storioni’.²²

The 1872 and 1873 catalogues indicate that Charles Reade, of 2 Albert Terrace, Knightsbridge, London, did not loan any instruments to the exhibition (but a Mr. C. J. Read, of Salisbury, Wiltshire, loaned nine instruments). The Stradivari violin loaned by John Hart is indeed simply listed in the 1872 catalogue as

92. VIOLIN *By Stradiuarius*
 Lent by Mr. John Hart, Princes Street, Leicester Square, London.

but four violas, also loaned by John Hart, were equally simply described:

139. VIOLA *By Amati*
140. VIOLA *By Stradiuarius*²³
142. VIOLA *By Gaspar di Salo, 1570*
143. VIOLA *By Joseph Guarnerius*

When Hart wished to supply additional information he did so, as with his loaned Bergonzi violin:

109. VIOLIN *By Carlo Bergonzi, Cremona, 1727.*
 “The most perfect Bergonzi known to Mr. Hart, and having varnish of great beauty.”
 *Lent by Mr. John Hart, Princes Street, Leicester Square, London.*²⁴

²⁰ The text has possibly become muddled: the owner was Leroy de Chabral, who was a banker (*banquier*).

²¹ Engel (1874) p. 362. According to the Cozio.com website (accessed May 2012) Vuillaume sold this violin to Leroy de Chabral in 1851. It then passed through the hands of an anonymous owner, being subsequently bought in 1870 by M. Glandaz, who retained it until 1878. Harvey S Whistler and Ernest Doring (Whistler and Doring pp. 66-69) provide five monochrome photographs of the *La Pucelle* violin, and three photographs of Vuillaume’s copy violin (Vuillaume number 1489): ‘[...] it is almost fantastic how Vuillaume matched the grain and appearance of the wood [of the *La Pucelle*]. The color of the varnish and even the tone of the violin is exceptional, having a true ‘Italian’ timbre.

²² Benjamin Hebbert, ‘The coming of the ‘Messiah’’, *The Strad*, March 2011, p. 48.

²³ The Reverend Hugh Reginald Haweis (Haweis (1884) pp. 304-305) comments on this Stradivari viola: ‘The (140) [Joseph] Gillott’s so-called Stradiuarius tenor, is a very doubtful affair. The belly and holes are very good, but the scroll is simply monstrous; the back and side are of the poorest, coarsest wood; the corners hang down like those of an Amati. Stradiuarius never cut them. They may be by Grancino, or more likely still, by Bergonzi, after Stradiuarius’s death.’ Subsequently, in 1898, Haweis wrote again about this viola (Haweis (1898) p. 217): ‘Certainly I find a very dubious Strad tenor (one of [Joseph] Gillott’s) labelled 140 in the South Kensington collection. As to this particular collector’s specimen, if I grant him his belly and his sound-holes, it is about all that I can do – for Strad never threw that scroll nor touched with plane or chisel that back and ribs.’ This instrument is now known as the Stradivari *Mahler* viola of 1672, and the report in *The Times* newspaper (Tuesday 30th April 1872) on the auction (29th April 1872) of Joseph Gillott’s enormous collection of instruments states that ‘a tenor [viola], by Antonius Stradiuarius, 1672’ was sold to ‘Hart’ for 88GBPs. The Hills’ commentary (Hill (1902) p. 96) on this 1672 viola includes: ‘[...] the whole instrument, with its unsymmetrical outline (too wide for the length), ungainly head, and general stiff robustness, is without the grace inherent in the productions of the Amati.’

Georges II Chanot loaned the Stradivari violin listed above as exhibit 82, and also loaned exhibit 81. *SMALL VIOLIN, By Stradiuarius*. The absence of any further information, in inverted commas, about either of these instruments was evidently Chanot's choice.

With respect to exhibit 108, Vuillaume did not write 'acidly' in the 1872 catalogue, 'if we may rely on the label inside, by Gaspar di Salo', since that comment appears within inverted commas and was therefore written by the owner of the violin, Carl Engel:

108. VIOLIN *"If we may rely on the label inside, by Gaspar di Salo."
Lent by Mr. Carl Engel. (S.K.M.)*²⁵

According to the 1872 catalogue, the annotation (*S.K.M.*) indicated that the violin had been 'selected from the Loan Collection in the South Kensington Museum'. In his *Descriptive Catalogue of the Musical Instruments in the South Kensington Museum* Carl Engel briefly describes each of the 117 instruments which he had already loaned to the permanent collection of the Museum. Instrument 53 is described by Engel as:

VIOLIN: The work, if we may rely on the label inside, of Gaspar di Salo, the celebrated Italian maker, whose instruments date from about 1560 to 1610. Varnish and colour are nearly gone, but the tone of this instrument is far better than its appearance indicates.²⁶

With respect to exhibit 100, it is most unlikely that Vuillaume wrote 'ascribed to Guarnerius, probably Storioni':

100. VIOLIN *Ascribed to Guarnerius; probably by Storioni.
Lent by Mr. Sampson Moore (of Liverpool), The Threshold,
near Labottwood, Shropshire.*²⁷

As already indicated, the exhibition catalogue was 'in print before the opening of the Exhibition, when not all the instruments described had arrived.' For Vuillaume to have been responsible for this thumb-nail description (and others) he would have had to travel from Paris to London to evaluate the already-received instruments before the text of the 1872 catalogue was sent to the printers (and Vuillaume, in 1872, was 74 years of age). Alternatively, low-resolution monochrome photographs of already-received instruments would have had to be sent to Paris for Vuillaume's visual evaluation. Neither of these strategies is likely. Furthermore, rather than belonging to one of the 'rivals' whose reputation, it is claimed, Vuillaume apparently wanted to diminish, this Guarneri/Storioni violin was privately owned, and it is not likely that the owner, Mr Sampson Moore, would have consented to his violin being assessed by Vuillaume and the assessment then publicly printed. The more likely reality is that Mr Moore informally told Carl Engel the little that he, Moore, knew about the identity of his violin, and Engel, sensitive to the lack of certainty, presented the information in the catalogue without using inverted commas.²⁸

Further instrument entries in the 1872 catalogue are:

183. VIOLONCELLO *By Andreas Amati, 1572.
"Mentioned in Foster's book as a curiosity, and styled 'The King'." Painted at
back and sides.*²⁹

²⁴ Identical text appears in the revised 1873 catalogue.

²⁵ Identical text appears in the revised 1873 catalogue.

²⁶ Engel (1874) p. 342.

²⁷ Identical text, also without any inverted commas, appears in the revised 1873 catalogue.

²⁸ Charles Reade, in his *Third Letter to the Pall Mall Gazette* (see later in this chapter) states that this violin was made by 'Landolfo' of Milan (Carlo Ferdinando Landolfi).

²⁹ In the 1873 revised catalogue the concluding inverted commas appear after *sides*.

Lent by Rev. Alex. H. Bridges, Beddington House, near Croydon, Surrey.

187. VIOLONCELLO By Stradiuarius, 1730. A magnificent specimen.
Lent by Mr. Frederick Pawle, Northoole, Reigate.

Carl Engel's 1874 *Some Account of the Special Exhibition*, contains the same expression: 'a magnificent specimen'.³⁰ This repetition perhaps lends support to the proposition that the catalogue comments without inverted commas were formulated by Carl Engel.

189. VIOLONCELLO Assigned to Andreas Guarnerius, 1685. Probably by Amati.
Lent by Mr. Thomas Faulconer, London.

193. VIOLONCELLO By Bergonzi, probably.
Lent by Signor FrancaLucca.³¹

Vuillaume's description of his *Le Messie* violin is the longest entry in the exhibition catalogue:

91. VIOLIN By A. Stradiuarius, 1716; "Le Messie."

Cet instrument a été à peine joué. Il fut acheté vers 1760 par le Comte Cozio de Salabue, Grand Seigneur³² et dilettante, qui l'a toujours respecté et conservé jusqu'à sa mort. Ses héritiers l'ont vendu à Luigi Tarisio, connoisseur et fanatique d'instrumens,³³ qui l'a conservé sans le laisser voir à personne jusqu'à 1854. A l'époque de sa mort il était recommandé³⁴ à ses héritiers, et caché soigneusement dans la Ferme de la Croix, à côté du Village de Foutanette,³⁵ près de Navarre³⁶ (Italie). C'est là que son propriétaire actuel est allé le chercher dans le mois de Janvier, 1855. Le bois dont il est fait est remarquable³⁷ par la richesse de ses ondes. La perfection du travail, la beauté du vernis, rien ne lui manque. C'est un violon³⁸ qui semble sortir de la main du maître. C'est enfin le seul, l'unique, instrument de Stradivarius, qui soit parvenu jusqu'à nous, en cet état de parfaite conservation; or, ce monument intact de l'ancienne Lutherie,³⁹ cet instrument que l'archet n'a pas fait resonner dans l'espace de plus d'un siècle et demi, qui s'est écoulé depuis l'époque de sa fabrication, cet instrument vient donner un éclatant dementi à cette opinion d'après laquelle le son ne pourrait se produire libre et pur qu'après un long usage, par ici⁴⁰ dans un instrument neuf on trouve toutes les qualités réunies, – force, moëlleux, rondeur, finesse, vibration, facile,⁴¹ ton distingué, noble, incisif. Lent by M. Vuillaume, Paris.⁴²

This instrument has hardly been played. It was bought around 1760 by Count Cozio de Salabue,⁴³ aristocrat and enthusiast, who, until his death, always cared for and conserved it. His heirs sold it to Luigi Tarisio, connoisseur and instrument fanatic, who conserved it, without letting anyone see

³⁰ Engel (1874) p. 364.

³¹ FrancaLucci in the 1873 revised catalogue.

³² grand seigneur (1873).

³³ *instrumens* spelled thus in both the 1872 and 1873 catalogues.

³⁴ *recommandé* in the text provided by the Hills in their 1891 monograph (p. 8).

³⁵ *Fontanette* (1873); *Fontaneto* (Hill (1891) p. 8).

³⁶ *Novara* (Hill (1891) p. 8).

³⁷ *remarquable* (Hill (1891) p. 8).

³⁸ *violon* (1873); *violon* (Hill (1891) p. 8).

³⁹ *lutherie* (1873); *lutherie* (Hill (1891) p. 8).

⁴⁰ *parcequ'ici* (1873); *parcequ'ici* (Hill (1891) p. 8).

⁴¹ *vibration facile* (1873); *vibration facile* (Hill (1891) p. 8).

⁴² 1872 catalogue, pp. 17-18.

⁴³ In 1760 Count Cozio was five years old. Not for the first time Vuillaume's specification of dates is untrustworthy.

it, until 1854.⁴⁴ At the time of his death it was entrusted to his heirs and carefully concealed at the ‘Farm of the Cross’ near the village of Foutanette, near Navarre (Italy). It is there that the current owner went to find it in the month of January 1855. The wood from which it is made is remarkable for the richness of its waves. The perfection of the workmanship, the beauty of the varnish, nothing is lacking. It is a violin which seems to come [directly] from the hand of the master. It is in fact the only – the sole – instrument of Stradivari which has reached us in this state of perfect conservation. Now, this intact masterpiece of ancient violin manufacture, this instrument that a bow has not made resonate for more than a century and a half which has passed since the time it was made, this instrument gives a resounding rejection of the theory that free and pure sound can only be produced after long usage, because here, in a new instrument, one finds all the qualities combined – strength, sweetness, openness, delicacy, easy vibration, and a tone which is distinguished, noble, and incisive.⁴⁵

This is undoubtedly a substantial description⁴⁶ but there is no evidence that Vuillaume ‘turned the catalogue into a brochure dedicated to his own commercial successes’.⁴⁷ Other lenders also submitted extended descriptions of their instruments: there were nine lines of text provided for an English Viola da Gamba (exhibit 175) and thirteen lines of text for an English violin of 1578 (exhibit 125).

In the early 1870s a controversy erupted in the London violin world [...] caused by [...] Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume, whose behaviour in curating an 1872 exhibition of old instruments angered several leading figures in the violin trade. Among these was the English novelist and dealer Charles Reade, who was so enraged by Vuillaume’s ungentlemanly conduct that he openly attacked the Parisian in letters to the press.⁴⁸

Charles Reade’s *Four Letters* were published by the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the 19th, 24th, 27th, and 31st August 1872 (while the exhibition was in progress).⁴⁹ The *First Letter* – ‘Cremona Fiddles’ – begins with an overview of the development of the violin family, and continues:

[...] I proceed to inquire what country invented these four-stringed and four-cornered instruments. I understand that France and Germany have of late raised some pretensions.⁵⁰ Connoisseurship and etymology are both against them. Etymology suffices. The French terms [for string instruments of the violin family] are all derived from the Italian, and that disposes of France. I will go into German pretensions critically, if any one [*sic*] will show me as old and specific a German word as viola and violino, and the music composed for those German instruments. “Fiddle” is of vast antiquity; but pearshaped, till Italy invented the four corners, on which sound as well as beauty depends.

⁴⁴ Which makes it all the more remarkable that Giuseppe Rocca was apparently making copies of the *Le Messie* violin from 1843 onwards; see Chapter 8 for further details.

⁴⁵ Translation by the present author. The reader can compare these French and English texts with those of Fétis/Vuillaume in 1856 (see Chapter 1). It is noticeable that the text of 1856 clearly states that Tarisio bought the violin from Count Cozio in 1824, but Vuillaume’s text in the 1872 catalogue omits this information (and is silent with respect to the date of Count Cozio’s death). The 1872 catalogue text supplies the date of Vuillaume’s purchase of the violin – January 1855 – but this date is omitted from the Fétis/Vuillaume text of 1856.

⁴⁶ It is also noticeable that Vuillaume’s description makes no mention of the fact that the *Le Messie* violin had been seen in London ten years earlier, at the World Exhibition of 1862; see Chapter 7 for further details.

⁴⁷ Benjamin Hebbert, ‘The coming of the ‘Messiah’’, *The Strad*, March 2011, p. 49.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁹ These were not ‘letters’ in the modern sense, but, rather, articles derived from Charles Reade’s experiences of visiting the 1872 Exhibition.

⁵⁰ The French pretensions to which Reade is referring are possibly the expressions of French primacy contained within the Vuillaume/Fétis *Antoine Stradivari* publication of 1856.

It is notable that Reade's dismissive thrust is aimed at both France and Germany. Nonetheless, Reade has no difficulty in complimenting Fétis and Vuillaume:

The student who has read the valuable work put forth by Monsieur Fétis and Monsieur Vuillaume might imagine that I am contradicting them here; for they quote as "luthiers" – antecedent to Gasparo da Salo – Kerlino, Duiffoprucgear, Linarolli, Dardelli, and others. These men, I grant you, worked long before Gasparo da Salo [...].

If Reade was 'enraged by Vuillaume's ungentlemanly conduct' then, at least in this *First Letter*, the evidence is not to be found, nor any evidence which suggests that Charles Reade 'sought to belittle [Vuillaume's contribution] by purposely underplaying examples of Stradivari's golden period.'⁵¹ Reade's text, from his *Second Letter*, of 24th August, is:

About the year 1703 it seems to have struck him [Stradivari] like a revelation that he was a greater man than his master [Amati]. He dropped him once and for ever, and for nearly twenty years poured forth with unceasing fertility some admirable works of which you have three fine examples, under average wear, hard wear, and no wear – 90, 92, 91.⁵² Please look at the three violins in this order to realise what I have indicated before – that time is no sure measure of events in this business. Nevertheless, in all these exquisite productions there was one thing which he thought capable of improvement – there was a slight residue of the scoop, especially at the lower part of the back. He began to alter that about 1720, and by degrees went to his grand model, in which there is no scoop at all.

It is noticeable that Reade's descriptive terms – 'admirable works', 'fine examples', 'exquisite productions' – all relate to Stradivari's 'Golden Period' 1703-1720 violins. Reade certainly does praise Stradivari's instruments from the 1720s, identifying this period as Stradivari's 'grandest epoch' and specifically mentioning the Stradivari violins of 1723 and 1725 (owned, respectively, by the Duke of Cambridge and by Eugène Lecomte), and he extends his point still further by referring to 'One feature more of this his greatest epoch', namely Stradivari's habit of pointing the purfling 'bee-sting' across the C-bout corner rather than it being centred, but it is unclear how Reade's comments can be construed as constituting 'sabotage'.⁵³

Benjamin Hebbert also states that 'in his letter of 24 August he [Reade] attacked the value of the Frenchman's connoisseurship with regard to the 'Violon du Diable' Guarneri 'del Gesù'',⁵⁴ but there is no mention of this violin in Reade's *Second Letter*. In his *Third Letter* (27th August) Reade makes no mention of Vuillaume but does describe the Guarneri *Violon du Diable* (exhibit 93) thus:

93 is a little the grander in make, I think; the purfling being set a hair's breadth farther in, the scroll magnificent; but observe the haste – the deep gauge-marks⁵⁵ on the side of the scroll; here is already an indication of the slovenliness to come: varnish a lovely orange, wood beautiful; two cracks in the belly, one from the chin-mark to the sound-hole.

In his *Fourth Letter*, of 31st August 1872 – 'Cremona Varnish' – Reade explains that the price of old and rare Cremonese instruments is largely determined (towards the end of the nineteenth century) by their appearance:

[...] old fiddles are not bought by the ear alone [...] Now they are in reality bought by the eye, and the price is enormous. The reason is that their tone is good but their appearance inimitable;

⁵¹ Benjamin Hebbert, 'The coming of the 'Messiah'', *The Strad*, March 2011, p. 49.

⁵² Violin no. 90 was the *La Pucelle* violin of 1709, no. 92 was the undated Stradivari violin belonging to John Hart, and no. 91 was the *Le Messie* violin.

⁵³ Benjamin Hebbert, 'The coming of the 'Messiah'', *The Strad*, March 2011, p. 49.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ 'gouge'-marks.

because the makers chose fine wood and laid on a varnish highly coloured, yet clear as crystal, with this strange property – it becomes far more beautiful by time and usage; it wears softly away, or chips boldly away, in such form as to make the whole violin picturesque, beautiful, various, and curious. [...] No. 94⁵⁶ is a violin whose picturesque beauty I have described already; twenty-five years ago Mr. Plowden gave £450 for it. It is now, I suppose, worth £500. Well, knock that violin down and crack it in two places, it will sink that moment to the value of the “*violon du diable*” and be worth £350. But collect twenty amateurs all ready to buy it, and, instead of cracking it, dip it in a jar of spirits and wash the varnish off. Not one of these customers will give you above £40 for it; nor would it in reality be worth quite so much in the market.

Reade’s point is simply that instruments are heard by the eye, and without the visual enhancement of the varnish even a perfectly constructed violin appears almost valueless. Reade continues his *Fourth Letter* with comments about the *Le Messie* violin (comments which follow exactly the same line of reasoning):

Take another example. There is a beautiful and very perfect violin by Stradiuarius which the *Times*, in an article on these instruments, calls *La Messie*. These leading journals have private information on every subject, even grammar. I prefer to call it – after the very intelligent man to whom we owe the sight of it – the *Vuillaume Stradiuarius*.⁵⁷ Well, the *Vuillaume Stradiuarius* is worth, as times go, £600 at least. Wash off the varnish, it would be worth £35; because, unlike No. 94, it has one little crack.

It is difficult to find any evidence of ‘bitterness against *Vuillaume*’⁵⁸ in Reade’s text which estimates a hypothetically varnish-less *Le Messie* violin to be worth £5 less than a varnish-less 1735 Guarneri violin simply because the former has ‘one little crack’ (a deficiency which is subsidiary to his main point about the expensive appearance, literally, of old and rare Cremonese violins).

Hebbert’s final point – ‘Unable to criticise the ‘*Messiah*’, Reade launched a thinly veiled attack on *Vuillaume* as a maker’⁵⁹ – has substance. Reade writes:

As a further illustration that violins are heard by the eye, let me remind your readers of the high prices at which numberless copies of the old makers were sold in Paris for many years. 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 make. 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.⁶⁰

Reade’s criticisms of Parisian violin makers (and their various strategies for artificially ageing wood) are trenchantly expressed, but Reade appears to confound his own argument by continuing:

⁵⁶ Exhibit no. 94 was a Guarneri *del Gesù* violin of 1735, loaned by M. Louis d’Egville, Conduit Street, London.

⁵⁷ At the end of his *Second Letter* Reade writes in a similarly positive manner with regard to *Vuillaume*’s role in rescuing the Stradivari ‘Bass of Spain’ cello: ‘A certain high priest in these mysteries, called *Vuillaume*, with the help of a sacred vessel, called the glue-pot, soon rewedded [*sic*] the back and sides to the belly [...]’

⁵⁸ Benjamin Hebbert, ‘The coming of the ‘*Messiah*’’, *The Strad*, March 2011, p. 49.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Reade, *Fourth Letter to the Pall Mall Gazette*, 31st August 1872; see Chapter 7 for a discussion of *Vuillaume*’s treatment of wood.

The hideous red violins of Bernardel, Gand, and an English maker or two, are a reaction against those copies: they are made honestly with white wood, and they will, at all events, improve in sound every year and every decade.⁶¹

The proposition – that Vuillaume deliberately disparaged English participants in the Special Exhibition provoking Charles Reade to ride to the rescue firing anti-Vuillaume broadsides from the pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette* – lacks plausibility.

⁶¹ But, nonetheless, the violins look ‘hideous’.