

Chapter 10

The 1890 purchase, more correspondence, and players

At the start of 1890 news emerged from Paris that the two married daughters of Delphin and Jeanne-Emilie Alard – joint owners of the *Le Messie* violin following the deaths of their parents – were disposed to sell it. Fifteen original letters are held within the Hill Archive at the Ashmolean Museum¹ which chart the process leading up to the purchase of this violin by Mr Robert Crawford of Edinburgh.² The earliest letter, on 38 *New Bond Street* letter-paper, is from Arthur F Hill to Robert Crawford, dated 21st January 1890:

Dear Mr Crawford,
[...] I have sent you the catalogue of the South Kensington Museum Collection of instruments shown in 1872 and in it you will see some portraits of the “Messie”, much was written about it at the time in the papers and you cannot think what pleasure it will give me some day to put its history into shape. The photo gives not the faintest idea of its beauties but I can assure you it is the fiddle of Europe [...].³

Robert Crawford replied two days later, on 23rd January:

Dear Mr Hill,
[...] Many thanks for the offer of your services which I much appreciate. I am seriously thinking of buying the Messie, but I have been spending so much money during the last 6 months, close to £20,000 on my house and grounds alone, that causes [me] to be a little careful. Were it 3 months after this, I would not hesitate a second as I then will have lots of spare money but I will write you within 14 days [...].⁴

On 28th March 1890 Arthur Hill sent another letter to Robert Crawford:

Dear Mr Crawford,
With regard to the Messie, no offer is any good in the face of their⁵ having agreed to sell it for £2,000, and as their customer, whom we now believe to be an American known to us,⁶ has agreed to give this sum, unless you are prepared to give the same amount if he does not pay up, there is no chance of you having it. They have to all intents and purposes sold the violin for £2,000, but as the money is not forthcoming and there appears to be some difficulty on this point, your only chance, should this sale fall through, will be by being ready to at once take the violin for the same amount and be prepared to complete the purchase immediately.

Mr Crawford evidently moved quickly to register his intent to buy the *Le Messie* violin, for just a few days later two of the Hill brothers were in Paris, examining the instrument. From the *Hotel de Lille & d'Albion*, on 4th April 1890, William Henry Hill wrote to Mr Crawford:

¹ HA:AMO (Hill Archive, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

² The Crawford/Hill letters were donated to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, in 1988, by Andrew Hill. Internal evidence indicates that some correspondence is missing from the collection. Robert Crawford's handwriting, at times, is impossible to decipher.

³ Low-resolution monochrome photographs of the *Le Messie* violin appear only in the 1873 revised catalogue of the South Kensington Exhibition.

⁴ The official death record for Robert Crawford (14th January 1912) states that his occupation (evidently highly profitable) was that of a 'Distiller'.

⁵ 'Their' indicates the two Alard daughters, who were acting through the husband of one, Henri Croué.

⁶ The 'American' was the violin dealer Victor Flechter, later (in 1895) to be accused of having stolen a Stradivari violin from Jean Joseph Bott, in New York. Flechter, initially convicted of the crime, was eventually exonerated in 1900 when the violin was discovered in the possession of a Mrs Amelia Springer. See *The Violin Times*, September 1900, pp. 181-182.

[...] “The Messie Strad” was duly forwarded to my brother Alfred and self here, where we had come, principally to see the above violin. As I had neither seen the “Messie” or Paris, and there is a probability of the “Messie” leaving Europe the opportunity was too rare a one to be neglected.⁷ We have most carefully inspected and tested the tone of the “Messie” on two different days and here is our opinion while our impressions are vivid.

Its power of tone is unlimited; its quality of the finest kind; but the production of the tone is rather stiff. [Delphin] Alard, we were told by his daughter, but little used the violin as he wished to preserve for future generations its fabulous newness of appearance and state of preservation.⁸

Thus, the cause of the stiffness of production of the tone is naturally accounted for.⁹ We are most decidedly of opinion that the violin, if it is going to be used, must have a stronger bar put in, as the present one put in by Vuillaume at least 50 years ago¹⁰ has allowed the belly to sink in the G string side. The extreme high pitch in use with us would damage the violin unless the above was done.¹¹

[David] Laurie¹² is not in treaty for [the violin] although he tried to secure a promise that he should be informed of any offer which might be made. An American [Victor Flechter] has secured the right of refusal until the 25th of this month, but we don't think the money will be forthcoming by then.

There is no possibility of our getting the violin to England for you to try. My personal opinion is that it is the violin for you, as it is absolutely unique.

Yours respectfully
W. H. Hill

Thus, in April 1890, Robert Crawford was about to pay a world-record price of £2,000 for a violin which he had never seen (unless he visited the 1862 World Exhibition or the 1872 South Kensington Exhibition) nor played.¹³ William Henry Hill was 15 years old when *Le Messie* was exhibited at the South Kensington Museum in 1872 but, by his own admission, he had never seen the violin prior to his 1890 trip to Paris. William Henry's younger brother, Alfred, was 10 at the time of the 1872 Exhibition and, even if he had been taken to the Exhibition by his father, he surely would have remembered little, eighteen years later, about the *Le Messie* violin. Thus, prior to their visit to Paris in April 1890, neither William nor Alfred had any personal knowledge of the *Le Messie* violin. It must be assumed that the two brothers took with them a copy of the Special Exhibition revised catalogue of 1873 (with photographs) so that they could assure themselves that the violin which was delivered to their hotel was the same as that displayed in the catalogue. Their father, William Ebsworth Hill, no doubt would instantly have been able to recognise the violin as that which had been exhibited in 1872

⁷ William Henry's phraseology seems to imply that a first sight-seeing visit to Paris was just as important as a first viewing of the *Le Messie* violin.

⁸ This explanation is unconvincing. See later in this chapter for information about Delphin Alard performing on the violin.

⁹ i.e. the stiffness in producing the violin's tone was because the violin had not been consistently played.

¹⁰ Actually no more than 35 years previously.

¹¹ The pitch of the 'tuning A', during the mid to late nineteenth century in Europe, sharpened perceptibly.

¹² David Laurie (1833-1897) was a Glasgow-based violin dealer, and friend of Vuillaume. Laurie's reputation as a dealer was not unblemished; in 1882 he assembled a violin with assorted parts which he identified as being of Stradivari origin, and sold the resultant instrument as a 'Stradivarius genuine in all its parts'. Litigation followed (the Hills gave evidence for the prosecution) and Laurie lost the case. The resultant violin is now known as the *Court* Stradivari (see Harvey and Shapreau p. 16 and Doring p. 117).

¹³ David Laurie's *The Reminiscences of a Fiddle Dealer* includes (after p. 171) a listing of ten Stradivari violins which Laurie had sold between 1876 and 1880: nine of the instruments fetched prices of between £350 and £500; just one was sold at £800. In 1892 Stradivari's 1731 *Paganini* viola was valued by W. E. Hill & Sons at £750, the 1719 *Macdonald* viola at £1,100. To pay £2,000 for a violin – sight unseen and sound unheard – indicates either foolhardiness or a very high level of trust in the Hills' opinions and assurances.

(or not) but he was in London and would not see the violin until after it had been bought, and brought to New Bond Street.¹⁴

Further correspondence between London and Edinburgh ensued, including at least one telegram. As the Hills anticipated, the deadline imposed on Victor Flechter – 25th April – passed without the purchase money materialising, and so, on 29th April, another letter, unsigned, was sent to Mr Crawford, indicating that he was now the owner of the *Le Messie* violin.¹⁵

You have now got the fiddle of Europe and not only must we get together its history but we must have it in print.¹⁶ I should like to have it illustrated but this would cost for only a small number of plates quite thirty pounds.¹⁷ It is still more worthy though of a book to itself than our Tuscan,¹⁸ and would save you a lot of trouble when your friends begin to ask its history, if you could give them a book in which they could read for themselves all about it. My brother Alfred hopes to be able to leave for Paris Thursday or Friday¹⁹ [...]. We are quite as anxious as yourself to have the violin safely and quickly here [...].

The *Le Messie* violin was duly collected from Paris, and handed to Robert Crawford, in Edinburgh, on Monday 19th May 1890.²⁰ On 22nd May Alfred Hill wrote to Robert Crawford from Heath Lodge, Hanwell, Middlesex: ‘I hope you and your friends are admiring the famous Strad. I feel very proud that you should have trusted us with the negotiations for its purchase.’ However, it seems that Crawford may have begun to doubt the authenticity of the violin, and perhaps then wrote to William Ebsworth Hill on this matter, since on 9th July 1890 W E Hill sent the following letter to Edinburgh:

Dear Sir,

The violin called Le Messie, lately purchased by you is a genuine Stradivarius, that is to say I should buy it for a Stradivarius, and should sell it for a Stradivarius – never for one moment doubting it being in each and every part the work of that eminent maker and of the date 1716 – I also firmly believe the label inside to be the original one put there by Stradivarius himself.

William Hill

p.s. I first saw the Messie in 1862 at the Exhibition held in London that year. I next saw it at the Loan Collection at South Kensington 1872 I think, lastly a short time ago this year:²¹ and I am more and more convinced of its unique character never during an experience of 50 years have I seen anything in the shape of a Stradivarius violin that at all approaches [*sic*] it for all [[?]²²] Beauty and preservation I think you can safely challenge [*sic*] the world to say ditto ditto!

William Hill

Perhaps W E Hill’s assurances were not entirely convincing²³ since a letter from David Laurie to Robert Crawford (10th July 1890)²⁴ implies that the latter had initiated his own investigations into the violin: ‘I hope you or your emissaries will be able to ferret out much more trustworthy information

¹⁴ It is curious that Arthur Hill did not travel to Paris despite having initiated the correspondence with Robert Crawford.

¹⁵ According to Charles Beare (see Chapter 11) the financial transaction, initially using the Hills’ money, was concluded on 26th April 1890.

¹⁶ This sentence, repeating what was written in the letter of 21st January 1890, suggests that the writer of the unsigned 29th April letter was Arthur Hill.

¹⁷ Hence, presumably, the less expensive alternative of reproducing Mr Slocombe’s paintings of the violin.

¹⁸ The Hills’ short monograph on the 1690 *Tuscan* violin by Stradivari was published in 1889.

¹⁹ 1st and 2nd May 1890.

²⁰ See also Chapter 11.

²¹ The text of this postscript suggests that Robert Crawford had questioned W E Hill’s first-hand historical knowledge of the violin (which only extended back to the London Exhibition of 1862).

²² Illegible word.

²³ What was Robert Crawford to make of the reference to the violin’s ‘unique character’? – or the absence of any mention of its tonal qualities?

²⁴ The letter from Laurie is included within the Hill Archive.

[about the violin] and give it to the violin's devotees.'²⁵ The identity of these 'emissaries' is unknown; also unknown is the outcome of their investigations (if they occurred). George A Dissmore states to have received a letter from Robert Crawford in which the latter comments on the tonal qualities of his new violin: 'It needs to be played upon, the tone is superb, full and brilliant, but not so refined as my other Strad, which has been played till half the varnish is worn off.'²⁶

The next Archive letter – eight months later – is from Robert Crawford, dated 12th March 1891:

Dear Mr Hill,

I had [Joseph] Joachim²⁷ and [Alfredo] Piatti²⁸ down with me a long time yesterday and I am sure you will be pleased to hear that they were quite gone on the "Messie". Joachim kept playing on it for about an hour, would not let it out of his hands and he kept turning to Piatti every few minutes, what a marvellous tone Fredy [*sic*] etc. He [?²⁹] had never heard such a tone before [...]. They were also gone on the Darbrucke Strad,³⁰ Piatti would not keep away from it for the [?] and from the time that he looked at it I don't think there is a pin point on it but that he knew [?]. Joachim and he again said what an instrument and what tone. [...]

Best wishes

Yours sincerely

Robert Crawford

Five days later (17th March 1891) Robert Crawford sent another letter to London:

Dear Mr Hill,

[...] I have written "Joachim" asking him to write me what he thinks of the tone of the Messie and its state of preservation and I fancy he will reply, and if he only states what he said verbally [?] no violin tone can be better. He and Piatti were in the Picture Gallery along with Mr Campbell while I was playing the Guarnerius, the Darbrucke, the Messie in the Billiard Room [?] the instant the bow went on the "Messie" they both³¹ said instantly that is by far the best, fuller and richer tone [?] Piatti said he thought playing would improve it, but Joachim was quite satisfied with its tone at present. [...]

Alfredo Piatti, having returned to London from Edinburgh, wrote (20th March 1891) from 15 Northwick Terrace, Maida Hill, to Robert Crawford:

In this moment I arrive from Glasgow and find your letter and the whisky which you kindly sent me. I have no doubt that it is Messie of all whiskies. That puts me in mind that you are the happy possessor of that extraordinary violin which in beauty of tone surpasses "almost" all the other violins which I have heard.³² The other Strad (I believe you call it Darbrucke) is also very fine but it wants the sound-post to be removed further back from the bridge and there I am sure it will sound better. Your favourite Guarnerius is also very fine and in good condition. The sound-post I consider it not very properly placed. You happy mortal to possess such instruments!

With best regards believe me, sincerely yours

Alfred Piatti

²⁵ Was Laurie's phrase – 'much more trustworthy information' – deliberately ambiguous?

²⁶ Dissmore (un-numbered page). Dissmore's booklet – *The Violin Gallery* – is stated to have been published in America during the same year (1890) in which Robert Crawford, in mid-May of that year, obtained *Le Messie*. The soubriquet identity of the 'other Strad' is uncertain.

²⁷ 1831-1907.

²⁸ Carlo Alfredo Piatti (1821-1901) was principally a cellist, but also played the violin.

²⁹ Illegible word.

³⁰ 1727 *Deurbroucq*.

³¹ Underscore as in original letter.

³² Piatti's caution is noticeable.

In my excitement speaking of your violins I forgot to thank you for the whisky. I think it very kind of you to part with such excellent stuff; but violins, paintings, or liquor are stuffs that very few possess like you.³³

None of Piatti's comments appears in the Postscript of the Hills' 1976 *Tuscan/Salabue* re-publication; perhaps his opinion that the tone of *Le Messie* was not *ne plus ultra* ruled his letter out. The unidentified author of the 1976 Postscript writes: 'A number of adverse comments have been made³⁴ concerning the tonal qualities of "Le Messie," and we have repeated a letter that Joseph Joachim wrote to Mr. Crawford which speaks for itself.' Joachim's letter, sent from 13 Airlie Gardens, Campden Hill, London, to Robert Crawford, is dated 23rd March 1891:

Dear Mr Crawford

I received your kind note, and it is a great pleasure to be reminded of the most pleasant hour I had the privilege of spending in your house, surrounded by the treasures in your picture gallery and playing your splendid fiddles. Of course the sound of the Strad, that unique³⁵ "Messie" turns up again and again in my memory, with its combined sweetness and grandeur, and this struck me so much in hearing it. It is indeed justly celebrated, and I hope I may again put my bow to it someday but I long to see the second Strad and the Guarnerius again too! *I wonder whether you had the sounding post [in] the former altered.*

*I was quite touched by your attention in sending me that fine old produce of Scotland, yellow varnish, and I can assure you that I felt its beneficial effects after coming home from a fatiguing journey very much. I shall never become a teetotaller now, I am afraid.*³⁶

Believe me, dear Mr Crawford to be with kindest regards, yours most sincerely,
Joseph Joachim

Robert Crawford was evidently much pleased with the written comments which he received from both Piatti and Joachim, for he wrote to 'Mr Hill' the next day (24th March 1891):

Dear Mr Hill,

I enclose [?] copies of letters I have received from Joachim and Piatti and I have no doubt you will be pleased to see what a great opinion they have of the tone of the Messie and I am sure the instrument deserves it. [...] seems now that the tone is much grander than when I received it evidently through the sound post having got fixed securely in its place [...].³⁷

The 11th March 1891 visit, by Joachim and Piatti, to play Robert Crawford's violins, was evidently not their first journey to Crawford's Edinburgh residence. A comment made by Arthur Hill indicates that both musicians had been at 'Newbank' one year earlier, during March 1890. In Arthur's letter (28th March 1890), after his opening sentences regarding the strategy needed to purchase the *Messie* violin (see above), he writes:

After having had such distinguished visitors as Joachim and Piatti you will begin to look down upon your lesser friends. What great artistes these two men are! and if it was not that you possessed a Strad none of the ordinary worldly attractions would have obtained for you the honour of their company.

³³ All underscores are as in original letter.

³⁴ No details supplied.

³⁵ Underscores are as in Joachim's handwritten letter.

³⁶ The italicised text is not included in the Hills' reproduction of Joachim's letter in their 1976 Postscript (although this excision is not acknowledged). The exclamation mark, after 'too', is also omitted from the 1976 Postscript. Joachim appears to be just as excited by the 'second Strad and the Guarnerius' as he is by the "Messie".

³⁷ Crawford's copies of the letters from Joachim and Piatti were perhaps received by the Hills too late to be included in the April 1891 publication of their monograph on the *Salabue* violin.

The ‘Strad’ to which Arthur Hill refers cannot be the *Salabue/Le Messie* since, in mid-March 1890, Robert Crawford was still six weeks away from owning it. It would therefore seem that Joachim and Piatti had travelled to Edinburgh in March 1890 in order to see another Stradivari violin owned by Crawford – perhaps the 1694 *Muir-Mackenzie*, or the 1704 *Viotti*,³⁸ or the 1727 *Deurbroucq*.³⁹ Joseph Joachim was the leader of two string quartets, one in England (in which Alfredo Piatti was the cellist), and one in Germany. Joachim’s English Quartet performed a concert in Newcastle on 20th March 1890 and it is probable that Joachim and Piatti travelled to Edinburgh immediately after this Newcastle concert.

According to Charles Beare the cordial relations between Robert Crawford and the Hills deteriorated in April 1891 when the Hills’ monograph on the *Salabue/Le Messie* was published.⁴⁰

In 1904 Robert Crawford sold the *Le Messie* violin back to the Hills, who retained the instrument until 1913 when it was sold to the collector Richard Bennett. Prior to that sale, the Hills (according to Sylvette Milliot⁴¹) sought the opinions and advice of European colleagues who could personally, and validly, comment about the *Le Messie* violin and about Vuillaume. This seeking out of corroborative information might be interpreted as indicating that the Hills were no longer completely convinced of the authenticity of the violin (which could explain their subsequent decision not to sell the instrument after Richard Bennett returned it to them in 1928). One of the Hills’ respondents in 1912 was Georges Meier:

Vuillaume allowed me to play the Messie at leisure and, when I expressed the wish to have the Messie played to me, he called his son-in-law Mr Alard, who played the instrument for me for a long time (...).⁴² This instrument had at the [1872] Kensington Exhibition, as well as ever afterwards, greatly attracted me by its beauty, its perfect state of preservation and later, when I had played it myself and had it played to me by an artist, not less by its tone.⁴³

This commentary does not entirely correspond with the information from Delphin Alard’s daughters which was relayed to Robert Crawford in the 4th April 1890 letter from William Henry Hill (see earlier).

Another nineteenth century player of *Le Messie* was Hugo Heermann (1844-1935) who wrote to Alfred Hill on 14th February 1913. Heermann is rather less enthusiastic:

I very often saw the celebrated *Messie* in Paris at Vuillaume’s house on the rue Demours during the years 1863-1865. I often played on it. To tell you the truth, I never found an extraordinary quality of sound such as one might anticipate from its fine appearance and its state of conservation. In fact, it just sounded like the many new Vuillaume [violins] that the *luthier* had the habit of showing me each time that I went to rue Demours. At that time the most widespread

³⁸ There are four more *Viotti* Stradivari violins: two are label-dated 1709 (one of which is now owned by the Royal Academy of Music), the others are label-dated 1710 and 1712.

³⁹ The Cozio.com website (accessed June 2012) was unable to provide precise details of when these violins were owned by Robert Crawford.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 11.

⁴¹ See Milliot p. 328.

⁴² Delphin Alard married Vuillaume’s daughter, Jeanne-Emilie, in 1849. In addition to his *Alard 1742 Guarneri del Gesù* violin (see Chapter 6 for consideration of this violin’s authorship) Delphin Alard also owned a 1679 Stainer violin, a 1649 Nicolò Amati violin, and a Stradivari violin from 1715. The Amati and the Stradivari violins are also known as *Alard* instruments.

⁴³ Meier’s letter is quoted, in English, by Sylvette Milliot (Milliot p. 333). A brief French-language descriptive summary of the content of this letter is provided by Milliot *ibid.* p. 328.

impression amongst Parisian artistes was that Vuillaume, having succeeded in making the finest of all his instruments, had invented the history of *Le Messie*, and that *Le Messie* had been made by him. He always showed it at the same time as his own violins; and many amongst those had an equally lovely sonority as that which he called *Le Messie*. When one told him this, he was delighted, and responded ‘You see! I make [instruments] equally as good as those of Stradivarius!’ In addition, at that time he had many Italian violins which possessed a much more beautiful sonority, much more ‘Italian’, than *Le Messie*.⁴⁴

In addition to Delphin Alard, Georges Meïer, and Hugo Heermann, other violinists have also performed on the *Le Messie* violin. Jon Whiteley has written: ‘Since the time when it was altered by Vuillaume, it has been played in private by Joachim, Piatti, Aldo Simonetti,⁴⁵ Nathan Milstein,⁴⁶ surely by Alard, and by others.’⁴⁷ With respect to Achille (Aldo) Simonetti, this violinist is mentioned by Arthur Hill in the latter part of his letter of 21st January 1890 to Robert Crawford: ‘We are glad to hear you liked Simonetti who is a very decent fellow and likely to take a high position.’ One hundred years later, the name of Achille Simonetti appears in a letter of 5th March 1990, sent by the Ashmolean Museum’s Acting Keeper to Mrs M Hill:⁴⁸

Dear Mrs Hill,

[...] has passed on to me the note initialled by your father-in-law [Albert Edgar Phillips Hill] and the letter by Simonetti following his recital on the Messie.

Thank you very much indeed for both gifts these add a most interesting footnote to the history of the instrument. I am charmed by Mr. Hill’s comment that the audience could detect little difference in the tonal qualities of the Messie and its copy.

The recital mentioned in the ‘note’ took place as part of a lecture given by Alfred E Hill at the St Mellitus Institute, Hanwell, Middlesex, in October 1910.⁴⁹ Achille Simonetti performed on the *Le Messie* violin and on a copy violin (presumably made in the Hills’ Hanwell workshops). Since the *Le Messie* violin had only returned to the Hills’ ownership, from Robert Crawford, in 1904, the copy violin is likely to have been no more than six years old, and was being compared, tonally, with a violin that was claimed to be very nearly 200 years old. The *Hanwell Gazette* report states:

A reproduction [copy violin] of [the *Le Messie* violin] was shown and played upon so that the audience might compare the tones [with those of the *Le Messie*] which to the ordinary individual were identical.

In his ‘note’ A E Phillips Hill comments:

As is usually the case, if a violin is played on by a competent player, the audience [at Hanwell] could detect but little difference in the tonal qualities of the two instruments. Kreisler himself stated to me on one occasion that what the audience hears is 90% the player. The true difference between violins is, of course, felt by the player himself. A fine instrument enables him to play with greater facility. This occasion on which Simonetti played the “Messie” is the only time I have heard this instrument played in public.

If a fine instrument allows a competent player ‘to play with greater facility’ – greater ease – then that enhanced facility ought to demonstrate itself in a wider range of tonal shadings and subtleties of

⁴⁴ Translated from Milliot p. 328; alternatively translated *ibid.* p. 333.

⁴⁵ Achille Simonetti (1857-1928).

⁴⁶ 1904-1992.

⁴⁷ Whiteley p. 56.

⁴⁸ Wife of Desmond D’Artrey Phillips Hill.

⁴⁹ See *The Hanwell Gazette*, Saturday 15th October, 1910, “A chat on old violins”; Simonetti also played on a ‘Meggena’ [Maggini] violin and on the 1564 violin made by Andrea Amati for Charles 9th of France.

musical expression. Edward J Payne offers the thoughts of Joseph Joachim (communicated to Payne by letter) regarding the tonal variety achievable from Stradivari's best violins:

[...] It is true that in brilliancy and clearness, and even in liquidity, Guarnieri [*sic*] in his best instruments is not surpassed by him [Stradivari]: but what appears to me peculiar to the tone of Stradivari is a more unlimited capacity for expressing the most varied of accents of feeling. It seems to well forth like a spring, and to be capable of infinite modification under the bow. [...] Their beauty of tone is not so easily reached as in the case of many other makers. Their vibrations increase in warmth, the more the player, discovering their richness and variety, seeks from the instrument a sympathetic echo of his own emotions: so much so that they seem to be living beings, and become as it were the player's personal familiars – as if Stradivari had breathed a soul into them, in a manner achieved by no other master.⁵⁰

If Achille Simonetti could demonstrate no more musical subtleties on the *Le Messie* violin than on the Hills' copy violin then the two instruments were equals in terms of their capacity to respond to his technique. The French violin makers employed by the Hills at their Hanwell workshops were very fine violin-makers in their own right, and it is certain that their violin was itself a fine instrument. The 1910 recital evidently revealed that the *Le Messie* violin was also a fine instrument, but perhaps not so fine as to justify the oft-cited Fétis/Vuillaume eulogy; perhaps its tonal qualities were more in keeping with the sober assessment of the violin by Hugo Heermann.

An oft-quoted comment concerning the *Messiah* violin is that which appears in *From Russia to the West*, co-authored by the violinist Nathan Milstein (1904-1992) and the historian Solomon Volkov. Milstein's solitary comment regarding the *Messiah* violin is that playing it was 'an unforgettable experience', but Charles Beare has commented: 'Yes, Milstein played on it probably in the 1940s or 1950s and he couldn't make head or tail of it.'⁵¹ Beare follows this comment with: 'Yehudi Menuhin also played it since the war, I think.' As shown in Chapter 13, the Ashmolean Museum's Keeper has stated that, at least prior to 1965, Menuhin never asked to play the *Messiah* violin. A letter included in the Hill Archive, dated 3rd February 1999 and written by an assistant to Lord Menuhin, states that Lord Menuhin 'has never heard the *Messiah* being played [...].'

⁵⁰ Joachim's letter is quoted in the article on Antonio Stradivari by E J Payne which appeared in *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by George Grove, first edition, 1883, Volume III, p. 733.

⁵¹ JoVSA (XVII, 3) p. 211.