Chapter 11

Twelve days in May 1890, peg-box letters, and necks

The peg-box of the *Messiah* violin has the letter *G* inked inside;
the sound-box of the *Messiah* violin has dimensions which do not correspond
with Stradivari's *G* mould.[1]

Charles Beare has provided the following narrative:

> They [the Hills] sold it [the *Salabue/Le Messie* violin]. They delivered it to Mr. Crawford in Edinburgh. Twelve days after it arrived in London [6th May 1890]. They did not then see it until the monograph came out in April 1891.[2] Mr. Crawford received the monograph. Was furious. There was then a row involving lawyers for the next three months because the Hills had mentioned in their monograph other instruments like the Tuscans being pretty much comparable.[3] Only the Messiah was better.[4] But Mr. Crawford took offense at that. The bad feeling moldered on for quite a number of years. The next time there was any record of the Hills having seen the Messiah was in January 1902 just before their book came out when Alfred Hill went to Edinburgh to collect Mr. Crawford's other two violins and bring them back for sale.[5] Now, 12 days is not a long time to make a clear, careful study of the Messiah Strad, or any other Strad, but to find the letter G in the peg box.[6] Now, I've seen[7] the Messiah at least eight times, and I was fascinated by your article[8] to find out that there is a G in the peg box because I had never noticed it on eight examinations […].[9]
>
> From Vuillaume's family the violin passed for 2000 pounds, a world record price, to W. E. Hill & Sons in 1890. The purchase was agreed on April 26th, 1890, and Alfred Hill left for Paris to fetch it on [Saturday] May the 3rd and returned with it on the evening of [Tuesday] the 6th. On the morning of the 7th, Robert Crawford saw it,[10] and on [Monday] the 19th it was handed over to him [in Edinburgh] by Arthur Hill; 12 days only at Hill's [*sic*]. […] As it happens, when the Hill monograph on the Messie came out in April 1891, Mr. Crawford was very upset by it and fell out with the Hills in a big way, lawyers and all, apparently for mentioning other more or less comparable Stradivaris. There is no evidence in Arthur Hill's diary that the Hills ever saw the Messie again until a visit of Alfred Hill to Edinburgh in January 1902, just before the book came out.[11] Stewart's[12] claim that the "G" in the peg box was not present when the Hill Stradivari book came out in 1902 can only be nonsense. Like me on my brief visits [to the Ashmolean] on and off

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[1] It would be physically impossible to fit Stradivari's *G* mould (Museo del Violino, Cremona) inside the rib 'garland' of the *Messiah* violin.

[2] This is probably a slip of the tongue on the part of Charles Beare. He probably meant 'They did not then see it again before the monograph came out in April 1891.' The monograph is the Hills' *"The Salabue Stradivari"* of 1891.

[3] The 'Tuscan' instruments made by Stradivari are not mentioned in the Hills' 1891 monograph. Charles Beare's train of thought appears to have been confused by the Hills' publication, in 1889, of a monograph on the Stradivari *Tuscan* violin of 1690, made for Grand Prince Ferdinand, the son of Cosimo III de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany.

[4] The sense here is unclear.

[5] Precisely which two violins are here being referred to is unclear.

[6] It is probable that Beare meant to say 'let alone find the letter 'G' in the peg-box'.

[7] By 'seen' Beare probably means 'handled and closely examined'.

[8] Stewart Pollens's article, *Le Messie*, JoVSA (XVI, 1) pp. 77-101.

[9] Charles Beare's spoken commentary, made at the 28th Convention of the Violin Society of America (November 2000) and assumed to have been transcribed from a recording, is in JoVSA (XVII, 3) pp. 169-170.

[10] Presumably Robert Crawford was in London on this date.

[11] This statement confirms the present author's proposition that the Hills' 1902 comments regarding the peg-box letter(s) of the *Le Messie* violin were formulated in 1890 (see later in this chapter).

[12] Stewart Pollens.

> over the years, the Hills in 12 busy days [in May 1890] simply didn't notice it, or else in 12 years [between 1890 and 1902] forgot that it was there.[13]

The workshop at the Hills' New Bond Street shop may well have been busy during those 12 days in May 1890 but, nonetheless, the Hills

1. had the time to remove the front plate of *Le Messie* and make a facsimile of the inscription which had been added by Vuillaume[14]
2. had the time, while the front plate was removed, to detach Vuillaume's bass bar, make another, stronger, bass bar, and fit it[15]
3. had the time to carefully inspect the interior: 'Excepting for the change of bar, everything inside is as Stradivari left it'[16]
4. had the time to have the instrument played: 'it is our opinion after a careful trial that the instrument would be greatly improved in tone by further use'[17]
5. had the time to make a 'careful examination' of the label.[18]

There was also enough time to allow Mr Shirley Slocombe (1872-1935) to paint three portraits of the violin (reproduced in the Hills' 1891 monograph) and, presumably, enough time for the Hills to make the written notes which would subsequently be incorporated into the monograph. In addition, the Hills would surely have cleaned the violin, brushed out all the dirt and dust from within the peg-box, checked the friction-fit of the four pegs in their tapered holes, and fitted a new bridge and a new set of strings. Twelve days is certainly long enough to allow a glance inside a violin's peg-box.

Despite the multiple articles about the *Messiah* violin appearing in *The Strad* in August 2001 and in March 2011, it was not until the 2011 publication of *Musical Instruments in the Ashmolean Museum: The Complete Collection* – with its single small photograph of the *Messiah* violin's peg-box letter *G* and the adjacent impressed stars (see Plate 26) – that, for the first time, those not closely connected with the *Messiah* violin were able to see this feature.[19]

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[13] Charles Beare, in JoVSA (XVII, 3) p. 188.
[14] Hill (1891) p. 24.
[15] *Ibid.* p. 23.
[16] *Ibid.* p. 24.
[17] *Ibid.* p. 31.
[18] *Ibid.* p. 25.
[19] See MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 160. The same *G*-letter photograph appears in the catalogue of the 2013 Ashmolean Museum *Stradivarius* exhibition (Beare *et al.* (2013) p. 181).

Plate 26: The *Messiah* violin peg-box letter *G* and impressed stars. Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

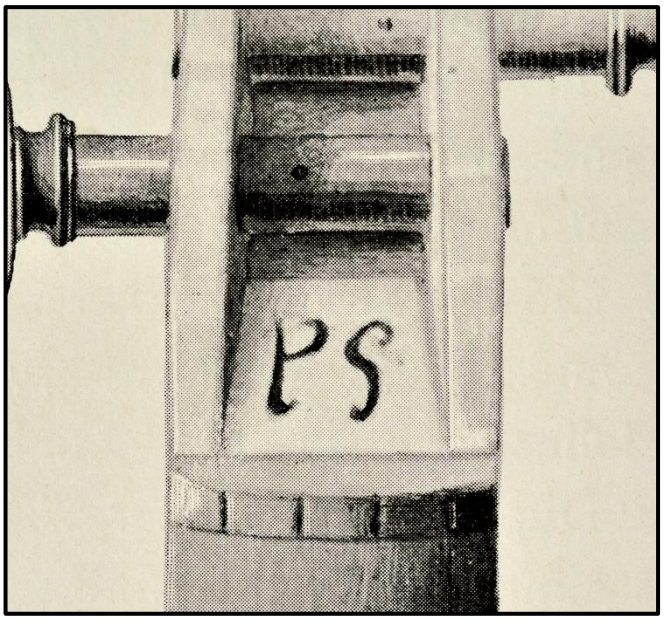

Plate 27: The 1715 *Alard* violin peg-box letters *PS* [PG] (Hill (1902), fig. 20, p. 60)

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> The neck of [Stradivari's 1715] "Alard" [violin] is original, and in the mortise [excavation] of the head [i.e. in the peg-box], still visible, are written the initials P.S. (see fig. 20) [see Plate 27]. We conjecture that these initials are those of Paolo Stradivari, and they possibly indicate that the violin was one of those which came into his possession on the death of his brother Francesco in 1742.[20] We have found these initials marked in six other violins, all of which obviously retain their original necks, otherwise the letters would have been cut away when grafting on the new one:[21] the most notable are that owned by M. Soil, dated 1714; the "Blunt", dated 1721; and the "Sarasate", dated 1724. On the other hand, we would point out that the "Messie" violin, which was sold by Paolo Stradivari to Count Cozio,[22] also has the original neck, but does not appear to have been so marked.[23]

Stradivari's 1715 *Alard* violin has been owned by an anonymous collector since 1981, but was loaned to the 2013 Ashmolean Museum *Stradivarius* exhibition (this was the first time that the violin had been seen in a public exhibition). No photograph of the peg-box letters was included in the exhibition catalogue, but the letters, with only a little difficulty, were visible to the naked eye even though the violin was displayed within a glass cabinet:

[20] Francesco died in 1743.
[21] See later in this chapter for details of neck grafting.
[22] A statement which has no secure evidential support.
[23] Hill (1902) pp. 60-61. The Hills say nothing about any stars which might have been impressed within the peg-boxes of the identified violins.

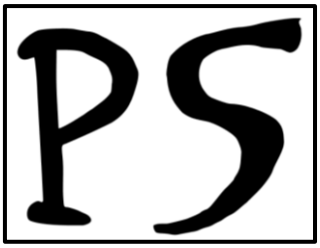

Figure 2: Author's rendering of the 1715 *Alard* violin peg-box *PS* [PG] letters
(see also Plate 27).

From the present author's illustration (Figure 2) it must be acknowledged that the second letter is more readily understood as an *S* than as a *G*, but a *G* might have been the intended understanding. The only known dimension of the 1715 *Alard* violin is the body length of 356mm;[24] if this was calliper-defined then the most likely source mould for the violin would be the extant *PG* mould.[25]

If the Hills' 'we have found these initials' indicated their observation of the specific letters *PS* (as they interpreted them) inside the peg-boxes of six violins other than the 1715 *Alard* then it is curious that they identify only three of those six violins. The three unidentified (but *PS*-lettered) violins may not have been amongst 'the most notable' but, with original necks, and peg-box letters which were still visible, they would have been extremely rare instruments and worthy of specific identification. Even within the Hills' group of three identified violins there are perplexing discrepancies: for example, if the Hills' statement was letter-specific the 1714 *Soil* violin ought to have *PS* inked inside its peg-box. However, the one-piece neck/partial peg-box, when displayed at the Museo Stradivariano (MSCr. no. 128), had an information label which stated:

> *Manico originale del violino "Soil" del 1714. Sulla parte inferiore della cassetta dei piroli é leggibile la lettera G, indicante la forma con la quale fu construito il violino. Dono S. F. Sacconi, precedentemente Coll. L. Witten.*
>
> Original neck of the 1714 *Soil* violin. In the lower part of the box of tuning pegs is readable the letter G, indicating the form [mould] with which the violin was constructed. Donated by S[imone] F. Sacconi, previously in the collection of L. Witten.[26]

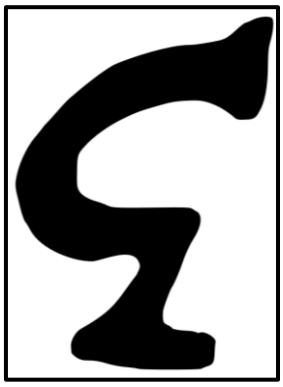

Figure 3: Author's rendering of the 1714 *Soil* violin
manico originale peg-box letter *G*

[24] Beare *et al*. (2013) p. 170.

[25] Stewart Pollens (Pollens (2010) p. 80) states that the 1715 *Alard* violin 'was made on the PG form'.

[26] 'L. Witten' is assumed to be Laurence C. Witten II (1926-1995) who collected instruments, labels, and documents, which today are housed at the National Music Museum, in Dakota, USA. The Cozio.com website (accessed November 2011) did not indicate ownership of the 1714 *Soil* violin, at any point, by Laurence Witten, so how he obtained the neck, and why (or when) he passed it to Sacconi (if that is what he did) is not known. A November 1983 typewritten inventory (Sackler Library, Oxford), prepared by Laurence Witten and Cora Witten, of all their to-be-sold instruments, bows, labels, and documents, contains no mention of the Stradivari 1714 *Soil* violin or the neck of that violin.

Since the Hills' statement – 'we have found these initials [i.e. *PS*] …' – is specifically applied to the 1714 *Soil* violin, it must be concluded that:

1. the violin passed through the New Bond Street workshop at some point prior to the writing of the 1902 monograph[27]
2. 'these initials' is letter-specific (even if the *PG* letters were interpreted by the Hills as *PS*). Ernest Doring states that:

   > The "Soil" violin [of 1714] bears the initials "PS" on the inner surface of the neck where it enters the peg-box […].[28]

3. the Museo Stradivariano/Museo del Violino *manico originale*, marked with the letter *G*, cannot be the original neck of the 1714 *Soil* violin.

One possible explanation is that the neck/peg-box which is exhibited in Cremona came from the Stradivari *Soil* violin of 1708 (also known by the soubriquet *Straus*) which was listed on Cozio.com (ID 479) with a length of 360mm.[29] If this measurement was made with a flexible tape (a tailor's tape) then a calliper equivalent would likely be 358.5mm which would be entirely plausible as a derivative from the length of the *G* mould.

In 1911 the Paris dealers, Caressa & Français, wrote a lenghty and detailed description of the 1714 Stradivari violin belonging to *A. Soil, à Tournai*; the text includes: *dans la mortaise P.S. incrustées* ('in the [peg-box] cavity are the inlaid letters P.S.').[30]

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The first letter within the peg-box of the 1721 *Lady Blunt* violin – *P* – is rather 'chunky', with a strongly inked 'foot' at the bottom of the stem (see Plate 28a). However, unlike the *Alard*, the second letter in the *Lady Blunt* peg-box is very clearly, and unambiguously, a *G*. It is difficult to believe that someone with as sophisticated and refined sense of draughtsmanship as Antonio Stradivari – consider the painstaking precision and beauty of the inlaid decorations on his *Cipriani Potter*, *Rode*, *Sunrise*, or *Hellier* violins – could have drawn the *PG* letters in the unsubtle manner in which they appear within the peg-box of the *Lady Blunt* violin (which also reveals no sign of any impressed stars). If, as proposed later in this chapter, Antonio Stradivari made one-size necks for his violins, and thus had no need to ink any identifying letters inside any peg-box, the authorship of the extant peg-box letters becomes questionable.

Writing of the *Lady Blunt* violin, Christopher Reuning[31] states:

> The handwriting and letter form of the 'PG' in the peg-box of the 'Lady Blunt' exactly match the inscription on the 'PG' Stradivari form [mould] exhibited in the Museo Stradivariano in Cremona.[32]

Reference to Plate 28a and Plate 28b (below) demonstrates that the *PG* letters inside the peg-box of the *Lady Blunt* violin, and the inked *PG* letters on Stradivari's mould, do not 'exactly match'.

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[27] According to the Cozio.com website (accessed June 2013) the Hills were never the owners of this violin.
[28] Doring p. 176.
[29] Cozio.com website accessed October 2012.
[30] See *Stradivari's 1714 Soil violin, peg-box letters, and Caressa & Français*; free to read at www.themessiahviolin.uk.
[31] From the American violin dealers, Reuning and Son Violins, Boston, USA.
[32] See Christopher Reuning's article *A Lady in Waiting*. http://tarisio.com/wp/lady-blunt-reuning-article/. The same quoted text appears in the Tarisio.com publicity brochure which was issued prior to the 2011 internet auction of the *Lady Blunt* violin.

Furthermore, while it seems implausible that the Hills could have looked at the peg-box letters of the *Lady Blunt* violin and interpreted the second letter as an *S*, in a letter to Robert Bower, dated 23rd January 1941 and signed 'William E. Hill & Sons' the following opinion is still given:

> We assume that the initials P.S. in the mortice of the head are those of Antonio's son, Paolo, into whose possession the ninety instruments left by the Master on his death, passed by way of inheritance.

The same text appears in a letter from Albert Edgar Phillips Hill to Samuel Bloomfield, dated 18th September 1959. Two certificates, dated 23rd January 1941 and 18th September 1959, both identify the initials 'P.S.' in the mortise of the head.[33] The reason for the Hills' mis-interpretation of the letter *G* in the peg-box of the *Lady Blunt* violin is unknown; perhaps their 1902 text concerning peg-box letters should be viewed with caution.

With respect to the Stradivari 1724 *Sarasate* violin (Musée de la Musique, Paris), photographic evidence (viewable on the Musée website) confirms that the letters *PG* are inked inside the peg-box.[34]

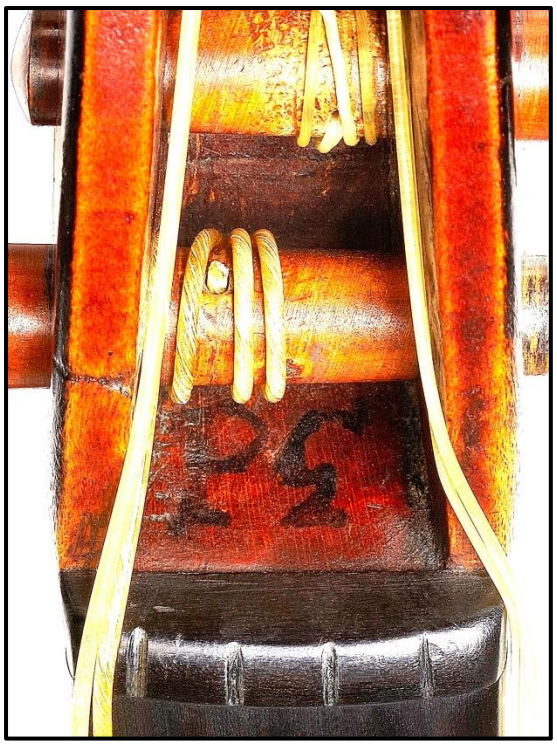

Plate 28a: The 1721 *Lady Blunt* violin peg-box letters *PG*.
Image by permission of Tarisio.com

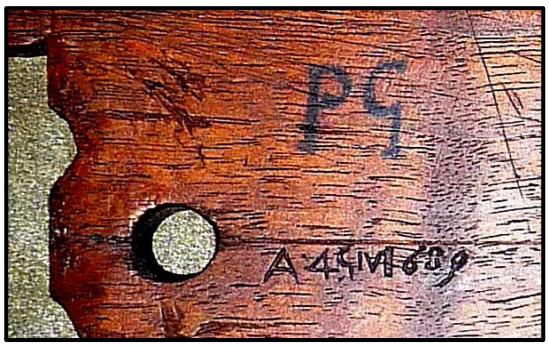

Plate 28b: The Stradivari *PG* mould (1689)

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The Hills' 1902 commentary regarding the peg-box of the *Le Messie* violin – 'does not appear to have been so marked' – raises more questions than it provides answers. Does their phraseology indicate the

[33] The details of these letters and certificates were sourced (by kind permission of Tarisio.com) from the Tarisio.com 2011 *Lady Blunt* publicity brochure (no pagination); the details were also available at http://tarisio.com/wp/2011/04/the-lady-blunt-stradivarius-of-1721/#Certificates (accessed November 2013). Paolo only inherited the ninety instruments after the death of his two elder brothers, Omobono (1742) and Francesco (1743).

[34] In the printed version of the present book the author included an inaccurate rendering of the *PG* letters found in the peg-box of the *Sarasate* violin ('Figure 4' on page 160) based on a poor-quality photograph supplied to him by the Musée de la Musique in Paris. 'Figure 4' has been deleted from the present electronic version **but the sequential numbering for subsequent Figures has been left unaltered**.

absence of the specific letters '*PS*' inside the violin's peg-box (but another letter, or letters, might have been present instead) or does it indicate that there was no lettering whatsoever within the peg-box?[35] The latter interpretation is perfectly valid, especially in the light of the Hills' usage of 'On the other hand' when introducing the (apparently contrary) condition of the peg-box of the *Le Messie* violin. In addition, the Hills' uncertainty of expression – 'We conjecture' – 'they possibly indicate' – 'does not appear to have been so marked' – is noticeable, yet they include in their 1902 monograph

1. an illustration of the mould made by Stradivari for the *Medici* tenor viola of 1690, clearly showing the inked letters *.T. .V.* in the centre of the mould and the letters *TV* lower down[36]
2. an illustration of a Stradivari sound-hole-positioning template with the inscription *Musura per la forma B per far li occhi del violoncello* ('Measure for the *B* mould for making the eyes of the cello').[37]

The Hills, having visited the Marchese Dalla Valle in Italy, also write of Stradivari's moulds:

> Several have Stradivari's writing or markings on them – the date when constructed, and letters such as S., L. or B., the object of which seems to have been to identify the patterns belonging to a given form [mould], all of which were similarly lettered.[38]

Thus, by 1902, the Hills were familiar with identification letters – from moulds and from patterns – and they were fairly certain that they understood the function of these letters, yet, within their 1902 monograph there is only the ambiguous comment, previously quoted, concerning the *Le Messie* violin's peg-box (and there is not a word about the impressed stars). In their earlier (1891) *Salabue/Le Messie* monograph the peg-box is not mentioned.

A possible explanation for the Hills' initial silence (in 1891) with respect to the peg-box of the *Le Messie* violin might be that, in May 1890, when the violin arrived from Paris, the Hills were entirely unaware of component-identification letters, and their function, and therefore would not have understood the significance of a peg-box letter (if observed). However, the third volume of the first edition of *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by George Grove, had already been published[39] and Edward J. Payne, author of the *Dictionary* article on Stradivari,[40] not only acknowledges the help given to him by 'the members of the firm of W. E. Hill & Sons […]'[41] but also provides copious detail about Stradivari's moulds, identifying the two viola moulds – *CV* and *TV* – and 'another tenor [viola] mould' (probably the MSCr. 55 mould) as well as the violin moulds marked *SL*, *S*, *P*, and *T*. Payne also identifies both *B* moulds and 'a mould for a child's violin with the blocks attached' (probably MSCr. 153).[42] For the Hills, in 1890, to observe a similar letter in a violin's peg-box but, in a monograph on that violin, make no comment about such a letter, is perplexing.

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[35] The intended understanding of the word 'so' is crucial.

[36] Hill (1902) p. 194.

[37] *Ibid.* p. 196.

[38] *Ibid* p. 206. There is no extant Stradivari mould which has only the single letter *L* inked (or incised) upon it; the 9th November 1691 mould has the letters *SL*.

[39] Macmillan and Co., London, 1883.

[40] *Ibid.* pp. 724-734.

[41] *Ibid.* p. 734, footnote. Payne's *Stradivari* article, in Grove's *Dictionary*, is cited by the Hills (Hill (1891) p. 9, footnote).

[42] E J Payne's *Stradivari* article, in Grove's *Dictionary*, was built upon his first-hand experience of visiting the 1881 National Italian Exhibition, in Milan, and seeing the Stradivari items loaned by Marchese Rolando Giuseppe Dalla Valle. According to Federico Sacchi (Sacchi, p. 22, note 15) 'It was on this occasion that Mr. Payne copied from Strad's models [moulds and patterns] the various inscriptions […].' For most of the items which he describes Payne supplies the identification numbers used by the Dalla Valle family – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 16, 18, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30 – and states that 'The Della Valle collection includes […] no less than eleven violin moulds' (but he identifies, by letter, only six full-size violin moulds, and makes no mention of, for example, the *PG* and *G* moulds). However, the Hills (Hill (1902) p. 206) write: 'As

Alternatively, perhaps it was not until after the publication of their 1891 *Salabue* monograph that the Hills travelled to Italy – 'Examination of the moulds possessed by the Marchese Dalla Valle […]'[43] – but they specify no date for their trip, nor their precise destination, nor, for certainty of identification, the complete name of the Marchese. In the Preface to the 1902 first edition of their *Antonio Stradivari* monograph the Hills express their personal gratitude:

> To the Marquis dalla Valle we are under an exceptional debt of gratitude for having freely accorded us access to his unique collection of Stradivari relics.[44]

This 1902 Preface is apparently replicated in the 1909 second edition but a comparison reveals that some of the 1902 text is omitted in the second edition and the expression of gratitude is re-worded:

> To the late Marquis Alessandro Dalla Valle we are under an exceptional debt of gratitude for having freely accorded us access to his unique collection of Stradivari relics.[45]

As indicated in Chapter 2, the Marchese Alessandro Dalla Valle received the Stradivari moulds in 1891 after the death of his father, Rolando Giuseppe Dalla Valle. If both of the Hills' expressions of gratitude refer to Alessandro (d. 1905) then the Hills' visit to Italy took place after 1891. It is curious that the Hills' 1902 (and identical 1909) information regarding mould letters – 'such as S., L. or B.,' – should, in the light of E J Payne's 1883 *Stradivari* article, and in the light of the Hills' visit to Italy where, apparently, they saw sixteen violin moulds and three viola moulds, be limited to just three examples.[46]

Commentators need to tread carefully through this peg-box minefield in the light of the ambiguities of the Hills' 1902 statement. In 2011 John Dilworth and Carlo Chiesa wrote about the peg-box *G* letter of the *Messiah* violin:

> A surprising phrase in the Hill book states that 'the Messie … also has the original neck but does not appear to be so marked'. The 'Messie' does in fact bear a mark in the peg-box, but it is clearly a 'G' with small star-shaped brands impressed into the wood on either side. […] At the time when the Hills were preparing their book for publication in 1902, the 'Messie' was not in their possession. They make no comment at all on the matter in the 1891 monograph on the instrument. Nevertheless, they were technically right to say in the more comprehensive publication of 1902 that there was no 'PS' marking in the 'Messie' peg-box.[47] But their observation that seven Stradivari violins bear the 'PS' is also plainly wrong: none of the instruments cited is so marked. Some, like the 'Alard' are inscribed 'PG', but the 'Soil', another of those mentioned, is plainly marked 'G' and was made on the 'G' mould.[48]

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previously mentioned, the moulds number nineteen, of which sixteen are for violins and three for violas; […].' Payne also writes: 'In 1716 [Stradivari] made new models [moulds] for a violoncello (Della Valle Collection, no. 16)', but the Hills (Hill (1902) p. 206) state that 'those [moulds] required for viols and for violoncellos are not extant.' It is unclear how the seven violin moulds described in 1823 by Count Cozio (ms. Cozio 72; see Chapter 2) – of which only three were left by the time of Giuseppe Carli's 1841 unsold/left-over inventory (ms. Cozio 84; see Chapter 2) – could increase to eleven by 1881 and sixteen thereafter.

[43] Hill (1902) p. 195.

[44] *Ibid.* Preface, p. viii.

[45] Hill (1909) Preface, p. viii.

[46] See Hill (1902) p. 195 and p. 206; Hill (1909) p. 203 and p. 215.

[47] But the Hills do not specifically say this. See also (later in this chapter) the text of John Dilworth's 2001 letter to *The Strad.*

[48] MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 161. Dimensionally it is more likely that the 1714 *Soil* violin was made around the extant *PG* mould. Charles Beare (Beare p. 318) specifies the back-plate bout widths of the 1714 *Soil* violin as 167.5, 109.5, and 206.5mm, and the body length as 356.5mm (back plate) and 355.2mm (front plate). Subtracting the present author's proposed 7.3mm 'extension' (see Chapter 2) produces source-mould bout widths of 160.2, 102.2, and 199.2mm, and a mould length of 348.6mm. Simone Sacconi (Sacconi (1972) p. 106) specifies the bout widths of the extant *PG* mould as 161, 103, and 200mm, and the mould length, including the upper and lower block-inserts, as 348mm.

The fact that the *Le Messie* violin was not in the Hills' possession when they were preparing their 1902 monograph is not germane. In the anonymous Postscript to the Hills' 1976 re-publication of their 1891 *Salabue* monograph the writer states:

> At the time that our monograph was published in 1891 the "Messie" Stradivari was in the hands of Mr. Crawford of Edinburgh. It remained in his possession until the year 1904 when it was repurchased by our firm.[49]

Precisely because the *Le Messie* violin was not seen by the Hills after it was handed over to Robert Crawford in May 1890 (and thus the instrument was in Edinburgh during the years when the 1902 monograph was being written and prepared for publication) the Hills could only make their 1902 comment – 'does not appear to be so marked' – having inspected the violin's peg-box during the twelve days in May 1890 when the violin was in their New Bond Street shop. In their April 1891 monograph they chose to make no mention of such an inspection and its outcome. Only in 1902, as a single sentence comment within their 300-page book on the life and work of Stradivari, do they mention the internal condition of the peg-box (but in a manner which is ambiguous and unreliable).

To summarise: neither an argument which interprets the Hills' 1902 text as indicating that the *Le Messie* violin had no peg-box lettering whatsoever, nor an alternative argument which claims that the Hills saw a peg-box letter *G* in May 1890 but chose not to say anything about it in their 1891 monograph, is completely convincing. However, for the Hills – internationally renowned, and the absolute authority on all matters concerning violins, especially Italian violins, and most especially Stradivari violins – to have seen the letter *G* in May 1890 but then draw a veil over their lack of understanding through, firstly, silence, and then, in 1902, an opaque manner of expressing themselves, is quite out of character. The balance of probability is that, in 1890, there was no lettering within the peg-box of the *Le Messie* violin.[50] When Robert Crawford sold the *Le Messie* violin back to the Hills in 1904 the entire violin – including the peg-box – would surely have been closely inspected for any sign of deterioration or damage, especially since Crawford was a player, not just a collector. The same procedure would have been implemented in 1914 when the violin was sold to Richard Bennett, and again in 1928 when Bennett sold the violin back to the Hills. If the violin was without a letter inside the peg-box in 1890 it should still have been without a letter in 1928. If, by 1978-79, when John Dilworth and Roger Hargrave were examining the violin at the Ashmolean Museum (see later in this chapter), the internal front face of the *Messiah* violin's peg-box was displaying the letter *G* (and two impressed stars) the addition can only have been made between 1928 and *circa* 1975. It is here suggested that the shaping of the present-day letter *G* within the peg-box (see Plate 26) was modelled on the letter inked inside the (alleged) *Soil* neck (see Figure 3 of this chapter), or the illustrative photograph of the same which appeared in Simone Sacconi's *I "Segreti"* publication of 1972 (or its translated-into-English publication of 1979). The identity of the person responsible for inking the *Messiah* violin's letter *G* – if this proposed sequence of events is correct – will likely never be known.[51]

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[49] Hill (1976) p. 33. See also footnote 11 of this chapter.

[50] Ernest Doring (Doring p. 177) states: 'Most famous of the ten violins which Count Cozio acquired subsequent to the death of Paolo, the "Le Messie," although it was intact with its original neck, had no mark upon it. It seems obvious, therefore, that Paolo had some reason for marking certain instruments.' Whether Doring was writing from personal experience of examining the "Le Messie" peg-box is not known.

[51] In the ''Messiah' on trial' article by Stewart Pollens which appeared in the August 2001 issue of *The Strad*, p. 855, there is a monochrome, life-size, photograph of the *Messiah* violin's peg-box (the camera positioned directly in front of the peg-box). The peg-box is empty – no pegs, no strings. The photograph was taken 'around 1980' and appears in *The Strad* 'courtesy of John Pringle'. The photograph was clearly taken as a frontal study of the scroll and its asymmetric eyes, but the internal front face of the peg-box cavity can be seen. While it must be acknowledged that the internal front face is almost parallel to the axis of the camera lens it is also the case that no evidence can be observed for an inked letter *G* or two

It is now accepted that the letter *G* in the *Messiah* peg-box is incorrect; the *Messiah* violin's dimensions correspond more closely to the extant *PG* mould. The only method of establishing the historical truth of the inked letter *G* in the peg-box would be to remove a fragment of the ink and subject it to forensic evaluation and chemical analysis to determine the composition and age of the ink.

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One other violin which has a letter *G* inked inside its peg-box is the so-called *Medici* violin of 1716,[52] owned since 1863 by what is now *L'Istituto Luigi Cherubini* in Florence. This violin has been described by Gabriele Rossi-Rognoni:

> The instrument is improperly named "Medici" as it in fact appears in the Grand ducal collections only in 1819, after the restoration of the Grand Duchy [of Tuscany] and the return of the [house of Habsburg-] Lorraine to Florence. No evidence of its previous history has yet surfaced. […] The head [scroll and peg-box] is grafted onto a new neck. A letter "G" is clearly inscribed in ink at the base of the inside of the peg-box, in a peculiar handwriting very similar to the letter "G" that can be found in the same position on the original neck of the "Soil" violin of 1714 […].[53]

The mystery of this violin is only deepened by the letter *G* inked on the internal front face of the peg-box, beneath the fingerboard nut (see Figure 5). If the original neck (with a peg-box letter *G*) was worn down to the point where it needed to be replaced then a new neck would be grafted onto the old scroll/peg-box; it would be highly unusual for the repairer/restorer to have carefully inked a replica letter *G* on the peg-box face of the new neck. An alternative possibility might be that there was no letter inked inside the original peg-box and the letter *G* was inked at the time of a neck-grafting operation, perhaps to lend false authenticity to the violin (and the neck-grafting operation itself may have been entirely unnecessary and an attempt to mislead).

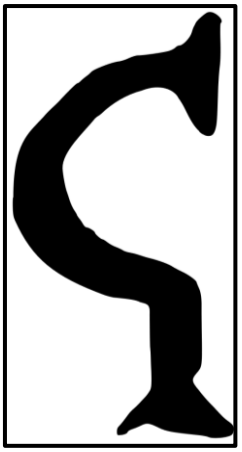

Figure 5: Author's rendering of the 1716 (1710?) *Medici* violin peg-box *G* letter
(from a photograph by Marco Rabatti and Serge Domingie).

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impressed star shapes. It is likely that the photograph was taken to aid John Pringle's 1980 technical drawing of the *Le Messie* violin (published in 1980 by the Ashmolean Museum in conjunction with W. E. Hill & Sons); there is no indication within Pringle's comprehensive technical drawings of any peg-box letter. Copies of the technical drawing are still available for purchase from the Ashmolean Museum.

[52] The photograph of the violin's label, on the Galleria dell'Accademia website (http://cherubini-opac.polomuseale.firenze.it, inventory number 1988/003, accessed March 2014) suggests that the label date may originally have been I*710*; the final numeral appears to have had an upper 'tail' added to change it to a *6*.

[53] Brandmair and Greiner p. 286. A photograph of the *Medici* peg-box letter *G* is not provided in Brandmair and Greiner's publication.

The *Medici* violin is described in Leto Bargagna's 1911 catalogue of the instruments owned by *L'Istituto Cherubini*[54] but Bargagna makes no mention of any peg-box letter. The violin is further described on page 30 of the 1980/81 catalogue which was published by Giunti-Barbèra, Florence – *Antichi Strumenti dalla raccolta dei Medici e dei Lorena alla formazione del Museo del Conservatorio di Firenze* (*Conservatorio di Musica Luigi Cherubini*) – but, again, no mention is made of any peg-box letter.

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In August 2001 a set of six articles relating to the *Messiah* violin were published in *The Strad*.[55] Subsequently, the magazine's editor received letters from Roger Hargrave and from John Dilworth. Roger Hargrave concludes his letter with:

> For what it is worth, I have probably handled the 'Messiah' more than anyone else alive. Having checked my earliest records on the violin, I find these were made between 1978 and 1980. In my notes I documented the letter 'G' set above two small stars on the peg-box end below the nut.[56]

The letter from John Dilworth includes, with respect to the Hills' 1902 comments concerning peg-box letters, the following:

> The clear intention of their statement is simply that certain instruments by Stradivari with original necks appear to be signed inside the peg-box by Paolo Stradivari but the 'Messiah' is not. Quite so: it does not bear a PS or PG, but a G, for which the Hills had at that time no explanation, and therefore did not elaborate upon. Nowhere do they say or imply that there is no marking whatsoever in the 'Messiah' peg-box.[57]

The Hills' comment – 'On the other hand, we would point out that the "Messie" violin […] does not appear to have been so marked' – is certainly not as unambiguous as stating 'has no marking whatsoever' but, conversely, Dilworth's proposition that the Hills '… had at that time [1902] no explanation' for the letter *G*, and therefore said nothing about it, sits against the Hills' visit to Italy where they saw Stradivari's lettered moulds and patterns.

Dilworth continues:

> I have been observing the violin since 1979, and on the first page of notes I made on the instrument is a sketch of the G inscription in the peg-box. It is a flat ink marking on a dull unvarnished surface, and virtually invisible unless under direct light.[58]

Thus, in the years around 1980, both Roger Hargrave and John Dilworth were handling and inspecting the *Messiah* violin on a regular basis at the Ashmolean Museum. They both observed the *G* mark in the peg-box, and Hargrave, at least, also observed the two impressed stars.[59] However, others were

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[54] Gli strumenti musicale raccolti nel Museo R. Istituto L. Cherubini a Firenze, pp. 15-16. Leto Bargagna was Secretary to the Institute.

[55] 1) 'Stranger than fiction' by Joanna Pieters; 2) 'Pure thrill' by John Dilworth; 3) 'The dating game' by John Topham; 4) ''Messiah' on trial' by Stewart Pollens; 5) 'Into the woods' by Kristen Thorner; and 6) 'Holes in history' by Philip Kass.

[56] *The Strad*, October 2001, p. 1071.

[57] *Ibid.* p. 1071.

[58] *Ibid*. Cf. 'The few original Stradivari necks that survive have a prominent marking on the front face of the peg-box mortice [cavity] beneath the nut' (Dilworth and Chiesa, MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 161).

[59] Daniel Draley has written that, in 1984, he 'carefully examined' the *Messiah* violin for two hours, but apparently did not see a letter inked inside the peg-box nor two stars impressed into the wood (or, if he did, he thought it unnecessary to mention the fact in his subsequent article: 'The Salabue Stradivari', *The Strad*, May 1990, p. 359 and p. 362).

apparently not aware of the peg-box letter *G*, even as late as 1999, since Charles Beare,[60] at the Violin Society of America Convention of November 2000, commented:

> We certainly have to thank Stewart [Pollens] for pointing out the letter "G" in the peg-box of the Messie and the discrepancy arising from the body of the violin having been made on the form [mould] marked "PG" […].[61]

This *G*/*PG* discrepancy has generated much discussion: is it nothing more than a simple mistake made within Stradivari's busy workshop, or, in the light of Stradivari's acute sense of perfection, is it a mis-match which Stradivari could never have tolerated (and therefore its very existence raises doubts about its provenance)?

> The outline itself [of the *Messiah* violin] is unquestionably derived from the PG mould, and the presence of the letter G inked in the peg-box mortice is therefore anomalous, if it is assumed that this [letter] refers to the mould used to build the violin to which it is attached.[62] […] The inked 'G' on the neck [in the peg-box] of a violin made on the PG mould would only be truly anomalous, rather than a harmless workshop substitution, if the two were dimensionally incompatible: […].[63]

More recently, John Dilworth (with Carlo Chiesa) has reiterated his proposition regarding 'a harmless workshop substitution':

> Although some system existed in theory to match components,[64] in a busy workshop mistakes can be made and certainly a pragmatic substitution of one neck for another is a plausible explanation of the contrary inscription.[65]

Alternative opinion points towards Stradivari being a man obsessed with exactitude and certainty, a man for whom 'a harmless workshop substitution' would have been an anathema. Simone Sacconi evaluates Stradivari thus:

> The personality that emerges from the recovery of Stradivari's constructional process is that of a genial, reflective, methodical craftsman who left nothing to chance or improvisation […]. Every product of Stradivari – violins, various violas and violoncelli, lutes, guitars, harps, mandolas, mandolins, and *pochettes* – emerged, in every case, on paper [or 'on card' – *sulla carta*] and then models, defined down to the smallest detail, even if only of aesthetic value, such as the points [C-bout corners] or the scroll.[66]

The Hills, in 1902, also recognised Antonio's systematic approach to the art of violin making:

> They [Stradivari's drawings and patterns] bring us face to face with irrefutable evidence in support of the ideas we have formed of the man. Painstaking, thorough and careful to the smallest detail, we see him specially designing everything – even to bridge, pegs, and tail-piece – for a given instrument, and then further embellishing these fittings with painted or inlaid designs. He also turned his attention to the cases intended for the reception of his instruments, and carried his fervour to the point of making sketches for the locks and hinges. Nothing apparently was too

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[60] Until recently Charles Beare was Director of the violin dealership established in 1892 in London by John and Arthur Beare. Charles Beare is acknowledged as a world authority on string instruments, especially Italian instruments.

[61] JoVSA (XVII, 3) p. 187, referring to Pollens's *Le Messie* article in JoVSA (XVI, 1) pp. 77-101 (1999).

[62] It is unclear why such an assumption should be queried. Patrizia Frisoli (Frisoli, p. 41) writes: 'Each mould is marked with a letter to which, most likely, we must attach some meaning; this letter is clearly repeated on every element to be used to construct a specific instrument and also on the paper sheets in which they [the templates and designs] were wrapped.'

[63] J. Dilworth, 'Pure thrill', *The Strad*, August 2001, p. 843.

[64] It is unclear why a system of matching components through identification letters should be only theoretical.

[65] MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 161.

[66] Translated from Sacconi (1972) p. 1.

> unimportant for his attention, and the recognition of this veritable passion to leave nothing undone to ensure the success of the whole, throws a flood of light on his lifelong work.[67]

With all the components comprising a single instrument needing to be 'just so' it is understandable that they were marked with letters which matched the mould letterings already described. Thus, in Stradivari's workshop there were:

1. identically-lettered wooden templates for shaping the four C-bout corner blocks, and the upper and lower blocks, for each mould (some of these templates have subsequently been lost)
2. identically-lettered 'counter forms' – short rods of wood, precisely and individually shaped to match the curvatures of the various moulds' C-bout corners (see Plate 29, below). When secured with strong cord through pre-drilled holes in the mould, the counter forms pressed against the outside surface of the ribs when the ribs were being glued against the corner blocks. The surviving counter forms are marked with the letters *B*, *S*, *PG*, *P*, and *T*.[68]
3. neck patterns, made of card, which were also lettered: *CV*, *TV*, and *B*[69]
4. paper plans marked with the letter *P*, *G*, *CV*, or *TV* or, in the case of a cello, *B*, for the positioning and orientation of the *f*-holes.[70] The *f*-hole outline was then marked out using an appropriately-lettered paper template as a guide.
5. wooden templates for fingerboards, marked with identification letters: *P*, *G*, and *PG*[71]
6. wooden templates for the design of bridges, marked *Bo* and *Mo Bo*[72]
7. tail-piece templates, marked *MG* and *B*.[73]

The evidence clearly points towards Stradivari using same-letter components (for the sake of consistency and predictability) to create an instrument.

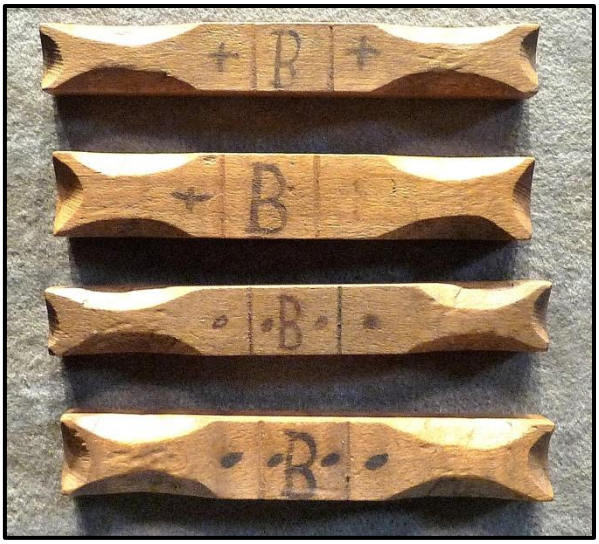

Plate 29: Counterforms for securing the ribs against the corner blocks when glueing.
The meaning of the dots and the plus signs is unknown.

[67] Hill (1902) p. 207.
[68] MSCr. (Museo Stradivariano, Cremona) 60-97.
[69] MSCr. 213, 53-54, and 61.
[70] MSCr. 116, 117, 210, 234, and 272.
[71] MSCr. 131-134.
[72] MSCr. 285-286.
[73] MSCr. 137-139.

Consideration of what might have been Stradivari's workshop practice with regard to neck stop,[74] body stop,[75] and fingerboard length, is aided by technical evidence from music composed during Stradivari's lifetime, in performances of which Stradivari's violins were likely to have been used. The weight of evidence is that Baroque composers working around 1700 usually did not require a violinist to shift his or her left hand any higher on the fingerboard than 'third' or 'fourth' position: fourth position on a violin's top string – E – would mean that the player's 'little' (fourth) finger would be able to reach the E one octave above the open string (see Figure 6). The Hills write: 'During Stradivari's lifetime no violin player went beyond the third or fourth position, consequently the neck and fingerboard as then fitted answered every purpose.'[76] However, Vivaldi, in his *Le Quattro Stagione* (*c*1720, i.e. within Stradivari's lifetime) requires the *Violino principale* to ascend as high as 'top A' (fourth finger when in seventh position); in his Violin Concerto in B flat major, RV583, Vivaldi requires B-flat, one semitone higher; in his Op. 7 no. 11 Concerto in D major, he requires one semitone higher still – B-natural (fourth finger in eighth position). However, the 'orchestral' violin parts of *Le Quattro Stagione* ascend no higher than fourth-position E, and, in the Op. 7 no. 11 concerto, the highest pitch for the orchestral violins is third-position/fourth finger D. Thus the 'ordinary' string player might never ascend higher than D or E above the treble-clef stave but Baroque virtuosi were required to play much higher.

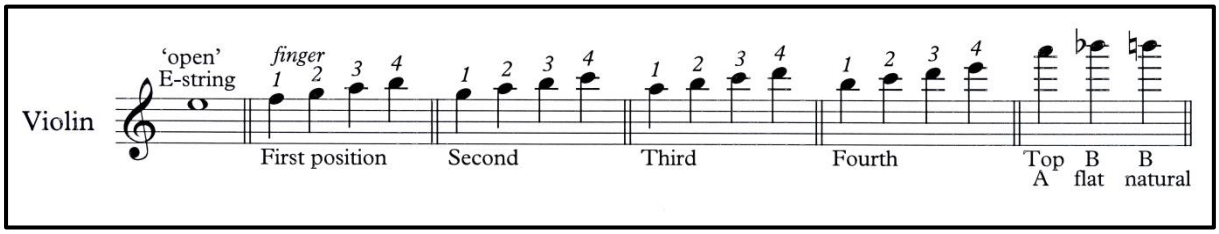

Figure 6: Violin E-string hand positions and resultant fingered pitches.

Technical difficulties for the early-eighteenth-century violinist were exacerbated by the manner in which a violin neck was constructed:

- The neck projected almost horizontally from the sound-box[77]
- Therefore, to ensure that the fingerboard would rise up over the front-plate's arching, a tapered slice of willow was fitted between the flat upper surface of the neck and the flat underside of the thin fingerboard.

[74] The distance from the front, vertical, face of the fingerboard nut to the edge of the top plate (adjacent to the neck-foot) is most usefully termed the 'neck stop' (but frequently termed, simply, the 'neck'). The nut sits on top of the flat upper surface of the neck behind the narrow end of the fingerboard (not on top of the fingerboard). Evidence suggests that Baroque-period nuts had a front-to-back depth of 4mm; the modern norm is 6mm.

[75] The position of the bridge on the violin's front plate is normally in line with the two inside 'nicks' of the *f*-holes. The distance from the bridge to the upper edge of the front plate, adjacent to the neck-foot, is termed the 'body stop' (or just the 'stop'). See Chapter 5, Figure 1.

[76] Hill (1902) p. 204.

[77] David Rubio (Gill p. 19) suggests from between 0 degrees (i.e. horizontal) to 2 degrees below horizontal (see also later in this chapter).

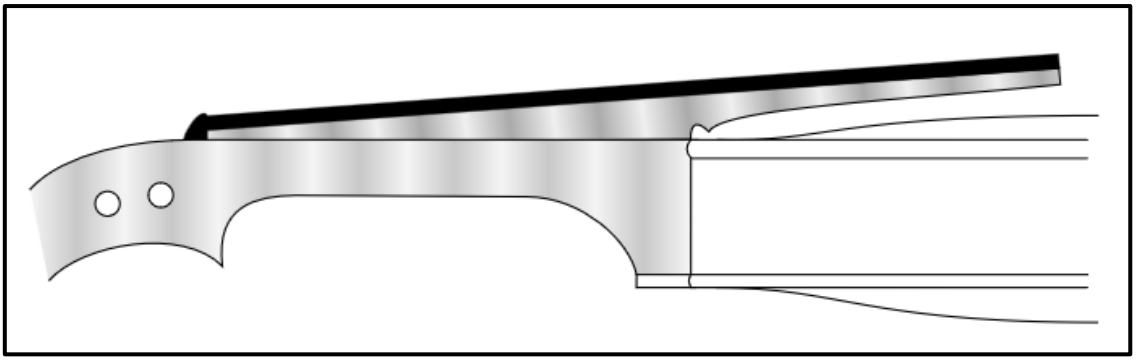

Figure 7: Baroque-period neck/fingerboard construction for a violin. See also Gill, p. 24.

For the player, this three-layer design (see Figure 7) meant that when shifting into higher positions – even just third or fourth positions – the player's left hand would be increasingly distorted and discomfited as the combined thickness of the neck, the in-between tapered slice, and the fingerboard, steadily increased; the left-hand thumb would be uncomfortably stretched around the increasing top-to-bottom depth of the neck. These shortcomings of design help explain why the highest pitch which most violinists were expected to be able to reach on the top string was just one octave higher than the 'open string'.[78] Only after *c*1780, when original violin necks were being removed, lengthened, and re-angled to five degrees below horizontal[79] – thus allowing the fingerboard to sit directly on the flat surface of the neck but still rise above the arching of the front plate – was an improved trajectory for the player's left hand established, thus enabling a more secure and reliable ascent to the stratospheric pitches being demanded by composers.[80]

A survey of 27 Stradivari violins reveals, from a range between 191.2mm and 199mm, an averaged body-stop measurement of 195.2mm.[81] Stradivari's normal neck stop was 125mm (see below), which, in conjunction with a body stop of 195.2mm, would produce a freely-vibrating string length of approximately 323mm.[82] The physics of a violin string of 323mm dictates that if the string is bowed or plucked while a fingertip 'stops' the string exactly halfway along the length (i.e. at 161.5mm from either the nut or the bridge) the sounding pitch will be exactly one octave higher than the pitch of the open string. On a violin's uppermost string this would be the 'top E' required by most Baroque composers from non-virtuoso violinists.

Logically, therefore, and as a bare minimum, a fingerboard of length 161.5mm would suffice for a non-virtuoso Baroque-period violinist. However, Stradivari's fingerboards were much longer than 161.5mm. Simone Sacconi provides the following measurements for the single violin fingerboard, and the five violin-fingerboard templates, which have survived:

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[78] Into this physical scenario should be inserted Baroque-period opinion concerning whether violinists should rest their instruments below or above the collarbone, and, if above the collarbone, should additionally use downward pressure from the chin to create additional security.

[79] See Johnson and Courtnall p. 161. David Rubio (Gill p. 19) suggests 5 – 7 degrees.

[80] Pictorial evidence additionally suggests that by 1800 players had moved the violin above the collarbone and were also using downwards pressure from the chin – to the right-hand side of the tail-piece – to steady the violin and thus free the left hand.

[81] Data from Beare pp. 316-321. The Hills (Hill (1931) p. 81) state that Stradivari's body stop was $7^5/_8$ inches (implying that there was never any deviation from this measurement, equivalent to 193.7mm).

[82] Combining the lengths of the neck stop and the body stop does not equal an instrument's freely-vibrating string length since the strings are angled upwards. On modern full-size violins (body length of 355-357mm) the two stop measurements are normally: neck stop 130mm, body stop 195mm (a ratio of 2:3), total 325mm. Measuring along the rising line of the strings would reveal a freely-vibrating string length (between the front edge of the nut and the top of the bridge) of 328mm.

MSCr. exhibit no. 129	21.3cms fingerboard
MSCr. exhibit no. 130	21.3cms fingerboard template
MSCr. exhibit no. 131	20.7cms template (marked with the letter *P*)
MSCr. exhibit no. 132	20.7cms template (marked with the letter *G*)
MSCr. exhibit no. 134	21.2cms template (marked with the letters *PG*)[83]
MSCr. exhibit no. 135	19cms template (with impressions for decorative inlay).[84]

Fingerboards resulting from the 213/207/212mm templates would have allowed the virtuoso player of 1720 (if he or she could cope with the difficulties created by the ever-increasing thickness of the neck) to ascend beyond the 'orchestral' fourth-position 'top E' as far as the high 'A' in *Le Quattro Stagione*, or the higher-still 'B' in Vivaldi's D major Violin Concerto. It is unclear whether Stradivari fitted fingerboards of these lengths because he was aware of, and therefore was responding to, the virtuoso demands being made by composers such as Vivaldi and Locatelli, or whether he determined his fingerboard length simply for reasons of visual and proportional harmony.

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With respect to necks, the term 'original' is a misnomer, for not one of Stradivari's violins now has a neck which is in exactly the same condition as when made by Antonio.

The data provided with the *Messiah* violin poster published by *The Strad* in March 2011 states that the original neck stop was 120.5mm. The lengthening and re-angling wedge inserted (apparently by Vuillaume) at the foot of the neck extends the neck stop to the current 129mm.

To this data can be added information derived from the *Lady Blunt* violin. This violin has always been accompanied by what is stated to be its original fingerboard, which is 213mm in length.[85] The neck stop for this violin is represented by the tapered slice of willow which is glued to the underside of the fingerboard (the slice being positioned between the front face of the nut and the edge of the front plate), and is 120mm.[86] The original neck stops of these two violins – *Messiah* and *Lady Blunt* – are therefore all but identical.

As previously mentioned, what has been stated to be the original neck of the Stradivari 1714 *Soil* violin (Museo Stradivariano exhibit 128) is today exhibited at the Museo del Violino in Cremona. The neck, at the peg-box end, does not have a nut, and, at the opposite end, there is part of a wooden wedge still attached (using wooden dowels) to the front face of the neck,[87] i.e. the neck, at an unknown date, was lengthened and, very probably, re-angled to approximately five degrees below horizontal by the addition of a triangular wooden wedge.

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[83] At first sight it is curious that the 212mm *PG* fingerboard template is longer than the 207mm fingerboard template which is linked to the large *G* mould, but perhaps this *PG* template is related to the present author's proposed *Più Grande* mould rather than a *Poco Grande* mould (see Chapter 2).

[84] All fingerboard and template information from Sacconi (1972) p. 201. The Hills (Hill (1902) p. 204) identify only three different sizes of Stradivari fingerboard: 7½ inches (190.5mm), $7^{7}/_{8}$ inches (200.0mm), and 8½ inches (215.9mm).

[85] The violin, the fingerboard, and the original bass bar were auctioned, as one lot, by Tarisio.com in 2011. Life-size colour photographs of the fingerboard can be found in the publicity brochure produced for the auction. Charles Beare defines the fingerboard length as 214mm (Beare p. 321).

[86] Charles Beare (Beare p. 321) states the same length.

[87] Sacconi (Sacconi (1972) p. 201) makes no written comment about this partial wedge even though it is photographed *ibid*. on p. 102.

The current overall length of the neck, from the edge of the peg-box cavity (i.e. where the *rear* face of the nut would be situated) to the front face of the wooden wedge, is 129mm.[88] The semi-circular shape of the neck-foot (including the remaining part of the wedge) suggests that it is equal to the original (pre-modified) foot, i.e. the original overall neck length was 129mm. From this length needs to be subtracted the 4mm front-to-back depth of a Baroque-period nut. Thus the original neck stop was 125mm.

Count Cozio di Salabue also measured the neck length on some of the instruments in his possession and, with respect to the large (360.95mm) 1716 Stradivari violin which he measured on 29th May 1816, he writes:

> *Manico longhezza come era dell'autore sino al capotasto polici quatro, ponti sette* [see footnote] *mancante di ponti uno e mezzo*[89]
>
> Length of the neck, as in the time of the maker, as far as the nut, *pollici* four, *ponti* seven [eight], falling *ponti* one-and-a-half.[90]

Using the aforementioned conversions of 27.07mm and 2.26mm for *pollici* and *ponti*[91] reveals an original neck length of 126.36mm, which corresponds closely with the present author's proposed 125mm original neck length on the *Soil* violin, but fails to agree with the 120.5mm original neck length of the *Messiah* violin or the 120mm neck length of the *Lady Blunt* violin.

Count Cozio also measured the original necks on two of his 1736 Stradivari violins – described as *forma grande* and *forma più piccola* – with results of 125.2mm and 125.6mm:

1. *Manico:* […] *la longhezza dell'asta* ('the length of the shaft') *polici quatro, ponti sette e mezzo*
2. *Manico:* […] *polici quatro, ponti sette e due terzi* [92]

Thus there were at least three violins owned by Count Cozio, of differing body sizes, where the necks exhibited stop lengths of 125-126.5mm, to which can be added the present author's calculation of the original neck stop of the *Soil* violin (125mm).

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, in addition to exhibiting the *Messiah* violin, also exhibits Stradivari's decorated *Cipriani Potter* violin of 1683. This is a very small violin, possibly made for one of the children of the Este family, and has a body length of 339mm, some 17mm shorter than a full-sized violin (the body stop measurement is 187mm, rather than Stradivari's full-size norm of 195mm). According to John Dilworth and Carlo Chiesa:

> The neck has been extended [with a wedge] and refitted. […] the original neck length was approximately 124mm, surprisingly almost 3mm longer than the original length of the 'Messie' neck.[93]

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[88] Inspection of the neck, and measurement, by the present author. The catalogue prepared by Simone Sacconi states that this *Soil* neck has a length of 12.2cms (Sacconi (1972) p. 201); the 1979 translated edition of *"I Segreti"* specifies the neck's length as '122mm' (Sacconi (1979) pp. 200-201). It is unclear how Sacconi established this measurement.

[89] BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 47, folio 14v; see also Cozio/Bacchetta p. 242. Although the Count writes the *ponti sette* his equivalent number – *7* – is overwritten to show as *8*.

[90] Giuseppe Baretti's 1831 dictionary translates *mancante* as 'falling, decaying', and the various shades of meaning of *mancare* include 'to wane', 'to abate', and 'to decay'. A fall of one-and-a-half *ponti* (3.4mm) from a horizontal plane, over a neck length of 125mm, is equivalent to an angle of 2 degrees. Thus, in relation to the vertical face of the rib, the original neck of the 1716 violin 'drooped' at an angle of 2 degrees below horizontal. See previous footnote 76, and also later in this chapter.

[91] See Chapter 5 for details of these units of measurement.

[92] BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 47, folios 20r and 21r; see also Cozio/Bacchetta pp. 246 and 247.

[93] MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 153.

Stradivari's original 124mm neck for the *Cipriani Potter* violin is consistent with the necks on the four violins itemised above even though the *Cipriani Potter* violin was built around the small *Q* mould. Thus the evidence from five violins suggests that, even with instruments of entirely different sizes, the necks fitted by Stradivari (and others – see below) were effectively 'one size fits all': 125 ± 1.5mm.

With respect to neck lengths, the Hills, in 1902, state:

> The necks of Stradivari's violins were of the same dimensions as those of the Amatis.[94]

This statement can be tested through the evidence of the 1649 Nicolò Amati *Alard* violin (back length of 350mm), also exhibited at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. John Dilworth and Carlo Chiesa comment on this violin:

> The neck has been reset and lengthened, and the violin converted to modern playing condition. The marks of the three original fixing nails can still be seen in the root [neck-foot], and the original length of the neck can be calculated from the remaining marks at 125.5mm – some 4.5mm shorter than the modern standard.[95]

Now there are six violins which, when made in Cremona by two different makers, had the same neck stop, namely 125 ± 1.5mm. In addition, Frédéric Chaudière, writing in 2002 of the Guarneri *del Gesù* 1742 *Alard* violin,[96] comments: 'One can clearly see a knife cut on the side of the neck, which is probably a trace of the original top nut, giving a [neck] stop length of 125mm (identical to that of the [Paganini] 'Cannon' [violin]).'[97] Thus, eight violins, made between 1649 and 1742, by three different makers, had near-identical neck lengths. If Cremonese violin necks were all of one length there would have been no need for Stradivari to ink any letters inside his peg-boxes; the evidence points towards the handful of surviving peg-box letters all being created post-1737.[98]

The continuation of the previous quotation from the Hills is:

> In length they [the Stradivari necks] varied, from under the nut[99] to the edge of the belly, from $4^3/_4$ to $4^7/_8$ inches [120.6 to 123.8mm]; […] the relative proportions of to-day are: neck, length, $5^1/_{16}$ to $5^1/_8$ inches [128.6 to 130.2mm]; […]. Thus we have lengthened the neck from $^1/_4$ to $^3/_8$ of an inch [6.3 to 9.5mm].[100]

A more succinct manner of presenting the Hills' information might be: the old minimum length of 120.6mm has been extended by 8mm to a new minimum of 128.6mm; the old maximum of 123.8mm has been extended by 6.4mm to the new maximum of 130.2mm. The Hills' dimensional information was presumably based upon examples of Stradivari violins which still had their original necks (with appropriate allowance made for neck-foot wedges) which would seem to point towards the seven violins previously cited – *Alard*, *Soil*, *Sarasate*, *Blunt*, *Messiah*, and two unidentified others. The Hills' old minimum of 120.6mm corresponds with the neck measurements of the *Messiah* violin (120.5mm) and the *Lady Blunt* violin (120mm), but the evidential source for the Hills' old maximum of 123.8mm is unknown. The Hills' information does not correspond with the aforementioned evidence from Count Cozio, the 1683 *Cipriani Potter* violin, the 1649 Nicolò Amati *Alard* violin, or Frédéric Chaudière.

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[94] Hill (1902) p. 202.
[95] MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 145.
[96] See Chapter 7 for consideration of the authenticity of this violin.
[97] 'Silent witness', *The Strad*, June 2002, p. 623.
[98] David Rubio (Rubio, p. 19) provides a table of violin measurements comparing 'original' dimensions with those of ''Modern' adaptation[s]'; he defines original neck lengths as '125mm'.
[99] It is assumed that 'under the nut' means 'from the front, vertical face of the nut'.
[100] Hill (1902) p. 202.

The method used during the Baroque period for attaching the body of a violin to its neck was to drive three iron nails through the upper block, and the surrounding rib, into the foot of the near-horizontal neck (the front plate would not have been glued to the body while this operation took place). The late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century process of raising, lengthening, and re-angling the neck could be implemented by the relatively simple addition of a triangular wooden wedge attached to the foot (with the beneficial result that any inked letter within the peg-box would have been left undisturbed). The wedge-modified neck could then be butted against the rib, or inserted into a new dovetailed slot cut into the body of the violin. The 'butted' joint is employed on the *Messiah* and the *Lady Blunt* violins.

Count Cozio writes about re-angling the neck of a violin 'in the modern manner' – *Darlo indietro* [tilt-back] *alla moderna*. The Count's comments presuppose that the front plate has been removed, the three iron nails extracted from the top block, and the neck detached:

> First one places on top of the neck button a piece of maple[101] […] for reinforcement, to raise the neck as far as one *linea*[102] above the border [of the front plate] in order that the fingerboard is more elevated above the front plate.[103] Second, one then takes a piece of maple – a wedge in shape – which will tilt the neck backwards […]. Thirdly, it is necessary to change the interior [upper] block of willow. Fourth, plug, with glued dowels the [nail] holes in the foot. Fifth, one makes three new holes and re-attaches the neck with nails, without glue, with filed-down heads.[104]

Count Cozio's commentaries on his instruments frequently include reference to the state of the necks:

1736 Stradivari violin: *Il manico fu alzato solo fino al bordo del coperchio* ('the neck was raised just to the edge of the front plate')[105]

1717 Stradivari violin: *Si è dato indietro senza alzarlo* […] *coll'apposizione d'un grosso cuni* ('[the neck] was tilted backwards [but] without raising it […] when a large wedge was inserted')[106]

1781 Nicola Bergonzi viola: […] *del manico che è ancora a rialzarsi e darsi indietro* ('the neck which is still to be raised and tilted backwards')[107]

1658 Andrea Guarneri violin: *Il manico fu alzato di mezzo ponto sopra il bordo del coperchio* ('the neck was raised half of a *ponto* [1.1mm] above the edge of the front plate')[108]

1733 Carlo Bergonzi violin: *Si alzò nulla il manico* ('the neck has not been raised at all')[109]

A 'quite small' Stradivari violin: *manico ancora a darsi indietro* ('the neck still to be tilted backwards').[110]

Count Cozio also acknowledges the role played by Guadagnini in modifying the Count's violins:

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[101] The 'piece' is the same shape as the protruding button, thus doubling the thickness of the button.

[102] One Italian *linea* is the same as one French *ligne* which, elsewhere, is specified by Count Cozio as 2.26mm (but alternatively termed one *ponto*); see Chapter 5.

[103] Thus the old-style tapered slice of willow in-between the flat upper surface of the neck and the underside of the fingerboard was no longer needed.

[104] Translated from BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 9; see also Cozio/Bacchetta pp. 104-105. Count Cozio's phraseology indicates that the wedge-modified neck was to be re-attached to the body by being butted up against the outside face of the rib, and then re-nailed from inside the sound-box.

[105] BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 47, folio 20r; see also Cozio/Bacchetta p. 246.

[106] BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 47, folio 95v; see also Cozio/Bacchetta p. 302.

[107] BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 47, folio 57v; see also Cozio/Bacchetta p. 271.

[108] BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 47, folio 18v; see also Cozio/Bacchetta p. 245.

[109] BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 47, folio 25v; see also Cozio/Bacchetta p. 251.

[110] BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 47, folio 41v; see also Cozio/Bacchetta p. 265.

> […] *con manico dato indietro dal Guadagnini come tutti li altri del Stradivari*.[111]
>
> with a tilted neck by Guadagnini as with all the others of Stradivari [which I own].

There is no evidence that Guadagnini altered the tilt of the violins' necks other than by adding a wedge to the foot of the neck (in the manner described by Count Cozio). Since the violins sold by Paolo Stradivari to Count Cozio had apparently been stored, unplayed, in the Stradivari workshop, no wear to the side of the necks (from the left hand constantly shifting up and down) would have taken place, and thus there would have been no reason for Guadagnini to cut away the scrolls and then graft the scrolls to new necks. If the *Messiah* violin was owned by Count Cozio and, despite the aforementioned dimensional discrepancies, was the 1716 *(P.G.)* violin he measured on 29th May 1816, and if it originally had a 2-degree droop in the neck, and if Guadagnini lengthened, raised and further tilted the neck with a wedge, why was it apparently necessary for Vuillaume, around 1855, to remove Guadagnini's wedge and then fit a replacement wedge which achieved exactly the same effect? With respect to this measured violin Count Cozio writes:

> *Cuni agionto spessore ponti due e mezzo*.[112]
>
> Wedge added, thickness *ponti* two and a half [5.6mm]

The 5.6mm thickness of the wedge, when added to Count Cozio's 29th May 1816 specification of 'the length of the neck as in the time of the maker' – 126.36mm (see earlier) – produces a thoroughly modern neck stop of 132mm. If, for reasons unknown, Vuillaume removed Guadagnini's 5.6mm wedge, and substituted his own 8.5mm wedge, the neck stop would increase to 134.86mm (126.36 + 8.5); the current neck stop of the *Messiah* violin, as already stated, is 129mm.

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The internal top block of the *Messiah* violin features the slotted head of a sizeable brass screw (which is assumed to pass all the way through the upper block into the foot of the neck) as well as traces of three filled-in nail holes.[113] In their 1891 monograph the Hills write:

> The necessity of opening the instrument, in order to insert a stronger bass bar, gave us an opportunity of examining the inside, which is as remarkable as the outside. […] Excepting for the change of bar, everything inside is as Stradivari left it.[114]

It seems highly unlikely that the Hills, in 1890, could have seen a brass screw head projecting from the violin's upper block yet still have written 'everything inside is as Stradivari left it'. Since the Hills were of the opinion that a new, stronger, bass bar was essential if the *Le Messie* violin was going to be played by Robert Crawford, they might also have been of the opinion that the butted neck/body joint would need strengthening, but no mention of such an opinion is made in the 4th April 1890 letter sent from Paris by William Henry Hill to Mr Crawford.[115] If the Hills inserted the reinforcing brass screw they (as far as is known) have never publicly acknowledged doing so.[116]

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[111] BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 42, p. 7; see also Cozio/Bacchetta p. 211.

[112] BSCr, LC, ms. Cozio 47, folio 14v; see Chapter 12 for the comments from Rev H R Haweis concerning the modification of the neck of the *Messiah* violin.

[113] See John Pringle's 1980 technical drawing of the *Le Messie* violin; see, also, Dilworth and Chiesa in MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 164.

[114] Hill (1891) pp. 23-24.

[115] See Chapter 10 for the Hill/Crawford correspondence.

[116] Roger Hargrave has written ('Evolutionary Road', *The Strad*, February 2013, p. 55) that Enrico Ceruti (1806-1883) 'was still using a variation of the Cremonese [construction] system, albeit screwing rather than nailing the neck through the neck-block.' Tim Ingles (Ingles p. 145) has added that Ceruti 'had business dealings with Tarisio and Vuillaume', a statement

In addition to the inked peg-box letters – *PG* and *G* – found in a few Stradivari violins there are but two other examples of letters added to the fabric of a Stradivari instrument. In their 1902 monograph the Hills illustrate 'Stradivari's monogram, carved on the button of the back of an example dated 1689'.[117] Their unidentified violin is the 1689 *Arditi* violin[118] and the superimposed letters – *AS* – are indeed most elegantly and beautifully intertwined in the Hills' illustration (see Plate 30a). However, the current reality of the *Arditi* violin's button (see Plate 30b) is rather different.

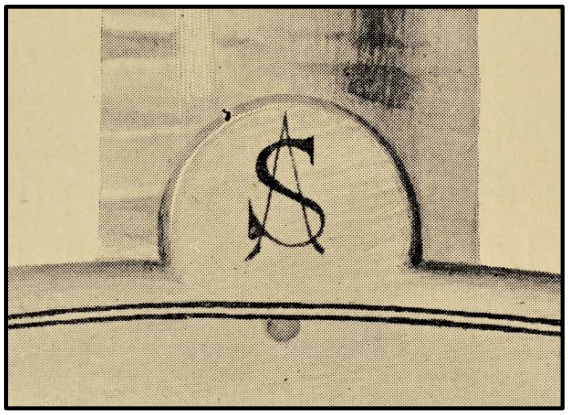

Plate 30a: The 1689 *Arditi* violin monogram (Hill (1902) p. 44)

Plate 30b: the 1689 *Arditi* violin monogram (2014) The intertwined letter *A* has mostly disappeared.

The Hills state that the same 'very graceful' monogram is stamped inside the peg-box cavity of the *Medici* tenor viola of 1690,[119] but the website information from the Istituto Cherubini (Galleria dell'Accademia) in Florence shows that this viola's monogram letters are *ASC*, rather than just *AS*, with the *C* (Cremona?) placed on top of, and bisected by, the lower curl of the *S* (see Figure 8). In addition, there is a diagonal line passing through the upper part of the *A*. A photograph of this monogram is viewable on the Galleria website[120] and the website's commentary uses the term *punzonatura* ('punching') to describe the technique through which the monogram was created, just below the fingerboard nut.[121]

which closely echoes George Hart (Hart p. 103): 'He [Ceruti] was acquainted with Luigi Tarisio and with Vuillaume'. It would probably be unwise to wonder whether Enrico Ceruti might have had a connection with the *Messiah* violin.

[117] Hill (1902) p. 44.

[118] The Cozio.com instrument number was 413.

[119] See Hill (1902) p. 99.

[120] http://cherubini-opac.polomuseale.firenze.it. Stradivari's 1690 tenor viola has the reference number '1988/015'.

[121] Personal inspection, by the present author, of the 1690 *Medici* tenor viola peg-box, has not been possible. An explanation for the branding of the monogram inside the peg-box of the tenor viola might be that this was carried out by administrators from the Medici household after receipt of the instrument (although one might have expected the monogram to identify the Medici family rather than Antonio Stradivari). Leto Bargagna's 1911 descriptive catalogue of the instruments owned by the Istituto Cherubini in Florence – *Gli strumenti musicale raccolti nel Museo R. Istituto L. Cherubini a Firenze* – contains a description of this tenor viola (pp. 16-18) but there is no mention of any monogram. Neither is there any mention of a monogram in the aforementioned 1980/81 *Antichi Strumenti*… catalogue, p. 45.

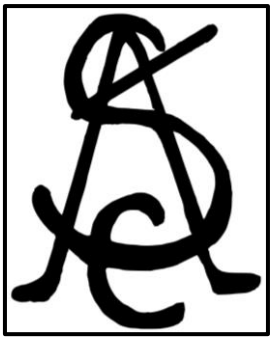

Figure 8: Author's rendering of the 1690 *Medici* tenor viola peg-box monogram
(from a photograph by Marco Rabati and Serge Domingie)

Curiously, there is apparently no similar monogram within the peg-box cavity of the Istituto's 1690 *Medici* cello which, like the tenor viola, was made by Stradivari for Grand Prince Ferdinand, son of Cosimo III de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany.[122] If Antonio Stradivari owned a custom-made, metal, monogram punch, with the letters *A*, *S*, and *C* intertwined (the monogram perhaps attached to the end of a metal shaft) then this would have been far easier to manipulate within the heavily restricted space of a peg-box cavity than would an ink-pen, and the elegant appearance of the *ASC* monogram would be much more in keeping with Stradivari's aesthetic ideals than 'chunky' inked lettering.

[122] The cello is also one of the instruments which has an 'Antonins' label; see Chapter 12.