

The Hills' gift to the Ashmolean Museum

At a point during the mid 1930s, the Hill brothers – Arthur Frederick and Alfred Ebsworth – decided to make a gift of the *Messiah* violin, and other instruments, to a museum, for the benefit of posterity. In 1935, with the rise of Hitler obvious to all (and the outbreak of hostilities likely) such a strategy would have been perfectly prudent. If war was to break out, and central London was to be bombed, then the Hills' shop in New Bond Street would be vulnerable; the relatively remote Ashmolean Museum at Oxford would be a much safer location for valuable wooden instruments. In addition, both of the brothers were by now fairly elderly; in 1935 Arthur was 75 years of age (and not in good health) and Alfred was 73. According to Jon Whiteley the Hills' desire to place their instruments within the protective environment of a museum was not just in response to political and military developments:

In the course of handling and repairing instruments, the Hills became increasingly aware of the damage that was being inflicted on early viols and violins by constant playing and repeated restoration. This concern gave rise to the idea of donating a select group of rare instruments to a museum where they would be preserved from further harm.¹

K. J. Garlick adds:

One of their [the Hills'] aims in making the gift was that the instruments should be kept in the condition in which they were handed over, as examples of perfectly preserved craftsmanship, with, in the case of 'Le Messie', the original varnishes still glowing and unrubbed. [...] It is a necessary rider [...] that the instrument shall not be played or even handled frequently.²

With the imminent outbreak of World War II all the Hill instruments were secreted away:

Fears for the safety of the "Messie" Stradivari were entertained at the beginning of the war and it was taken to a private house in the country which the Museum Authorities had rented for the storage of this and other art treasures.³

The instruments were only brought together and exhibited as a collection in 1950. Whether the *Messiah* violin has been played since it arrived at the Ashmolean Museum is an issue which has generated differing commentaries. Jon Whiteley has indicated that the violin has never been played:

The Hill instruments have been played only once since 1939, in a concert conducted by David Boyden in 1963. Only selected instruments were played and these did not include the 'Messie'.⁴

Alternatively, but in the same publication, John Dilworth and Carlo Chiesa have written:

The instrument has only very rarely [been] played since then [1940], bearing in mind the unavoidable disturbance to its fabric in bringing it to a playing condition and the danger of damage to the delicate varnish coat.⁵

¹ Whiteley p. vii. Dr Jon Whiteley was Senior Assistant Keeper of Western Art at the Ashmolean Museum.

² Boyden (1979) p. v. The Preface for the 1979 re-printing of Boyden's 1969 Catalogue was written by K J Garlick (Keeper of Western Art at the Ashmolean Museum).

³ Hill (1976) p. 34.

⁴ MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 9. The printed programme (preserved in the Hill Archive at the Ashmolean Museum) for the 19th June 1963 concert identifies the instruments on which the musicians performed: the *Charles IX* Andrea Amati violin of 1564, the *Charles IX* Andrea Amati viola of c1574, a Gasparo da Salò viola of c1590, the *Alard* Nicolò Amati violin of 1649, a Jacob Stainer violin of 1672, and the *Cipriani Potter* inlaid Stradivari violin of 1683.

In Tim Meara's 2009 documentary film *In Search of the Messiah*, David Hill makes the following statement about the Hill instruments and the *Messiah* violin in particular:

One of the conditions⁶ of the Hill gift is that these instruments are not allowed out of their [glass] cases.⁷ This has upset quite a few people over the years, but it [the *Messiah* violin] is the finest violin in the world – full stop.

Since no one alive today has heard the *Messiah* violin being played, it is difficult to know on what comparative basis David Hill's assessment of the instrument as 'the finest violin in the world' is being made.

The 'Hill Archive', stored at the Ashmolean Museum and freely available to the public, contain most of the correspondence relating to the Hills' gift of a collection of instruments to the Museum (and thus to the University of Oxford). The extant correspondence begins with an October 1936 letter from the Museum's Keeper to the Vice-Chancellor of the University:

It is quite certain that they [the Hill brothers] are very anxious for their collection to come to Oxford, but the difficulty of providing a room of the kind they envisage in the Museum is by no means small.

This difficulty was intensified when the Building Committee of the Ashmolean Museum subsequently advised the 'Visitors' of the Museum (the Museum's Governing Body):

The Committee found themselves compelled for various reasons to advise the Visitors against allocating space to receive the collection in the Ashmolean Museum at the present time, or in any building shortly to be erected.

However, on 10th February 1937 the Museum's Keeper⁸ wrote a long letter to Alfred Hill in which he indicated that a room in the Ashmolean Museum might now, after all, be available, but that the Hill brothers would need to travel to Oxford to inspect the room and give their opinion as to its suitability. This it seems they did, and in June 1937 Alfred Hill wrote to the Vice-Chancellor giving outline details of the instruments which would be included in the Hills' 'benefaction'; a more detailed listing was sent to the University in October 1937. This listing comprised two violins (the *Messiah* violin and the violin which Andrea Amati made for King Charles IX of France), six *Viole da Gamba*, four *Violas*, two *Lire da braccia*, one *Cetera* (cittern), four guitars, and various bows.

In April 1938 the Museum's Keeper received a letter from the University's Registrar:

[...] if the Collection is accepted it would probably be possible to raise enough money from music lovers in Oxford to pay for the decoration of the room. The Vice-Chancellor [...] asked me to get you to find out as quickly as you can what the cost would be, and, if it is not too formidable, he will then ask Council and the Chest to agree to the expenditure, on the understanding that every effort is made to recover it from either Mr. Hill or from music lovers in Oxford. This would make it possible to accept the Collection [...].

Thus, if the financial generosity of Oxford's music lovers – or Mr Hill – did not entirely match the costs of preparing and decorating the Hill Room at the Museum, the University was prepared to

⁵ MIAM:CC/Milnes p. 159.

⁶ There are no documents in the Hill Archive at the Ashmolean Museum which itemise any 'conditions' attached to the Hills' gift of instruments to the University of Oxford.

⁷ But, as indicated, six of the instruments were played in a public concert in 1963.

⁸ Since the Archive's letters are carbon copies there is usually no identification, by name, of the letter-writer.

guarantee the un-financed portion, but ‘every effort’ must be made to minimise this liability. In May 1938 Alfred Hill received a letter from the University:

The Vice-Chancellor submitted to the Hebdomadal Council today the terms of your generous offer in connexion with your and your brother’s proposed gift to the University of a valuable collection of musical instruments; and I was directed to enclose for your formal approval a copy of a decree of acceptance.

The following month a letter from the University’s Registry was sent to the Museum’s Keeper:

A decree in the following form, accepting the Hill gift of musical instruments and money for the decoration of the room, will be moved in Congregation on 14 June:-

‘That the thanks of the University be accorded to Alfred and Arthur Hill for a gift to the University of a valuable collection of musical instruments, shown in the schedule attached, for a donation [from the Hills] of £500⁹ towards the expense of the special decoration of a room in the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology for the exhibition of the collection, and for the [Hills’] promise to undertake such other expenses as will be incurred in the drawing up and publishing of a descriptive catalogue and descriptive tickets.’

Thus the Hill brothers were now donating the instruments, making a sizeable financial contribution towards the cost of decorating the exhibition room, and, in due course, would be paying for the display-labels and all expenses associated with the publishing of a catalogue.

On 5th February 1939 Arthur Hill died, and all responsibility for pushing the project forward fell upon Alfred’s shoulders. On 21st February 1939 he wrote to the Keeper:

[...] I must find time presently to come down and see you, as I want especially to talk over the question of the atmosphere of the room. I have had a good deal of experience on this point, and know what is necessary for fiddles, furniture, and in fact any wood work.

This visit evidently took place, for in April 1939 Alfred Hill wrote again:

I was very pleased to see the room and the glass cases when I paid my visit to you, and I feel we must now start preparing the instruments, seeing that they are all in perfect order, with labels which will give the ordinary observer an idea of what he or she is looking at.¹⁰ The catalogue will follow in due course.

The donated instruments (but not the *Messiah* violin) were delivered to the Ashmolean Museum at the end of May 1939.¹¹ Two months later (and just five weeks before the outbreak of World War II) Alfred Hill wrote once more to the Keeper, this time with specific concerns regarding the display of “The Messie” violin:

I am very anxious that the case destined to contain the Stradivari known as “The Messie” shall have curtain hung around it to protect the instrument from the light, and Mr Phillips¹² will discuss the matter with you: it will involve a metal fitting being adjusted to the show-case, which, I have no doubt an Oxford craftsman will be able to carry out.

In the same letter Alfred Hill adds:

In my opinion, “The Messie” is sufficiently safeguarded whilst in my hands and, should a crisis arise, I propose to deposit it in the underground vaults of the Royal Bank of Scotland, Burlington

⁹ £30,000 in today’s money (very approximately).

¹⁰ The echoes of the uninformative 1872 Special Exhibition catalogue are noticeable.

¹¹ See Beare *et al.* (2013) p. 35.

¹² Albert Edgar Phillips, later Albert Edgar Phillips Hill.

Gdns: these vaults being dry, fire, and damp-proof.¹³ At the present moment the violin is at my home, an isolated house standing in its own grounds outside St Albans. Let me know if you approve of the above suggestion. Needless to add, as soon as the situation has been cleared up,¹⁴ I shall be more than pleased to see the instrument safely housed in the Ashmolean.

Following the September 1939 declaration of war the Ashmolean Museum's valuable artefacts were hidden away in the countryside and the exhibition spaces were filled with loans and temporary exhibitions. A letter of May 1940, from Albert E Phillips Hill to the Keeper, indicated that Alfred Hill had recently died (21st April 1940) and the *Messiah* violin was still at St Albans:

I hesitate to bring it to London at this juncture and think that, if you are in agreement, it would be best to place it with your other Works of Art which, I understand, are stored away in the West of England. I could either deliver the violin to you direct, or convey it to whatever destination you suggest.

A June 1940 letter suggests that the *Messiah* violin was handed over to the Ashmolean Museum's authorities during that month.

There is no further correspondence in the Hill Archive until after the end of World War II. A letter of February 1946 from Albert Edgar Phillips Hill to the Keeper indicates that the former was anticipating the imminent opening of the exhibition room (with newly-donated additional instruments and bows). However, the west end of the Museum had been occupied by the Ministry of Food since 1939, rendering the entire second floor, the Print Room, and the Hill Music Room unavailable for exhibitions, and those rooms and spaces were not vacated by the Government until 1949.¹⁵ Nonetheless, in late 1948, the Museum managed to mount a temporary exhibition of instruments, and on 12th October 1948 A E Phillips Hill wrote to the Museum:

I have received an invitation to a reception to be given by the Chancellor of the University at the Ashmolean Museum on Saturday November the 6th, when I understand the Hill Collection of instruments will be specially displayed. Can I assume from this that the musical instruments are now to be placed in the cases in the rooms specially set aside for them?

Subsequent correspondence clarified that the November 1948 display was only a temporary arrangement; the Hill Room was not finally opened until 1950. From that point onwards, until the present day, the Museum has received a continual stream of visitors to see the instruments, and especially the *Messiah* violin.

In view of the considerable difficulties which had been overcome in order to establish and exhibit the Hill Collection it is perhaps surprising that, just one year later, in 1951, Desmond Hill¹⁶ enquired of the Ashmolean authorities whether they would be willing to loan the *Messiah* violin and the Nicolò Amati *Alard* violin to an exhibition due to take place in Paris in 1954. The Assistant Keeper replied, on 17th November 1951, that the request would be referred to the next meeting of the Museum's Visitors (who have a statutory duty to rule on all loan requests¹⁷). The Visitors declined to loan the violin. Subsequently, in 1955, A E Phillips Hill wrote to the Museum in connection with an Interpol

¹³ Alfred Hill adds a footnote at this point: 'also bomb proof'.

¹⁴ The 'situation' either being the imminent commencement of World War II or, perhaps, the installation of the protective curtain.

¹⁵ Information to the present author from Dr J Whiteley.

¹⁶ Desmond D'Artrey Phillips Hill, son (b. 1916) of Albert Edgar Phillips Hill (1883-1981).

¹⁷ Information to the present author from Dr J Whiteley.

exhibition to be held in Paris under the title ‘Le Faux dans l’Art et dans l’histoire’, with genuine instruments sitting alongside copies of the same. According to A E P Hill’s letter, of 9th May 1955, ‘the sponsors of this exhibition would like to show the Messie Stradivari, of which one of the famous Parisian luthiers, J. B. Vuillaume, made a number of copies’. The Keeper replied immediately (10th May) indicating that he would send the request to the Visitors for a decision; the Visitors declined to loan the *Messiah* violin.

On 11th May A E Phillips Hill sent another letter to Oxford:

In view of certain wild statements which are being made by investigators on the continent, who claim that many of the world famous Stradivaris are not genuine through conclusions arrived at by examination with an ultra violet lamp, we should like to take the opportunity, if you should have a lamp on the premises, which you no doubt have, to examine the Messie Stradivari. We also propose to bring two examples of the Parisian maker, Vuillaume, who named this Stradivari “Le Messie”, to compare with it.

Cremonese string instruments, with their oil-based varnish, generally reveal a salmon-pink colour when illuminated by ultra-violet light; nineteenth-century instruments, using spirit-based varnish, do not. Regrettably, the Hill Archives contain no information on the outcome of this ultra-violet investigation (if it took place).¹⁸

The issue of whether all the instruments (but especially the *Messiah* violin) should remain in their cases at all times – untouched by anyone – began to feature in correspondence between the Hills in New Bond Street and the Museum in Oxford. An inconsistency of response led to situations where certain visitors were allowed personal access to the instruments whereas others were refused. In 1952 R A Olson¹⁹ and Carl Becker, together with their wives, were allowed to see, handle, and closely examine the *Messiah* violin. In 1955 Desmond Hill wrote to the Keeper:

I am coming to Oxford tomorrow and bringing with me Mr. Rembert Wurlitzer and Mr. Sacconi who are over here from New York and wish to see the instruments.

Since anyone could ‘see’ the instruments in their glass cases it must be assumed that Desmond Hill’s letter indicated permission – almost an instruction – for Wurlitzer and Simone Sacconi to be allowed to make a personal examination of the instruments. In 1956 the Museum’s Assistant Keeper replied to a letter received from William Beare:

Thank you for your letter informing me that some of your young craftsmen are coming to see the instruments on Saturday May 12th. I don’t think that there will be any difficulty about seeing the “Messiah” out of its case on that day, and it will be a pleasure to show it to them.

In 1960 Desmond Hill wrote to the Keeper:

Alfredo Campoli, who owns a very fine Stradivari, tells me that he will be in Oxford this coming Saturday, and hopes very much to see the “Messie”. [...] I think he is hoping that the instrument can be removed from the case for him to examine it, but I told him that I did not know if it would be possible to arrange this.

In 1961, the Assistant Keeper replied to an American lady who was planning to visit the Museum and see the Hill Collection: ‘[...] I shall be very glad to show you the instruments in the Hill Collection [...]. You will be able to examine all of these outside the cases, except Le Messie.’ The apparent

¹⁸ See Rubio pp. 36 and 37; see also Chapter 12 for further information about Cremonese varnish and examinations of Stradivari and Guarneri violins by ultra-violet light.

¹⁹ President of the Chicago violin firm of William Lewis and Son.

uncertainty over exactly who was controlling personal access to the instruments is demonstrated by a September 1961 letter from Desmond Hill to the Keeper:

I understand that Miss Marta Eitler has arranged to visit Oxford again, and is hoping that on this occasion you will remove some of the instruments from the cases.

I would not want you to treat Miss Eitler any differently from your other visitors, but if you are willing to remove “The Messie” from its case I certainly have no objection. I think it is quite a good idea not to let visitors handle the instruments, since this must increase the risk of damage, and in any case would cover the instruments with finger marks which would afterwards have to be removed.

Another enquiry, in 1963, received the following response from the Museum:

Unfortunately, we cannot allow visitors to handle *Le Messie* without an introduction from Messrs. W. E. Hill & Sons (140, New Bond Street, London, W. 1.) who look after this collection. Should your father-in-law know Hill’s [*sic*] and be able to obtain such an introduction, we would be glad to let him handle the violin.

In 1963, David D. Boyden joined the University of Oxford on a Fulbright research project and was responsible for the aforementioned June 1963 public concert in which some of the Hill Collection instruments were played. Boyden was also asked to write the catalogue for the Collection.²⁰ The concert (19th June 1963) contained music composed contemporaneously with the relevant instruments – Corelli, Vivaldi, J S Bach and Geminiani – and the success of the concert prompted Boyden to wonder whether a second concert might be possible. However, concerns were raised by the Hills regarding ‘damage’ to the instruments, specifically ‘shrinkage’ (notwithstanding the Museum’s usage, since 1951, of a hygrometer which, according to an October 1951 letter from the Assistant Keeper to A E Phillips Hill, was indicating an average of 60% humidity in the display cases, ‘even with central heating on’).²¹ The Archive is seemingly missing some relevant correspondence from this period but, with regard to possible damage to the instruments, there exists a letter of October 1970 from David Boyden to the Museum’s Keeper:

In 1963 the general consensus was that the concert using the Ashmolean instruments under my direction was a great success and a considerable public service. I am not aware that any damage at all was done to the instruments. Quite the contrary; and the Hills certainly never complained to me about any difficulties. The “shrinkage” that Desmond speaks of can have nothing to do with usage by players (who, as far as I know, haven’t been allowed to touch – much less play – the instruments since 1963). Any shrinkage must be due, I expect, to the appalling exposure of the instruments to light and heat under the present housing of the Collection in the Ashmolean (i.e., if the situation is the same as in 1967, the last time I saw the Collection).

The Keeper replied:

The Hills have tightened up very much on the use of the instruments within the last two years. A number of them developed hair splits largely due to the fact that the humidity in the Hill Music Room was not controlled. All the instruments have now been repaired and we have installed a humidifier. I hope therefore that the trouble will not recur. I think however that we must wait and see how things work out before we propose a concert to the Hills again – they may well change their point of view.

Boyden returned to the subject of deterioration in a letter of March 1971:

²⁰ Published in 1969, almost 20 years after the Hill Collection went on display.

²¹ A E Phillips Hill’s response (October 1951) was: ‘I am glad to know about the humidity in the cases. 60% is, as you say, quite a good average in which the instruments could not be affected’.

The concert we gave in 1963 with the instruments did nothing but good for the Ashmolean and the instruments, and actually, as I warned [...] in 1967, the last time I was in the Museum, the shocking conditions of exposure of the instruments to sun and varying temperatures was doing far more damage to the instruments that almost any amount of use under normally responsible conditions could possibly inflict. [...] I am not surprised that the instruments had to be repaired (and it is not only the humidity but the light shining directly on certain instruments that needs attention). So, in effect we get into a closed circle, in which in order to protect their instruments (or should I say, your²² instruments), the Hills feel they must assume a more and more restrictive policy with regard to using the instruments.

From the final sentence of Boyden's letter it would seem that, even after 21 years of public display, day-to-day control of the Collection was still uncertain.²³

On the matter of playing the *Messiah* violin, as opposed to examining and handling it, an enquiry to the Museum in 1965 received this reply from the Senior Assistant Keeper:

The Messie [...] forms part of the Hill Collection and, although property in it is vested in the University, their expertise is still relied on. It was the donors' intention that the Messie should be kept in a public collection as a permanent testimony of the appearance of a virtually pristine instrument by that maker. [...] I do not remember the Messie ever having been played since it was installed after the War. The last recorded time was more than seventy years ago.²⁴ [...] It is unlikely that a violinist of the first rank would ever ask for such a concession. To name but a few, Oistrakh, Menuhin²⁵ and Devito²⁶ have to my personal knowledge upheld the donors' intention.

By the end of the 1960s, and probably as a result of the less-than-ideal atmospheric environment, the physical condition of the instruments was evidently beginning to deteriorate. Desmond Hill wrote to the Keeper (April 1969):

Following his recent visit to Oxford, my son painted a rather alarming picture of the general state of the instruments, no doubt due to the rather extreme conditions, inasmuch as last year we had one of the dampest summers I can remember [...] and then the rather cold winter [...]. I was most relieved to hear that you hope to be able to combat the problems as I have always felt that far too little was done in the past. Perhaps I did not insist sufficiently. [...] We have maintained all the instruments entirely without charge for nearly thirty years, but I feel I must point out that we cannot necessarily continue to do this.²⁷

Notwithstanding the 'alarming' state of the instruments, handling of the *Messiah* violin was apparently still being allowed, since in June 1971 Desmond Hill wrote another letter:

[...] I was appalled last week to hear that Mr. Wolf Wolfensohn had had the Messie all to himself on a table downstairs for over an hour and he even added that he was asked if he would like to play on it. This, I imagine, was by way of a joke.

Unsurprisingly, the Keeper offered an apology:

²² The underscore is as in the original document.

²³ Hence, perhaps, the long letter of 1988 (see later in this chapter).

²⁴ This is probably a reference to the oft-mentioned playing of the *Messiah* violin by Joseph Joachim in 1890 (when the violin was owned by Robert Crawford) rather than the 1910 Hanwell recital by Simonetti; see Chapter 10.

²⁵ The indication that Yehudi Menuhin had not asked to play the *Messiah* violin sits against Charles Beare's comment that 'Yehudi Menuhin also played it since the war, I think' (JoVSA (XVII, 3) p. 211).

²⁶ Giaconda de Vito (1907-1994).

²⁷ The concerns expressed within this April 1969 letter possibly prompted David Boyden's letter of October 1970. An October 1972 letter from Desmond Hill to an enquirer speaks of some of the instruments having 'suffered measurable deterioration as a result of constant handling by visitors'.

Your first paragraph is a great help because I have sometimes found myself in something of a dilemma and, in case of doubt, I have always said ‘no’ to applications to see the musical instruments. [...] in future only the Keeper, that is myself, shall give permission for this instrument to be taken out of its case. [...] I hope you will feel that this makes the situation more secure in the future.

A tighter access-protocol appears to have been in operation during the 1970s, a protocol defined and implemented by the Museum and apparently enjoying the consistent support of the Hills. In 1971 Desmond Hill wrote to a potential visitor:

I note that you wish to pay another visit to the Ashmolean Museum. I will write and let the Keeper know that you are coming, though I doubt very much if they would agree to opening any of the cases as it is not their normal practice to do so.

Further, in a letter of October 1972, Desmond Hill indicates that he has refused permission to handle the *Messiah* violin to ‘a dozen of his customers’, and, in 1974, a well-known violin maker was refused permission to be allowed to measure the *Messiah* violin. In 1987 Andrew Hill received a letter from scientists at an American university who proposed the removal of a tiny specimen of the *Messiah* violin’s varnish for analysis. The letter-writer added a postscript: ‘In the unlikely event that the *Messiah* would not prove original in our test, we would make no public statement.’ Understandably, the analysis was not permitted. In 1988, the then editor of *The Strad* wrote to the Ashmolean Museum asking whether Roger Hargrave could visit to take measurements and notes on the *Messiah* violin, the Amati *Alard* violin, and one of the Amati violas, for a colour supplement, with photographs and drawings, to be published by the magazine. The request was passed to the Hills, who replied:

We do not really wish anybody to examine those instruments in the terms proposed. [...] A year ago, when we had the visit of the members of the Entente Internationale,²⁸ we refused to even consider certain selected members of that group handling any of the instruments, and they are a great deal more qualified than any other makers existing in the world today, so we really feel it is not something we could recommend in any way.

As already indicated in Chapter 3, Roger Hargrave has stated that in the 1980s he was regularly and frequently examining the *Messiah* violin: ‘As a Hill’s employee, I was also allowed unrestricted access to the instruments in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, and I would visit every other weekend to study them. I have probably handled ‘The *Messiah*’ more than any other living soul!’ Hargrave’s familiarity with the violin appears not to have persuaded his erstwhile employers to allow him to measure the violin.²⁹

The photographs and measurements of the *Messiah* violin were eventually made for the March 2011 poster issued by *The Strad*, an issue which coincided with the publication of *Musical Instruments in the Ashmolean Museum: The Complete Collection*.

In the early 1980s the organisers of the 1987 250th anniversary Stradivari exhibition in Cremona began asking owners and institutions for their agreement to loan their Stradivari instruments. One such request, to the Ashmolean Museum, was for the loan of the *Messiah* violin. In 1982 the Museum wrote officially to the exhibition organisers ‘to communicate the Visitors’ decision not to send our instruments’. Subsequently, in April 1986, Andrew Hill wrote to the then Keeper of Western Art at the Museum:

²⁸ L’Entente Internationale des Maitres Luthiers et Archetiers d’Art.

²⁹ It would seem that Hargrave did not take any measurements of the violin when he was so frequently examining it in the 1980s.

I am enclosing a photo-copy of a letter³⁰ that we have sent to the Mayor of Cremona in reply to a request from them asking us to intervene in obtaining “Le Messie” for their Exhibition in Cremona. We really feel that we cannot recommend that the Museum consider allowing “Le Messie” to travel anywhere, let alone Italy where they would more than likely take it to pieces and hand it round for everybody to examine. There is also the possibility, of which I have first hand experience, that the Italian Government would not release it back to the UK.

The 1998-99 Vuillaume Exhibition in Paris included three of Vuillaume’s copies of the *Messiah* violin (copies dating from 1856,³¹ 1862, and 1870). Alongside those copies the French organisers had hoped to exhibit the *Messiah* violin, but

Sadly, the Hill brothers, whose family has owned it since 1889, would not allow the original instrument to be displayed in Paris – their usual caution no doubt exacerbated by increased recent speculation over whether Vuillaume was in fact the maker of it [...].³²

The apparent non-existence of unambiguous legal conditions relating to the Hills’ gift continued to provoke questions about the mute status, in perpetuity, of the instruments. A 1988 letter included in the Hill Archive (sender and recipient indicated only by first names) contains a succinct but comprehensive summary of the on-going dilemma:

Following your request to check the terms of the Hill Gift in so far as it relates to the rule of silence, I have looked through the archive. I cannot find any deed of gift or legal document referring to the transfer of the instruments but from the general tenor of the correspondence I would be surprised if the museum had legally committed itself to keeping the instruments forever silent. There is absolutely no question however, that this was the intention of the donors whether or not they made it a binding condition of the gift. As [...] wrote in 1966 to [...] ‘The Hill Collection of instruments in general and the *Messiah* in particular were presented in 1939 to the University for preservation conditionally that they were not played upon.’ Since then, museum policy has become far stricter and we have refused many serious proposals to allow the instruments to be played or even bowed by musicians. The reasoning behind this goes back to the donors’ intention to remove a number of documentary pieces from the constant wear inflicted on all instruments at that time which were still in playing condition. This was a pioneering idea in the 1930s but it is now universally accepted in the museum world that instruments in public collections should be divided into those which are retained for playing and those which are kept for documentary interest. [...] We have a moral obligation to do nothing that would offend the Hills. This is an important consideration not only because we should stick to the spirit of the gift but also because they have been generous in funding the setting up and decorating of the Hill Room, in commissioning and funding Boyden’s catalogue and in keeping a constant eye on the condition of the instruments, repairing them from time to time as needs be and advising us about the conservation. It is difficult to quantify this service in monetary terms [...]. The benefit to the collection is one which we would be hard pressed to match by ourselves.

If I felt that there was a case for playing the instruments even on a very restricted basis, I might suggest opening discussions with the Hills although I would be very surprised if they could be persuaded to change the policy of years.

³⁰ The letter is not present within the Ashmolean Museum’s Hill Archive.

³¹ Vuillaume number 2176.

³² Joanna Pieters, editor of *The Strad*, August 1998, p. 833. The Hills have been the full owners of the violin only between 1904 and 1913, and from 1928 onwards (after the violin was sold back to them by Mr Richard Bennett).

During the final fifty years of the twentieth century the traditional identification of the Ashmolean's violin as the work of Antonio Stradivari was accepted by almost everyone. The Hill Archive contains a one-page account, entitled 'Le Messie', which appears to have been an information sheet available to Museum visitors. This account follows the usual chronology, with the heirs of Count Cozio selling the violin, 'about 1827', to 'the eccentric Luigi Tarisio'. This undated and unsigned account states that Vuillaume 'bought from [Tarisio's] heirs six violins, including 'Le Messie'' – the writer seemingly not confident about the story of hundreds of instruments being stored at Tarisio's lodgings in Milan. With regard to the alterations made to the violin, the writer of the information sheet states:

As is true of most instruments made before 1800, certain alterations have from time to time been made to 'Le Messie'. The neck has been lengthened by a graft and the original fingerboard has been replaced, as have the pegs, bridge, tail[-piece], bass bar and, of course, the strings. The original bass bar is shown beside the instrument, and it is believed that the pegs and tail are still in private hands.

As the violin, sitting silently inside its glass case, approached the millennium it seemed that little would now disturb the quiet calm that had settled over the Hill Collection.