

Conclusion

The existence of the Ashmolean Museum's *Messiah* violin cannot be demonstrated with certainty for any date prior to 1855, and its identity from 1855 onwards relies on the evidence of just one person, a person (Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume) whose relationship with truth and honesty is questionable.

When Antonio Stradivari died in 1737 there were approximately one hundred string instruments left in his Cremona workshop (according to Paolo Stradivari). In the six years that followed (until the death of Francesco Stradivari in 1743) some of these instruments were surely sold, and between 1743 and 1758 (during which period the workshop was occupied by Carlo Bergonzi and his sons) still more instruments were very likely sold, although how they were labelled is unknown. With continuing sales of just two or three instruments each year it is entirely reasonable to suppose that by 1773, when Count Cozio di Salabue began buying, only about a dozen instruments would have remained.

If today's *Messiah* violin was made by Antonio Stradivari in 1716 and then sold at any point during the subsequent fifty years, the purchaser could not have been Count Cozio di Salabue (b. 1755). If it was not sold, then (as John Dilworth has proposed) the reason might have been that the instrument's constructional imperfections necessitated its removal from the sale stock, '[...] a resolve that this violin was not to be sold'.¹ If, in 1773, the 1716 violin was still being kept 'out of sight' then it is possible that it was unearthed by Paolo Stradivari and included in the group of left-over violins sold to Count Cozio and described by the Count in his ms. Cozio 41 inventory. In 1823 Count Cozio still possessed this violin, since early in that year he returned to his inventory and added a note in the margin: 'The most beautiful, and undamaged; the best in consistency and beauty; in 1823 it was placed in my principal collection.' Count Cozio's 'principal collection' of instruments – the 27th February 1823 *la Collezione (Primo Inventaro)* – was then consigned to Carlo Carli for sale. The descriptions which were written by Count Cozio in 1774-75 and 1801 (ms. Cozio 41 and ms. Cozio 42) – descriptions which, almost certainly, are of the same instrument – do not indicate a convincing agreement with the physicality of today's *Messiah* violin, and if the violin measured in 1816 (with its 360.9mm body length) is the same violin as described in 1774-75 and 1801 then there is no dimensional agreement either.²

In either 1824 or 1827 (according to different accounts written by Vuillaume) Luigi Tarisio apparently bought the 1716 violin which was subsequently identified by Vuillaume as *Le Messie*, but if this violin was the 1716 violin listed in Count Cozio's 1823 *la Collezione (Primo Inventaro)* then such a purchase would sit at odds with Tarisio's apparent lack of financial resources at this time, a lack which not only necessitated his (alleged) strategy of bartering valueless-new for valuable-old instruments but also necessitated his (alleged) 400-mile walk from Milan to Paris in 1827. There is no record of when Tarisio began to entice the Parisian dealers with descriptions of the perfect Stradivari violin which he claimed to own, and Tarisio might have been just as adept as Vuillaume at building and sustaining a mythology. If Tarisio, with possibly a wry grin, could settle his bill with Giuseppe Carli by dropping a bag containing 570 five-franc coins on the latter's desk, he was just as capable of telling Vuillaume, Chanut, Aldric, and Thibout what he guessed they wanted to hear – that he was a social inferior whose greatest satisfaction was to travel backwards and forwards from Milan, supplying those dealers with the instruments by which they could make their own fortunes and saving them the trouble of ever stepping outside the walls of Paris; the enticing *pièce de résistance* would be an unobtainable Stradivari violin. It is possible that Tarisio's initial encounter with Aldric (or Chanut)

¹ John Dilworth, 'Silent Witness', *The Strad*, March 2011, p. 38.

² See Chapter 3 for detailed consideration of these descriptions.

in 1827 was entirely stage-managed by Tarisio – a game of charades, no less. Tarisio seems to have lived his life in a solitary and undemonstrative manner – no wife is known, no children have ever been identified – and his (real) death was most likely equally undemonstrative; he simply disappeared from view, leaving few recorded traces of his existence. Reverend Haweis succinctly sums up the situation:

Barring a narrow circle of dealers, it may seem strange that so remarkable a man should not have been more widely known and esteemed during his lifetime; but we can well understand that the restricted circle of dealers amongst whom he moved did not find it to their interest to place their special Cremona “pocket” within reach of the wealthy amateurs out of whom they themselves were busy making their market.³

As proposed in Chapter 6, it seems more likely that the 1716 Stradivari violin itemised in the 1823 *la Collezione* inventory was not sold at any point between 1823 and 1834.⁴ Even when Count Cozio allowed the *la Collezione* instruments to be sold individually (rather than all thirty-four instruments being bought in one transaction) there were still difficulties in finding purchasers who would pay anything other than the lowest possible prices.⁵ Perhaps, as a result of this lack of interest, the Count subsequently retrieved from Carlo Carli some of his instruments, and listed two of them – the *forma P.G.1716* Stradivari violin and his father’s 1668 Amati violin – in the ms. Cozio 81 inventory of 11th October 1834. The evidence of this inventory strongly suggests that the 1716 violin, now described as *più bello [...] più perfetto*, was eventually sold by Countess Matilde, during 1841, to a now-unidentifiable person. Even if that person was Tarisio – who by that time was very wealthy (according to Vuillaume) – the physical differences between the violin described in 1774-75 and 1801 (and measured in 1816) and today’s *Messiah* violin, remain unresolved. If the 1841 purchaser was not Tarisio then Vuillaume’s ‘discovery’ of the *Le Messie* violin at the Fontaneto d’Agogna farmhouse in January 1855 is entirely false. An alternative possibility is that the 1716 violin of *la Collezione* was sold by Carlo Carli to a now-unknown purchaser, and the 1834 ms. Cozio 81 *più bello [...] più perfetto* Stradivari violin is a quite different instrument.

Even if the common account of Vuillaume’s discovery of the *Le Messie* violin at Fontaneto d’Agogna is accepted, the subsequent behaviour of Vuillaume is more than just perplexing. If the violin was uniquely immaculate – a violin which demonstrated, exactly, the incomparable reality of Stradivari’s skills in 1716 – why would Vuillaume modernise the violin for usage but then lock the violin inside a glass cabinet? Why, having apparently obtained ‘the most perfect instrument I have ever seen’ did Vuillaume try to sell it just seven years later in 1862, and again in 1865?⁶ Why copy the *Messiah* violin so exactly (Vuillaume’s 1856 violin, number 2173)⁷ if not to demonstrate that Vuillaume’s skills as a maker were entirely equal to those of Stradivari? Why would Vuillaume, apparently, push a finely-sharpened pencil, and the nib of an ink pen, into the unblemished front-plate varnish of his *Le Messie* violin?⁸

Vuillaume’s awareness of his own abilities, his commercial dominance of the mid-nineteenth-century European violin trade, and his subtle and effective manipulation of customers and competitors, likely combined to produce a self-assessment of untouchable superiority. Given his history of copying Cremonese models it would have been but a short step for Vuillaume to perpetrate a fraud which, following the earlier demise of the principal witnesses, was unlikely to be evidentially challenged.

³ Haweis (1898) p. 179.

⁴ Giuseppe Carli’s letter of 14th February 1841 to Countess Matilde is relevant: ‘Here in Milan the enthusiasm of amateurs for music has been much diminished’.

⁵ See Carli’s correspondence with Countess Matilde (Chapter 6).

⁶ See Chapter 7 for further information.

⁷ See Chapter 8.

⁸ See Chapter 8.

As shown in Chapter 10, the urgency with which the 1890 purchase of the *Le Messie* violin had to be conducted (with David Laurie and, possibly, Victor Flechter waiting in the wings) perhaps excuses the Hills from making comprehensive enquiries and checks on the instrument – what would be described today as ‘due diligence’. What is disquieting is that during the period between the return of the violin from Robert Crawford (1904) and the sale of the violin to Richard Bennett (1913) the Hills sought information from European players and contacts who had known Vuillaume on a personal level and, more importantly, had either heard the *Le Messie* violin being played or had played it themselves. The published responses⁹ are certainly not consistent, but, if the Hills harboured doubts about the violin, then the responses, especially that which was received from Hugo Heermann, would have done little to assuage those doubts. Perhaps Achille Simonetti’s aurally-inconclusive public recital on the *Messiah* violin, at Hanwell in October 1910, prompted those doubts, especially when juxtaposed against Vuillaume’s earlier assessment: ‘in this instrument we find combined all the necessary qualities – strength, sweetness, openness, delicacy, easy vibration, and a tone which is distinguished, noble, and incisive.’¹⁰ Indeed, it might not be unreasonable to wonder whether the Hills only allowed Richard Bennett to buy the violin in 1913 because 1) he was a collector and was not going to play it, and 2) the violin would be invisible, secreted at his house in Southport, Lancashire.¹¹ From 1928 onwards the violin remained inaccessible to all (apart from a few minutes in Nathan Milstein’s hands) until it was displayed, mutely, at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

In view of the continued unavailability of the Hills’ personal diaries (which might shed valuable light on the Hills’ private thoughts about the instrument which hung, like a millstone, around their necks) it is here suggested that the Hills possibly viewed with misgivings the twentieth-century’s ever-increasing dissemination of string-instrument information – both written and photographic – together with the opening-up of access to the detail of museum collections, exhibitions, and library archives. If the *Messiah* violin was ‘in the open’ then unexpected discoveries in institutional archives might jeopardise its commonly accepted history, and therefore it was perhaps akin to a tactical retreat for the Hills to donate the violin, as part of a larger collection, to the glass-cabinet security of the Ashmolean Museum. Simply, the violin could not be sold.¹²

It is perhaps indicative of the lack of certainty about the *Messiah* violin’s identity that so much effort, and ink, has been spent unravelling the Hills’ comments about the peg-box letter, the date when the incorrect *G*-mark appeared in the peg-box, and the meaning of the impressed stars. Even the asymmetric eyes of the scroll are contentious since, as already shown,¹³ their condition is anomalous. The condition of the *Messiah* violin’s label renders it of limited help in confirming the violin’s provenance (especially when the label’s physical condition is juxtaposed against other late-seventeenth-century and early-eighteenth-century examples).

Within such an uncertain environment the science of dendrochronological analysis undoubtedly appealed to the violin’s major commentators, on both sides of the argument, as providing absolute reality. However, as shown, the dendro evidence only raises further questions, and cannot, in any manner, prove the involvement of Antonio Stradivari in the making of the *Messiah* violin. The outermost/CJ ‘youngest’ dates for the front plate are generally agreed – 1686 (bass side) and 1674 (treble) – but these dates resist being interpreted, or having assumptions drawn from them. Forensic analysis of the peg-box ink, or the paper and ink used for the internal label, might well provide more

⁹ See Chapter 10.

¹⁰ See Chapter 9.

¹¹ The price paid by Richard Bennett for the violin is unknown.

¹² According to Toby Faber (Faber, p. 203) ‘Henry Ford is said to have offered a blank cheque’ for the *Messiah* violin. If true, the Hills evidently declined to make their collective fortune in this manner (but why they declined is the critical issue).

¹³ See Chapter 3 for the Hills’ comment regarding ‘absolute similitude’.

conclusive evidence about the violin's origin than dendrochronological analysis (although a dendrochronological analysis of the spruce used in Vuillaume's copy-violins of the mid 1850s could provide an instructive comparison with the spruce used in the *Messiah* violin).

The *Messiah* violin has been placed on a pedestal, both literally and figuratively; its forever-silent condition is probably the most appropriate outcome from its unreliable history.