

The Mystical Stradivarius

A Stradivarius, of course, is a stringed instrument built by members of the Stradivari family, particularly Antonio Stradivari. According to their reputation, the quality of their sound has defied attempts to explain or reproduce, though this belief is controversial. The name "Stradivarius" has also become a superlative applied to designate excellence. To be called "the Stradivari" of any field is to be deemed the finest there is.

Born in Italy in 1644, Antonio Stradivari is believed to have been a disciple of Nicolo Amati, of the Amati family of luthiers of Cremona. In 1660, Antonio set up shop on his own in Cremona, though his early violins are generally considered inferior to those of his "golden age", between 1698 and 1720. While his techniques have long been fertile soil for debate and not fully understood by modern craftsmen and scientists, it is known for certain that the wood used included spruce for the harmonic top, willow for the internal parts and maple for the back, strip and neck. There has been conjecture that this wood was treated with several types of minerals, including potassium borate (borax), sodium and potassium silicate, and vernice bianca, a varnish composed of Arabic gum, honey and egg white. He made his instruments using an inner form, unlike the French copyists, such as Vuillaume, who employed an outer form. It is clear from the number of forms extant that he experimented with some of the dimensions of his instruments throughout his career.

A Stradivarius made in the 1680s, or during Stradivari's Brescian period from 1690-1700, could be worth several hundred thousand dollars or more on auction, at today's prices. Depending on condition, instruments made during Stradivari's "golden period" from 1700 to 1720 can be worth several million dollars. After the passing of the legendary cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich in 2007, his cello, one of the greatest cellos in existence, the Dupont Stradivarius of 1711, was acquired by the Japan Music Foundation for \$20,000,000. A Russian collector also recently paid a record \$9,500,000 for the Barrow violin of 1715.

It is not uncommon for violins to be labeled or branded "Stradivarius", as the name has been used since

by other manufacturers. However, it is generally believed that there are fewer than 700 genuine instruments extant, very few of which are accounted for.

The fame of Stradivari instruments is not a modern phenomenon and they appear in numerous works of fiction. The fictional detective Sherlock Holmes is described as having owned a Stradivarius, with detail given to how he purchased the instrument for fifty-five English shillings in the story "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box". A famous, if perhaps apocryphal, story about the Dupont claims the instrument's visible dent was made by the boots of Emperor Napoléon I of France, who tried his hand at playing it.

Just one more fascinating subject available in the wonderful world of phillumeny!

[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stradivarius>]

