

2012

"Stradivari" by Stewart Pollens

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Recommended Citation

Walls, Peter (2012) "'Stradivari" by Stewart Pollens," *Performance Practice Review*. Vol. 17: No. 1, Article 8.
DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.201217.01.08
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol17/iss1/8>

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Book review: Pollens, Stewart. *Stradivari*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-52187-304-8.

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Stradivari is a household name. Microsoft Word's spellcheck recognizes it. Whether elevated in the Latin form used on violin labels as "Stradivarius" or shortened to just "Strad", it has long been a byword for violin perfection. In 1967, the Popular Mechanics Press published a set of plans (by Joseph Reid) under the title *You Can Make a Stradivarius Violin*; and recently *The Guardian* newspaper carried a headline "How many notes would a virtuoso violinist pay for a Stradivarius?" (an article about musicians' ability to discern a difference in tonal quality between old and new instruments.¹)

Disentangling fact from legend is no easy matter especially when skepticism extends even to the claim that Antonio Stradivari "never existed at all but was the invention of a cadre of corrupt nineteenth-century violin dealers" (p. 41). Stewart Pollens's meticulous and scrupulously honest examination of the archives puts paid to such extreme views. Pollens pieces together a fascinating picture of Stradivari's life and circumstances. At the same time, his book illustrates that, despite the enduring power of the brand, there has been scant respect historically for Stradivari's judgment. The process of altering his instruments began very early in their history. Count Cozio di Salabue, who set out in the 1770s to acquire as many Stradivari instruments as possible for his collection, had no compunction about sending these off to Francesco and Pietro Giovanni Mantegazza in Milan for an upgrade.

And so it continued. Pollens writes, "Shortly after Cozio's death in 1840, many of the instruments from his collection found their way to violin shops in Paris and London, and eventually to New York and beyond, where they were again re-necked, re-graduated, re-barred, and outfitted with new bridges, fingerboards, tailpieces, and pegs...As a consequence, very few original or early fittings from Cozio's collection have survived, a fate shared by virtually all of Stradivari's instruments and most violin-family instruments made prior to 1750" (p. 120). In other words, almost all Stradivari instruments have been irrevocably and fundamentally changed. We are left with the paradox that musicians, makers and collectors have, on the one hand, assumed that Stradivari was the

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2 January, 2012; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/jan/02/how-many-notes-violinist-stradivarius>. Pollens (p. 104) notes preferences for old instruments going back to the seventeenth century, with Charles II of England paying up to thirty-three times the value of a new lute in order to acquire one made by Laux Maler in Bologna in the first half of the sixteenth century. It was not until the late eighteenth century that Stradivari came to be regarded as pre-eminent among the luthiers of the previous two centuries. See Peter Walls, "Mozart and the Violin," *Early Music* 20 (1992): 8-9.

greatest violin maker of all time while, on the other hand, been confident that they have known how to improve his instruments.

There is a dispiriting side to reading this excellent book as we are continually reminded of the elusiveness of Stradivari's ideals in relation to form, setup, and—most importantly—sound. Pollens notes ruefully that “It is unlikely that Stradivari, as well as his predecessors and contemporaries, would have recognized the type of sound produced by their violins today” (p. 105). Given this situation, Pollens' concentration on Stradivari's workshop materials and his forms and patterns is a valuable way of reconstructing how this maker approached instrument making.

Chapter 4, “Violin fittings and setup” is of particular interest to those concerned with the historical-performance-practice perspective. Early on in the chapter (p. 105), Pollens writes:

“Much has been made of the Baroque-style ‘set-up’ by early-music practitioners, yet there are some widely held misconceptions about the original configuration of violins made by Stradivari and his contemporaries, the most common being that up through the mid eighteenth century, violin, viola, and cello necks were universally mounted in line with the body and were not angled back, that necks and strings were considerably shorter, that the string angle over the bridge was considerably flatter, and that tension was a good deal lower.”

He is, of course, right about the broad generalizations that have been used to describe the difference between Baroque and modern setups. I am as guilty as anyone here. In *Performance Practice: Music after 1600* and then in the “Violin Article” of *New Grove II*, I summarized the characteristics of Baroque violins, violas, and cellos as follows (and here I italicize statements that need, at least, qualifying in light of Pollens' research):

*“The neck, generally shorter than on modern instruments, projects straight out from the body so that its upper edge continues the line of the belly's rim. The neck is fixed by nails (or occasionally screws) through the end block rather than morticed into the end block as in modern instruments. The elevation of the strings over the bridge is achieved by a wedge-shaped fingerboard, which is, again, shorter than that found on modern instruments. Bridges were cut to a more open pattern and were very slightly lower. The bass bar was shorter and lighter, and the soundpost thinner. Violins (and violas) lacked chin rests. The tone of all these instruments is brighter, clearer, less loud and less 'mellow' than that of their modern counterparts.”*²

Pollen examines each of the features enumerated here in relation to the evidence of Stradivari's surviving instruments, forms (molds), and drawings. His dispassionate and careful reading of this evidence is illuminating. With the exception of the “Medici” tenor viola (1690), there are no surviving Stradivari instruments that the maker himself would recognize in terms of either setup or sound.

²

Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie, eds., *Performance Practice: Music after 1600* (London: Macmillan, 1989); Peter Walls, “Violin,” *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition (London: Macmillan, 2001), 26: 714.

The fingerboard patterns from Stradivari's workshop suggest that his violin neck length was only one millimeter shorter than the modern standard (130 mm) and that string length was "remarkably close" to modern violin setups (p. 82). (The fingerboards themselves were long enough only to reach eighth-position B^b on the E-string. On the tilt of the neck, Pollens notes "the 'Medici' tenor viola neck...is set at approximately eighty-six degrees. The added wedge produces a composite angle of about eighty-three degrees, which is within a degree or two of that used in modern viola setup." Pollens states categorically (p. 123) that there is no evidence that Stradivari's soundposts were substantially thinner than those used today.

Given the incomplete and contradictory evidence available, restoration of a Stradivari violin to its original condition is scarcely feasible. Pollens is scathing about the way in which the Metropolitan Museum's "restored" Stradivari violin misrepresents its original 1693 state: "A wedge-shaped fingerboard of extended length was fitted so that Classical period repertoire could be accommodated (though most of Stradivari's violins had been fully modernized by that time!). Despite the Baroque trappings and the efforts of well-schooled performers, the re-graduated and patched top of the Metropolitan Museum's 'Baroque Strad' continues to assert itself...even late-eighteenth-century fortepianos lack sufficient power to support the violin in sonata literature" (p. 130-1).³

The idea that "Stradivari" was the construction of a cadre of dishonest dealers is revived in the closing pages of the volume. Or, at least, we are reminded that some superb copies have been presented to the world as being by Stradivari. There is an appendix on the "Messiah" violin in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum proving conclusively that—as many have suspected—this exquisite instrument could not have been made by Stradivari. The case study is a superb example of Pollens' patient and exacting detective work. The *coup de grâce* is provided by dendrochronology carried out by Dr. Peter Klein, indicating that the violin could not have been made before 1739. This conflicts directly with earlier dendrochronological dating carried out by J. Topham and others; Pollens argues (p. 320, footnote 50) that the discrepant results of these other studies are based on an inadequate master chronology.

This is not just a book about Antonio Stradivari as violinmaker. There are chapters on the dancing master's kit, the viola da gamba and viola d'amore, the lute, the mandola and mandolino, the guitar, and the harp. Our picture of Stradivari has been molded by the priorities of succeeding ages. Instruments that were important and desirable to segments of Stradivari's clientele were obsolete a generation later. Viola da gamba construction seems to have loomed large throughout Stradivari's long career. In the year of his death, he created a new set of patterns and a form for making a seven-string, French-style viola da gamba (a style of instrument in which he had been interested since the beginning of the century). No actual instruments survive intact. There are, however, a number that have been converted for use as cellos.

This is an invaluable study. If I have any reservations, it would be that Pollens is perhaps too conscientious about back-filling every aspect of his story. We get an interesting history of Cremona going back to Roman times, and—in similar vein—he includes sections on the origins of the violin and of every other instrument that featured in Stradivari's output. These are necessarily brief and

³ See <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/55.86a-c>.

consequently invite objection. To take one very obvious example, it does not seem to me at all clear that “the viola da gamba is a somewhat older form than the violin” (p. 143) and the statement that it went into decline “around the third quarter of the eighteenth century” needs nuancing. Thanks, I think, to the desire to present a complete picture, there are some unnecessary repetitions (such as the quotation on p. 36 that is reprinted on p. 279). One repetition raises a more serious question. On p. 119, Pollens writes that Count Cozio sent new instruments that he had bought from Paolo Stradivari to the Mantegazza brothers to have them “thinned to perfection.” On p. 303, he repeats this phrase in the context of Cozio’s sentence: “quattro de tutto difettosi, tre de’ quali con catena mal collocata e abbondanti di legno, però mi riuscì di farli ridurre dal Mantegazza all perfezione” (“four of the total were defective, three of which had bass-bars that were badly glued and abundant in wood, however, I was successful in having the Mantegazza thin them to perfection.”) Cozio seems to be saying that the Mantegazza’s removed superfluous wood from the defective bass bars, not that he was complicit in thinning the actual plates.

There are occasional errors. The caption to Fig. 1.7 on p. 21 purports to show a census return from 1668 that has the Stradivari family occupying a house called “Casa Picenarda” whereas the document itself describes this as “Casa del Pescaroli”. (The family moved to the Casa Picenardi in 1681.) The caption for Fig. 2.9 also gives a wrong date for the burial record of Stradivari’s first wife, Francesca. He gives Henry Cart De Lafontaine’s outdated and inaccurate *The King’s Musick* (London, 1909) as a source for biographical information about the Steffkins brothers rather than the *Biographical Dictionary of English Court Musicians 1485-1714* and/or *Records of English Court Music*.⁴ There are a few statements that betray Pollens’ lack of knowledge of violin playing (“Today, the violin mute is chiefly used to reduce volume...”, p. 141).

These are just quibbles. By and large this is a thoroughly well-informed study with implications that go far beyond violin making. What is particularly appealing about *Stradivari* is that Stewart Pollens uses his enormous expertise as an instrument conservator to deepen appreciation of every aspect of Stradivari’s work. Best of all, he understands the musical importance of his subject.

⁴

Andrew Ashbee, David Lasocki, Peter Holman, and Fiona Kisby, compilers, *Biographical Dictionary of English Court Musicians 1485-1714*, 2 vols. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998); Andrew Asbee, *Records of English Court Music*, 10 vols. (i-iv, Snodland, 1986-91; v-vi, Aldershot 1991-6: Scholar Press).