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The 'Sainton' Controversy - Genuine or Fake? -

The Complex Story of a Late Violin by Giuseppe Guarneri 'del Gesu'.

This is the unedited version of an article that appeared in the Strad Magazine, July 2005, pp. 50-56.

Word count 2641

It is often claimed that Cremonese instruments can be identified by their unique tonal qualities. A few aficionados even believe they can discern a specific Stradivari timbre. Unfortunately this is nonsense. The simple truth is that while players can occasionally be recognized by their style and technique, no one has yet proved capable of identifying the instruments of a particular maker, purely by their sound. Even the apparently obvious distinction, between the acoustical properties of a Stradivari, and a Guarneri 'del Gesu', has continually defied serious analysis. The idea of a tonal fingerprint, unique to a specific maker, is pure fiction.¹ Documentary evidence ex-

cepted, the process of instrument identification, as with all other objects of art and antiquity, is essentially a visual one, and even the latest scientific aids are merely an extension of this visual process.

Consequently, for those wishing to purchase a fine violin there is little alternative to consulting an established connoisseur. However, for the musician or collector this poses an awesome dilemma, because assessing the value of a connoisseur's opinion can be as demanding as assessing the authenticity of an antique instrument.

Somewhat bizarrely the value of any connoisseur's opinion is directly related to how his or her peers assess their worth. An unrecorded vote of confidence is given and an unwritten ranking is established. Accordingly an expert of high repute has considerable influence and authority in the business. Unfortunately, even the best connoisseurs do not always agree, and in extreme cases factions build and dissent transpires. In order to understand why disagreements can arise, it is necessary to understand something about how the process of instrument identification works.

In general, connoisseurs approach the process of instrument identification from two directions; they examine the available documentary evidence, provenance, labels, archive materials etc, and they analyse the actual works, often in considerable detail.

At its finest, instrument identification not only involves the naming of a particular master, but also the period in which the work was completed. In order to achieve this, the connoisseur must have had access to many instruments, over many years and to have studied the lives and works of many individuals in meticulous detail. Eventually the very process of compiling, analysing and correlating information heightens the connoisseur's perception. In another context such a state might well be termed "enlightenment".

Enlightenment of this nature is not an innate gift. Like a good golf swing, or a fine cadenza, it requires hard repetitive practice. Natural talent, (whatever that might be), may help, but it is total dedication to any discipline that produces outstanding ability. Even so, regardless of their efforts, the extent of any con-

noisseurs 'enlightenment' will be more restricted than is generally imagined. History has seen the passing of hundreds of thousands of violinmakers. Some were undeniably prolific even celebrated but many, indeed most, were unproductive, unknown or both. Although theoretically it is the job of the connoisseur to identify all of their surviving works, this is an impossible task. No connoisseurs can claim to have examined even a single example of every school, let alone of every makers work. Accordingly, connoisseurs are required to make judgements based upon a relatively small sample of the available whole. In addition, as well as the countless numbers of legitimate instruments, for reasons many and varied classical violins have been copied, counterfeited and altered by generations of skilful craftsmen and women.

It may surprise musicians and collectors to learn that if a connoisseur knows the life and works of twenty-five to thirty historical makers in detail this is already an exceptional achievement.² A further hundred or so, though familiar, will represent a genuine challenge. But beyond this most connoisseurs are at best reduced to calculated guesswork. Although this is no exaggeration, it does not mean that they are worthless incompetents. Given the countless number of men and women who have made one or more instruments of the violin family, a well calculated guess is more than might fairly be expected.

Because of the huge number of violin makers there has always been a tendency for experts to specialise. Some specialize in geographical regions others in economic zones. Regrettably, although minor regional schools or inexpensive instruments may be as important academically as classical Italian works, in most other respects they are not. The intrinsic beauty of many classical Italian instruments, their undeniable sonority, and their stylistic authority, has caused their prestige and fiscal value to increase dramatically over the centuries. Consequently, rightly or wrongly, when the violin world talks of great experts, they are usually referring to those who know classical Italian instruments well. As a result the broader ability of the expert on Italian violins is often overestimated. In reality genuine universal experts are a rarer breed than virtuoso violinists. They may even be a myth. Amongst the world's famous experts both past and present, knowledge of the minor schools is often extremely limited. Quite simply, connoisseurs cannot hope to know that which they do not see on a regular basis.

Nevertheless, if circumstances allow, the physical details and typical features of violins can be catalogued and learned. And with time, effort and some good fortune almost anyone can develop the skills required. The danger lies in applying this information to the business of buying and selling instruments. Dabbling with dealing may not be as hazardous as volcanology or as menacing as nuclear physics, but the prospective connoisseur should be well aware that the potential for anguish grief and ruination is substantial.

Compiling data however all-inclusive does not in itself constitute wisdom. Indeed, although most top connoisseurs are well versed in the essential characteristics of fine violins they need only refer to this knowledge in challenging cases. As a rule any instrument that lies within their sphere will be recognised almost intuitively. Familiarity with minutiae may be an essential part of the connoisseur's schooling but relying on such details is generally the mark of a novice. Accordingly it is the novice who will take fright when a usually associated feature is not present on a genuine instrument, and it is the novice who will accept the fake that includes all the salient features. But, it is not only the novice who can become ensnared. Top connoisseurs can be justifiably proud of the insight they develop, but very occasionally an instrument will play tricks with their wits and in spite of their undoubted ability, from time to time even the best will make mistakes. And, when this happens, the result can lead to protracted disagreement. Moreover, if the opposing protagonists are particularly influential then opinions polarise and schisms develop.

Theoretically, as long as they remain genuine and sincere such disagreements should be welcomed. Constructive deliberation can only improve the overall standard of expertise. Unfortunately the enormous value of classical instruments frequently places too much strain on any possible constructive discourse.

The advent of the communications age and an undoubted move towards a more investigative form of expertise has complicated matters further. Instrument identification has become a continually changing discipline. Many old established doctrines have been unceremoniously overturned by new discover-

ies. Scepticism has become the watchword and those connoisseurs, who persisted with absolutes, run the risk of being proved absolutely wrong. Schools of violinmakers, and the individuals within those schools, can no longer be identified with the confidence displayed by previous generations. There can be little doubt that such developments have led many dealers to take a more conservative approach.

Some years ago the subject of this article, the 1741(?) “Sainton” violin by Joseph ‘Guarneri del Gesù’ became embroiled in controversy. In the latter part of the 20th century two distinct and highly reputable camps formed; one in favour and one against its authenticity. The story of Joseph Guarneri ‘del Gesù’ and his instruments is in any case more complex than most. It has been aggravated by the many myths and legends associated with his name, the high monetary value placed upon his works, and the fact that so many copyists have been attracted by his flamboyant style. Indeed, the legendary Hill brothers had the following to say about the middle period of Joseph Guarneri del Gesù’s production.³

“We cannot subscribe to the correctness of the method of dividing the master’s work into periods, for we find no dividing line that is at all perceptible, no decided changes of form or type which we are able to point to as the production of given years”

The history of some classical instruments can be traced back to the makers shop, but these are exceptions. In most cases a century is the most that can be hoped for and this brings them well within the range of several prominent 19th century copyists including Vuillaume, Lott and the Vollers. Since the provenance of the “Sainton” Del Gesù is comparatively short, and since both camps largely accepted the presence of the maker’s salient features, essentially the disagreement boiled down to a question of intuition.

Unfortunately, when dealing with an object that has been, radically altered (as have all classical instruments), and in constant use for more than 250 years, forming an intuitive opinion can be a risky business, especially in Del Gesù’s case.

Clearly all dealers must take risks; it is the nature of their business. Moreover, they must be prepared

to make incorrect judgements, not once but many times. They must also be prepared to learn from their mistakes and if they wish to and remain successful and respected dealers, they must be prepared to pay for such mistakes themselves and not simply pass on their losses to others. Accordingly, it is not simply a question of an instruments authenticity, but the risk one is prepared to take with either one’s own or more seriously with a customer’s funds.

In the case of the “Sainton”, it was probably with such factors in mind, that those connoisseurs in the vanguard of the new investigative form of expertise took the view that it was better to err on the side of caution. Taking chances on intuitive based opinions can be a risky business. With luck they can pay large dividends, but they can also lose far larger fortunes? In this case lady luck was on the side of the audacious and the day (at least for the customer) was saved.

Pronouncements about any ancient work of art or antiquity can never be 100% certain. None of us were actually there. In the end it is the balance of opinion that counts. And for the moment at least, even though scientific evidence can definitely denounce previous endorsements, it can never prove an objects authenticity beyond all doubt, it can only add considerably to the weight of favourable evidence.

Until the dendrochronologist John Topham was asked to examine the ‘Sainton’ in the summer of 2003 the evidence was very finely balanced making this beautiful violin perhaps the most contentious in the business. Having polarised opinion more than any other violin for many decades the debate came to an abrupt end when Topham established that the youngest year ring on this violin was probably 1731. (On the treble side the youngest year ring was slightly earlier dating from 1728). Topham also found that the ‘Sainton’ belly strongly cross-match with several bellies attributed to Guarneri Del Gesù, and that the bass side specifically matches the treble sides of the ‘Chatelanat’ of 1742 and the ‘Campo Selice’ of 1743.

Thanks to the 1994 commemorative exhibition of instruments by Giuseppe Guarneri ‘del Gesù’ held on the 250th anniversary of the death,⁴ connoisseurs can now contrast and compare the instruments of this Cremonese master better than ever before. The diversity that made Del Gesù’s work so difficult to

fathom has been realised and although not totally deciphered, various stylistic periods and anomalies have been catalogued and acknowledged.

For connoisseurs one of the great difficulties with this violin is the fact that it has many individual features that occur upon several violins but that it matches none exactly. The archings are somewhat pinched with flat, scoopy fluting around the edges and especially bellow the f-holes. They are similar to those of the 1744 'Ole Bull', the varnish however is not. It has a wear pattern resembling that of the 'Doyen' also of 1744, with grey-green edging around the chipped-off areas. However, the varnish colour lies somewhere between the two being darker and thicker than the 'Ole Bull' but lighter than the 'Doyen'. The curves and shapes of the f-holes' tops are also similar to the 'Ole Bull' but the bottom halves are nowhere near as wild. Moreover whereas the 'Ole Bull' f-holes are set more or less vertically on the belly, these holes like the 'Doyen' lean towards each other at the top.

The head is carved from wood of extremely fine growth and is well flamed. In this and in its style and cut it is akin to several late violins including the 1742 'Lord Wilton', the 1743 'Sauret', and again the 1744 'Ole Bull'.⁵ Like all of these heads it has the following characteristics: close second turns; eyes that stick out and up; saw cuts at the open throat; and the remains of rasp marks in the flutings where they run around the scroll's end. It also has the appearance of having been softened by an abrasive. But, it does not resemble the cut or finish of the 'Cannon' or 'Carrothus' heads of 1743 in any way.⁶

Until about 1742 'del Gesu' kept his rib mitres at the corners short. After this period he extended them by simply letting the upper and lower bout ribs overlap those of the centre bout.⁷ This is a strong feature of Del Gesu's last known violin the (probably posthumously labelled) 'Leduc' of 1745. It is present on all four corners of the 'Sainton'.

Though not as extreme, the body outline has the somewhat quirky form that characterises the 'Ole Bull'. It is almost as if the corners have slipped slightly out of place.⁸ The edgework is shallower and the corners shorter than the 'Ole Bull' and 'Lord Wilton' but this discrepancy can probably be explained by the fact that they are slightly more worn.

The most consistent feature of 'del Gesu' violins is the purfling material, and fortunately this instrument proves no exception. However, like most of the characteristic features of the 'Sainton', the purfling cut and finish is that of the master's later violins.

Finally, the label appears to read 1741 but all told this remarkable instrument probably belongs to Del Gesu's final period around 1743-4.

¹ *For some time it has been possible to identify the human voice electronically. Although it may eventually prove possible to identify a specific instrument, the problems of identifying the complete works of a whole school or individual are for the moment insurmountable. There are too many factors which must be taken into account when analysing the sound of a series of violins; the differing pieces of wood and models employed, the player, bow, bass bar, bridge, sound post and strings, being the most obvious. Damage to the varnish layer, repair and restoration work must also play a part.*

² *Coincidentally, but not significantly, this is approximately the extent of the classical Cremonese school.*

³ *See p.87 "The Violin Makers of the Guarneri Family", by W. Henry Hill, Arthur F. Hill & Alfred E. Hill. Pub. 1931 by W. E. Hill and Sons. London.*

⁴ *Held in 1994 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*

⁵ *For more information on Del Gesu's heads see pp. 137-142 "Giuseppe Guarneri Del Gesu". Published by Peter Biddulph, London 1998.*

⁶ *For a possible explanation see pp. 138-9 "Giuseppe Guarneri Del Gesu". Published by Peter Biddulph, London 1998.*

⁷ *For a possible explanation see p. 136 "Giuseppe Guarneri Del Gesu". Published by Peter Biddulph, London 1998.*

⁸ *For a possible explanation see p. 144 "Giuseppe Guarneri Del Gesu". Published by Peter Biddulph, London 1998.*
