

ANTONIO STRADIVARI

"HELLIER" 1679

**Roger Hargrave discusses the most famous of
Stradivari's decorated instruments.**

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Most modern violin makers prefer to believe that the violin is so pure in its conception that it simply does not require the vulgarity of added ornamentation. Whilst there may indeed be some justification for this 20th century functionalist idealism, it is certainly not in keeping with the baroque environment, within which the violin was to develop and reach its maturity. Before, during and even after the classical period of violin making in Italy (circa 1550 to 1750), an impressively large number of musical instruments were decorated. Throughout Europe, gambas, citterns, kettle drums, organs, recorders, guitars, trumpets, spinnets, harpsichords, clavichords, flutes, lutes and many more obscure instruments besides, were being carved, gilded, inlaid, embossed, chased and painted, to a point where the original function of the instrument became an almost secondary consideration. It is however quite likely, and certainly worth considering, that such elaborately decorated instruments, mainly prepared for a wealthy clientele, would have had a far better chance of survival than those simply made for the local street musician.

Not surprisingly, many of the great Cremonese masters did choose to decorate at least some of their production. The majority of surviving instruments of Andrea Amati (circa 1550 to 1581/2), the first known Cremonese violin maker; are decorated. Andrea's designs were usually quite elaborate, generally taking the form of a dedication to some member of the aristocracy. Though tastefully and skilfully executed, the painting and gilding often covered the back ribs and head almost entirely. However, apart from the usual single string of purfling around the edge, any elabo-

rate inlay work appears to have been confined to the fingerboards and tailpieces. In spite of this extreme decoration, the simple nobility of these ancient instruments, their superb craftsmanship and perhaps the patina of the centuries has made them totally acceptable to 20th century tastes.

Gasparo da Salo Giovanni Paolo Maggini and many other anonymous Brescian makers also occasionally pulled out the stops. They produced some very intricate, if not always well finished, purfling designs on the backs and bellies of their instruments. Occasionally Brescian instruments were also painted with heraldic and other devices.

I have seen two violins by Nicolo Amati, both of which are double purfled. Small areas of the ribs, the plates, the neck and the whole of the head, have been inlaid, using a black filler in a way strongly resembling both the style and method which Stradivari was later to develop. In a different way, these works of Nicolo seem to have influenced members of the Guarneri family, who used similar fleurdelys devices and double purfling. A few other Italian makers extended the decorative use of inlay and paintwork on their instruments, but by the 18th century, the practice was, like the baroque period itself, largely dying out.

There are ten known surviving decorated instruments by Stradivari. This number is made up of eight violins, one viola and one cello. The last of the decorated violins, made in 1722 and known as the "Rode", does not have inlay work on the head and ribs in-

stead, like the surviving viola and cello of the "Spanish" quartet, the designs are only delicately painted on.

Of the remaining seven completely inlaid instruments, I have examined four very carefully. They are as follows: the "Cipriani Potter" 1683 which is housed in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford; the "Ole Bull" 1687 which is one of the two genuinely magnificent instruments in the Axelrod Quartet; the "Greffuhle" 1709 so named because of the unusual design of the inlaid work, which includes greffuhles and several spotted hunting dogs, also in the Axelrod Quartet; and, finally the "Hellier" which is represented here.

The history of the "Hellier" is well documented, and it is one of the few instruments which can be traced back directly to Stradivari's workshop. It was brought to England by Sir Edward Hellier in 1734 and is obviously named after him. The following are excerpts from papers which are not in general circulation but which will help the reader to build a better picture of the violin's history. I have also included a section of boring's How many Strads?, since its scarcity may prohibit many people from seeing it for themselves.

There is an accompanying letter [to the certificate of W. E. Hill & Sons dated 21 January 1957] by Hill of special interest. In part, I quote: 'The instrument derives its name from the Hellier family, in whose possession it is first recorded in the XVIII century. It was brought to this country by Sir Samuel Hellier who is said to have purchased it from the great maker himself. The violin remained in the possession of the Hellier family until about 1880, when it was sold by Colonel Shaw Hellier.

'It is one of the few instruments whose complete history from maker to present day is known. We have always greatly admired these inlaid instruments of which ten only are known to exist, the design of the ornamentation being of such chaste beauty and so thoroughly in keeping with the maker's high standard of craftsmanship. They were the object of his special care, as we learn from the writings of the old Priest Arisi who used to frequent the Master's workshop and who, in referring to him in the year 1720, writes as follows:

"His fame is unequalled as a maker of instruments of the finest qualities and he has made many of extraordinary beauty, ornamented with small figures, flowers, fruits, arabesques and gracefully inlaid fanciful ornaments all in perfect drawing, which he

sometimes paints in black or inlays with ebony and ivory, all of which are executed with the greatest skill, rendering them worthy of the exalted personage to whom they are intended to be presented."

'Such instruments will stand out against the masterpieces of the makers and the "Hellier", which is in a remarkably fresh state, never having been overplayed, is from a tonal point of view one of the forest Stradivaris in existence.'

(Wurlitzer: The Hottinger Collection.)

The famous "Hellier" violin has been variously recorded as a work of 1679. It is one of the few specimens which are traced directly to Stradivari himself, as Sir Edward Hellier, of Womborne, Staffordshire, England, bought it from him in 1734, at Cremona, three years before the death of the master. Hellier is said to have paid a sum approximating two hundred dollars in today's equivalent! That, at the time, was perhaps a goodly price to pay, yet how utterly inadequate in this age! The violin remained in the Hellier family throughout several generations; it was loaned for exhibition at South Kensington in 1872 by Captain T. B. Shaw Hellier, being No. 85 of the exhibits. In 1875 it passed from the Hellier family to George Crompton and by him was exhibited in 1885, again at South Kensington. The violin then passed to a new owner, Charles Oldham, a prominent eyespecialist of London, who is recorded in the annals of violin lovers as having the unique distinction of possessing at one time an entire quartet of ornamented Strads. Oldham's wish was to leave his collection to the British Museum; it was, however, not accepted and this instrument left English possession, ac by Hamma & Co., of Stuttgart, in whose book it appears illustrated in three views. The violin is also illustrated in color plates in the Hipkins and Gibb work. Two years younger than the "Sunrise", the "Hellier", second of the ornamented type of violins, shows bolder lines and more massive build, a manifestation of Stradivari's growing urge to depart from Amati's teachings, although then still an employee in his shop.

(boring: How Many strads?, p.367.)

Antonio Stradivari was indisputably the greatest violin maker of all time and in every respect the "Hellier" is one of his personal masterpieces. The unique and almost unbelievable quality of this and indeed all of Stradivari's inlaid violins has proved to be his ability to apply an astonishing amount of decorative inlay, with a lightness and finesse which in no way disturbs the harmony of the violin's natural form. In-

deed the decoration genuinely enhances the simple beauty of the instrument's lines.

In many ways the "Hellier" can claim to be an absolutely unique violin. In 1679 Antonio was slowly, almost painfully slowly, moving away from the influence of Nicolo Amati. Although quite definitely inspired by Nicolo, not least in its decoration, in the "Hellier" we are given a vision of the shape of things to come. The modelling of the "Hellier" was an evolutionary step of tremendous vigour, but strangely one destined not to be repeated for several years. Stradivari was not a struggling, pushy "achiever" in the modern sense. His emancipation was a slow process and his development a composed and carefully calculated affair which was fortunately continued until the end of his extraordinary long life. We do not know if this instrument was a special commission, perhaps later cancelled, or merely a show-piece with which Stradivari could display his talent to prospective customers. Either way the instrument was to remain in Stradivari's workshop for a further 60 years.

The hours involved in building such a violin did not come cheaply, and it is therefore understandable that Stradivari was also extremely careful in his choice of materials. The two piece belly wood is of magnificently fine growth, opening only very slightly in the flanks. It is straight grained and quarter sawn and very typical of the wood used by Stradivari in this early period. Although Stradivari seems to have rejected such exceptionally fine belly wood in his later periods, this decision may have been dictated by a shortfall in his supply, rather than for acoustical or other reasons.

The back wood is of finely grown imported wood, again cut exactly on the quarter. The bold wild flame runs across and slightly downwards from left to right. The intensity of the flame has created a pronounced corrugated effect which is clearly visible when the back is viewed against a raking light. Although the ribs are similar to the back they are of an even finer growth and the flames are slightly tighter with a pronounced slope of almost 60°. Normally the flame direction on Stradivari's ribs remains the same all the way around the instrument. On the "Hellier" however the flame of the right hand centre rib runs in the opposite direction. Curiously this feature can also be seen on other inlaid violins. As usual the top rib would have been made from a single piece before being cut through when the neck was modernised.

The wood for the head has been very cleverly chosen. Again cut on the quarter and of extremely fine growth, the flame, despite matching the ribs perfectly, is of a very shallow curl. Such a shallow curl would obviously have been helpful during the carving and inlaying process.

The head is a typical specimen of Stradivari's early work and in that respect retains much of the Amati influence. It is perfect in symmetry and proportion, perhaps one of the most beautifully worked heads of the whole classical period. Only the Amatis ever matched this kind of elegance, and Stradivari seldom produced such delicate work in his later periods. Later heads may have possessed more vitality, more forcefulness and more maturity, but they never again possessed this kind of sensitivity. The work is of course exceptionally clean, although, as always, some small traces of the gouge can still be seen on the vertical surfaces of the turns, especially around the small eyes which seem to pass like a dowel, from one side of the scroll through to the other. Viewed from the side, the Amati influence can be seen in the sweep of the pegbox and the smaller (than later) turns of the scroll itself. The volutes remain fairly shallow, becoming only slightly deeper as they spiral in towards the eyes. The volutes end in stings rather than the more usual commas. The inlay work flowing around the pegbox and into the volutes runs almost up into the stings of the eyes and finishes with four tiny dots on each side. The ends of the eyes have been decorated with an extremely delicate flower design, cut simply with a narrow "U" shaped gouge.

Viewed from the back, the pegbox has a distinct Amatese taper running from the chin to the top of the head. The extra width at the back of the box, on a level with the throat, which is so much a trademark of Stradivari's later heads, had not yet been developed. The chin itself is quite wide, helping to accentuate the taper. The pegbox is generous enough inside. The flutings running up the back and over the top of the scroll are only slightly shallower than usual. They retain the normal flat bottomed curve, which generally becomes more rounded in form as it passes over the top and under the front. The central spine between the two flutes has been in a strip of purfling which runs "impossibly" far underneath the front of the scroll. There are, naturally enough, none of the usual pin pricks visible on the spine. This strip of purfling was not used on every inlaid head; the "Greffuhle" for example, has a single black line only. The chamfer, like the head, is delicate and appears not to have been picked out in black. Perhaps Stradi-

vari felt that to do so would have made this particular head too "heavy". Again this was not always the case as is proved by the "Greffuhle".

The inlaid work on the head and ribs is of staggering fluidity. The intensity of the blacks is perfectly counterbalanced by the finely spun quality of the lines. The "Hellier" is probably the most delicately inlaid of the violins which I have seen and, judging from photographs, possibly the most delicate of all. The head in particular is finished with a lightness of touch which almost defies the imagination. It would be fruitless for me to describe the inlaid work in more detail – the photographs speak for themselves. I will make only one final comment as to the working of the inlay. The work on both the head and the ribs is relatively deeply etched, as can clearly be seen where small pieces of filler have been chipped away. I would guess up to 1mm and more in depth on the head and 0.5mm. to 0.75 mm at least on the ribs. In their book *Antonio Stradivari. His Life & Work*, the Hills suggest that parchment was used on the back of the rib to strengthen them. If any such material was used on the Hellier it has since been removed.

The outline of the "Hellier" is one of its most interesting features. It measures 358 mm over the arching (14 1/2 inches). It is also remarkably wide. These measurements were only used again by Stradivari in the mid – Certainly, when both the length and the width are considered together they were never really exceeded, although similar proportions occur again at the end of the golden period in the 1720s. Although the "Hellier" is marginally shorter than the so called "long pattern" violins of the 1690s, it is considerably wider in the body. Furthermore the "Hellier" has a flatness to the top and bottom of the outline which the long pattern instruments do not have and which certainly puts extra meat into the upper and lower bouts. The middle bouts also have the appearance of being wider, perhaps because of the straightness of the middle section combined with the way in which the top corners hook sharply back. This hooking of the corners and the correspondingly tighter curve of the ribs is typical of this early period. The edgework and corners are finished boldly. Perhaps Stradivari considered this necessary in order to balance the extra width of the purfling inlay. Possibly because of this slightly heavier edgework there is some suggestion of the 1685 period about the upper corners. Generally the outline viewed on its own is out of character for the period.

The arching also shows an advance in Stradivari's

thinking. There is only a slight scooping in the edges to accommodate the necessarily wider purfling channel; otherwise the arching is quite full in the flanks.

The sound holes are an abrupt return to the 1670s. They are a perfect match for the head, keenly cut, with desperately narrow gaps at the tips of the wings. They are refined rather than imposing and certainly go well with the fine belly wood with which this type of hole is so often associated. The flutings in the wings are shallower than normal but well defined. They run up alongside the body of the holes to create a slight eyebrow effect above their top outside curves. The circles have clearly been drilled and the top circles in particular are smaller than in Stradivari's later soundholes. The bodies of the holes, typically narrow, are cut almost at right angles to the plate, the nicks are elegantly finished and not over large.

The inlay work of both the belly and the back consists of two parallel strips of purfling, each made up from three pieces in the normal way. Between these strips, set into a black background, tiny ivory circles and diamonds alternate with one another around the edgework. The purfling strips are thin, perhaps more so than normal, although Stradivari's early purfling was relatively narrow. The strips come together at the corners to form beautiful mitres on both the inside and the outside. An ivory circle is set into each corner between the mitres. The ivory circles, not always exactly round, vary between 2 to 2.25 mm in diameter. The diamonds also are not always symmetrical, ranging from 5 to 6 mm in length and 1.75 to 2mm in width. There are 240 circles and diamonds set into the back alone and a similar number in the belly. The black filler into which the ivory pieces are set is the same as that which makes up the inlay on the head and ribs. The work is extremely clean. There is no sign of the rasp marks which are scratched into the ivories on the "Cipriani Potter" violin in the Ashmolean. In fact, there are no visible tool marks anywhere on the instrument with the exception of those already mentioned on the head.

Apart from some minor repair work, the general condition of this violin is excellent. Prominent edges and corners are hardly worn. The varnish is a rich orange yellow colour over a golden ground, thin and highly transparent. The whole instrument is extraordinarily clean and fresh looking. In particular the ground, where varnish is missing, is clean. This in itself is a sure sign of a fine violin. Despite my reference to different periods and styles, the violin is

well balanced, nothing is too heavy or overworked, including the fine old Hill fittings. This is without question one of the world's finest violins. It may even have been considered by Stradivari himself to be his masterpiece.

My drawing of the f hole includes some slight wear to the outside line. The thickness of the plates and the ribs were not taken and I must refer the reader to Sacconi's thickening guides reproduced here. As usual because of the printing process the outline is accurate to within 1 mm over the length. The head and f hole drawings on which the measurements are mounted are only facsimiles. It may be noted that the cross archings do not always correspond to the long archings if the same base line is used. This is because these archings were taken whilst the instrument was closed and some natural twisting and warping of the plates and ribs has taken place.

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Total number of Diamonds & Circles on the „Hellier“

Back only :240

Back upper bouts including corner circles:

42 circles / 41 diamonds

Middle bout right excluding corner circles:

14 circles / 15 diamonds

Middle bout left excluding corner circles:

13 circles / 14 diamonds

Lower bouts including corner circles:

51 circles / 50 diamonds

MEASUREMENTS		
	(in	millimeters)
	Back	Belly
Length (over arch)	358	357
Upper bouts	171	169,5
Middle bouts	115,5	114
Lower bouts	210,5	210
	Corners	Centre bouts
Edge thickness (back)	5	4,5
Bouts	Top	Bottom
	4,5	4,5
Overhang (back)		
	Centre bouts	3/3.5
	Top and bottom bouts	2.25/2.5
Rib heights	Left	Right
	Neck root	29,5
	Upper corner	31,5
	Lower corner	32
	End pin	31,5
Purfling		
	Distance from edge	4/4/25
	Total width	4.25/4.5
	Filled area between purfling (excluding purfling blacks)	2/2.5
Stop length	Left	Right
	195	195
The button has an ebony crown		