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The 'Messiah' Stradivari Controversy - Strad letter (2001?)

Stuart Pollens may not be correct in his insistence that the 'Messiah' is at worst a fake and at best a work made much later than 1716, but his stand is a brave one and it will do neither the violin trade nor the 'Messiah' any harm to be re-examine. Indeed the excellently crafted articles in the August Strad indicate that some experts have been re-assessing their ideas and this fact has to be applauded.

The 'Messiah' is a particularly interesting case since the present debate neatly encompasses the three elements of expertise; stylistic analysis, documentary corroboration and scientific evidence. Unfortunately in each instance the arguments are as contradictory as they are apparently convincing. Whatever the truth of the various arguments the most important aspect of this controversy is its philosophical element.

Pollens is a museum man and rightly he sees dangers in a system where expertise is generally governed and controlled by those who profit from the

sale of works which they themselves certify. He may be overreacting but the simple truth is that those who purchase violins have no recourse to independent expertise. Regrettably the 'Messiah' has become a *raison d'être* for Pollens in my opinion the wrong one because if he loses this battle, even though his arguments are of great value in the wider debate about expertise, he will probably lose the war. If he does lose he may even be tarred and feathered because although the sale and hence the value of the 'Messiah' is only an academic proposition, were its authenticity to be proved incorrect a massive loss of confidence in the ability of the world's most esteemed experts would undoubtedly follow.

For Pollens sake I almost regret the following contribution to this debate. For what it is worth I have probably handled the 'Messiah' Stradivari more than anyone else alive and so after receiving last month's Strad I checked my earliest records on the violin. These were made between 1978 and 1980. In my notes I documented the letter 'G' set above two small stars on the pegbox end below the nut. I did this no fewer than five times from a total of twelve sessions with this instrument in the Ashmolean library before 1980. Although I visited the Hill collection on subsequent occasions these early observations show that the 'G' was unquestionably present when the apparently controversial photograph (see Pollens article p.855) was taken.

