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Forward

The origin of the violin has been credited to several places: Fussen in the Algau, (now a part of Germany), Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the towns of Venice, Brescia, and Cremona in Italy. Despite the many historical arguments in favour of one or another, only in Andrea Amati's 16th. century Cremonese workshop does the violin family first appear in a complete and highly sophisticated form. No matter who made the first violin, Andrea Amati and his two sons, Antonio and Girolamo, known as the 'Brothers Amati', created the designs from which all

the great Italian makers took their inspiration. In fact, the more that is known about the methods of the great Cremonese masters, the more it becomes clear that they faithfully followed Andrea Amati's example, in method if not always in style.

The 'Brookings' Amati 1654

Nicola Amati (1596-1684) was the son of Girolamo Amati and the Grandson of Andrea. Whatever Antonio Stradivari and Giuseppe Guarneri 'del Gesu' achieved tonally at a later date, it is arguable that Nicola fashioned the most aesthetically beautiful instruments of all time. Furthermore, the consistency of Nicola Amati's craftsmanship is phenomenal. Even when many years separate them, his instruments appear as similar as peas in a pod.

By the 1620's Nicola's hand was clearly the dominant one in the Brothers Amati workshop. However, shortly after this time, a series of drastic historical events altered the Amati family tradition and the course of violin making forever. In Cremona, two consecutive years of famine starting in 1628 were followed by a plague in 1630. The plague claimed Nicola's father and mother, as well as two of his sisters. This same epidemic went on to kill Gio Paolo Maggini in 1632. His uncle Antonio having died several years earlier, Nicola was left as the only surviving violin maker of importance in Italy. Not surprisingly, instruments by Nicola from this period are rare.

By the 1640's, had Nicola Amati regained the loss of momentum caused by the plague, and was faced with an overwhelming demand for instruments. He needed help for his rapidly expanding business. Since he had, as yet, no children of his own, Nicola had little choice, but to break with the family tradition and employ non-family members as violin makers. This action laid the foundations for further development of the violin and its eventual perfection in the hands of Stradivari and Guarneri 'del Gesu'.

From this point we see an entirely new group of important makers, all trained by Nicola Amati. This group included G. B. Rogeri, Giacomo Gennaro, Bartolomeo Cristofori, Girolamo Amati II and the founder of the Guarneri family of makers, Andrea Guarneri. Andrea was the farther of Giuseppe Guarneri 'filius Andrea', and the grandfather of Giuseppe Guarneri 'del Gesu'. Although documentary evidence is minimal, it seems likely that Francesco Ruggeri, Jacobus Stainer and even Antonio Stradivari,

were amongst Nicola Amati's many apprentices.

Nicola's greatest achievement as a maker was the development of the so-called 'grand pattern' violin, a characteristically bolder and wider model. These have become the most sought after violins of the Amati family.

The 'Brookings' violin of 1654 was built on this larger 'grand pattern' model. Its name is derived from its last private owner, the amateur violinist Robert Somers Brookings a prominent Washington economist, who bought the violin in Europe on the advice of Joseph Joachim. In 1938 the instrument was given to the Library of Congress by his widow.

The 'Brookings' Amati has is a superb one-piece, slab-cut maple back. This method of preparing maple gives the flame or figure, a beautifully soft, crushed velvet look. Although it was common for Amati violin backs to be cut on the slab, it was less so for Stradivari, and Del Gesu. (Like most Amati violins this piece of maple is of an extremely fine growth. On slab-cut timber, such fine growth manifests itself as a series of close rings radiating out from the centre of the back.

The edgework of the back, though well defined, has a special softness which is also associated with slab cut backs. Like most pure Cremonese instruments the edge thickness increases markedly at the corners. The corners themselves, although long and slender, are not as extreme as some of Nicola's earlier works. The purfling is broad and the blacks dark, rich and shiny. The long mitres point across the corners slightly in a distinctive fashion. The edgework and purfling are accurate and elegantly finished. There are none of the tool marks which we associate with later Cremonese edgework. The inner line of the purfling marks the deepest point of the edgework fluting and although the corner areas are a little more deeply worked the arching is not scooped in the manner of many of Nicola's earlier instruments. A full cross arch springs from edge to edge, giving the impression of great strength. The two piece belly is of remarkably even growth. The year rings are well defined and not excessively narrow. Although somewhat flatter across the bridge area the belly edgework and arching perfectly compliment that of the back.

The soundholes are well balanced and handsomely finished. They represent the final stages of soundhole

development for the Amati family. Nicola's accuracy with the knife was so consistent, that soundholes from any 'grand pattern' violin made within ten years of this instrument would probably be perfectly suitable for the 'Brookings'. As is customary for Nicola, the soundhole wings become narrower towards the ends. The wing flutings are subtle and remain an integral part of the arching. Stradivari's wing flutings, by contrast, are a separate sculptural embellishment, which break the natural flow of the arch.

The Amati's often cut the wood for both the ribs and the head on the slab, a practice only rarely followed by Stradivari and Guarneri 'del Gesu'. However, both the head and the ribs of the 'Brooking' were quarter-sawn. The upright flames of the ribs are similar to those of the back, but the growth is slightly wider.

The head wood is of exceptionally fine growth, and the flames, though shallow, match the back wood perfectly. As a rule, Nicola's heads are stronger in character than those of Andrea Amati, or the Brothers, while at the same time being more graceful than Stradivari's. The head of the 'Brookings' is clearly the work of a confident, competent craftsman in his prime. It is clean and sharp with few tool marks. Seen from the side, the delicate turns of the scroll culminate in a typical Amati, comma-shaped eye. There are no bumps, jumps or deviations from the natural course of the spiral. Viewed from the back the pegbox has that typical narrow Amatese taper, which both Stradivari and Del Gesu later rejected in order to provide more space for the A string inside the pegbox.

Although there is little pure varnish left on the belly, the dark amber ground is radiant. On the back, varnish is more plentiful and is of a transparent golden brown hue, again over a dark, highly reflective amber coloured ground.

Whatever Antonio Stradivari and Guarneri 'del Gesu' may have achieved later, Nicola Amati fashioned the most beautiful instruments of all. Although some later makers may have created superior sounding instruments, the tonal qualities of Nicola Amati's 'grand pattern' violins should never be underestimated. They are unquestionably solo instruments of the first rank.

The 'Castelbarco' Stradivari 1699

Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737) was already 40

years old at the time Nicola Amati's death. On his first known label dated 1666, the 22-year-old Stradivari claimed to have been a pupil of Nicola. Although no other documentary evidence exists to verify this, it is generally accepted to be true. Certainly Stradivari's first violins closely resemble those of Nicola Amati. However, by the time of the 1699 'Castelbarco' violin, Stradivari had already effected many changes to the design of his instruments. In the 1690s Stradivari's so called 'long pattern' violins first appeared, and with few exceptions he continued to make them until the end of the century.

From an estimated total of 52 'long pattern' violins, the Hill Brothers (in, Antonio Stradivari His Life and Work) cite eight fine examples. Of the final example, noted as being in the possession of Mr. J. Mountford, the Hills wrote: 'The latter is a most charming specimen, though unfortunately its original date has been altered to 1701.' Later Alfred Hill commented: 'I always had a great admiration for this fiddle; it foreshadows the end of the period during which the 'long Stradivari' was the instrument of the Master's predilection. Its beauty of workmanship and appearance are apparent to all, and its state of purity is beyond criticism.' This illustrious violin is the c. 1699 'Castelbarco', which takes its name from an earlier owner Count Cesare Castelbarco of Milan.

The one-piece back, like that of the 'Brookings' Amati, is cut on the slab, but the growth structure is not as fine. The figure is similar, but somewhat stronger. It has the same crushed velvet softness of all slab-cut, figured maple. The 'Castelbarco' is longer and narrower than the 'Brookings', and has a distinctly feminine silhouette. The corners are shorter and the top corners in particular have an entirely different shape. The most striking differences between Amati and Stradivari outlines are to be found in the Centre bouts. Stradivari's centre bouts are straighter, and the top curves are tighter than the open incurving forms of Amati. The width and finish of the 'Castelbarco' purfling is not dissimilar to the 'Brookings' Amati, but the mitres are minimally shorter and deflect fractionally more in the corners.

Probably as a result of the slab-cut maple, the back edgework, although still well defined, has a softer quality than either the 'Betts' by Stradivari or the 'Kreisler' by Guarneri 'del Gesu'. On both the back and the front the central cross archings are full to the purfling fluting. By contrast there is a slight scooping

in the upper and lower bouts giving the archings a slightly elongated barrel-like appearance.

The wood which Stradivari selected for the 'Castelbarco' belly is certainly characteristic of his 1690's period. It is of inordinately fine growth through the centre section, widening only slightly in the bouts. The soundholes are pristine, perfect in both cut and concept. Stradivari's soundholes are always longer and less curved than the Amati's. The wing flutings are more deeply worked and run more or less parallel to the centre joint, alongside the soundholes. This gives the soundholes a sharp outer edge, which initially blends with the arching above the soundhole, creating a slight 'eyebrow' effect around the top of the holes. The flutes continue, until they merge into the arching at the upper corners, contributing to the barrel-like form of the arch.

The rib wood is quarter-sawn and the flames, which match the back well, run vertically all around the instrument. As might be expected, the head wood, is of finer growth, but is well matched to the back and ribs. Stradivari's heads are more substantial than those of the Amati family. Typically a few fine tool marks are visible on the bosses of the scroll, while the flutings and volutes are cleanly finished. Although the spirals flow smoothly towards the eye, the turns have an oval quality. This becomes more pronounced on later scrolls, such as the 'Betts'.

The back of the 'Castelbarco' pegbox has an almost parallel run from the chin, until it begins to taper rapidly, at a point roughly level with the throat. Although the back of the pegbox seems slightly leaner than some of Stradivari's later heads, the narrow taper of the Amatis is gone. As the 'Ward' and the 'Betts' heads confirm, the 'Castelbarco' pegbox bears all the hallmarks of Stradivari. It is deep, wide and cleanly cut. The design is practical and the difficulties associated with threading the A string in Amati pegboxes are gone. The pegbox flutings are deeply cut but unlike the semi-circular cross-section of Amati flutes they flatten slightly at the base, a distinctive Stradivarian touch. These curves become rounded over the end of the head, finally regaining their original flatter form at the front of the scroll. A fine scribe line and several tiny compass pin markings are visible on the central spine, between the two flutes. These are the remains of Stradivari's marking out process.

The varnish on this violin is closer to that of Amati than to either the 'Betts' Stradivari or the 'Kreisler' del Gesu. Although rich in quality, it lacks the vivid,

orange-red coloration, which we associate with late Cremonese works. The whole instrument has a dark velvety hue which at the slightest change of angle, can suddenly burst into dazzling gold and amber.

The 'Ward' Stradivari 1700.

The original label of the 'Ward' violin is dated 1700, only one year after the 'Castelbarco'. In many respects the 'Ward' is a complete departure from the longer narrower body outline of the 'Castelbarco'. Its outline belongs to Stradivari's new generation of instruments. Nevertheless the 'Ward' and the 'Castelbarco' have a great deal in common. The outlines of the soundholes, their sloping set and their sweeping cut mimic each other to such an extent that they are almost interchangeable. They are still a long way from the upright form and set of the 'Betts' soundholes. Although in total, the belly arching of the 'Ward' has more in common with the 'Betts', the arching in the area of the soundhole wing, is still very similar to that of the 'Castelbarco'.

The 'Ward' head is marginally more worn than the 'Castelbarco'. This may be because the wood was sawn on the slab. Otherwise both heads, like the soundholes, are identical in both pattern and cut. The 'Ward' retains its original neck which is something of a rarity amongst classical Cremonese instruments. Instead of the usual graft, the neck has been altered to meet modern playing standards by adding wood to the root of the neck.

The purfling of the 'Ward', with its poplar whites and intensely stained blacks is also interchangeable with the two other Stradivari violins. The 'Castelbarco' the 'Ward' and the 'Betts', have virtually identical inlay materials which have been applied in a similar manner. Only the course of the purflings has been altered by variations in the outlines and corner shapes. Whereas the slab-cut wood of the 'Castelbarco' back has given its edgework a somewhat softer look, the condition of the 'Ward's' edgework is almost identical to that of the 'Betts'.

The back wood of the 'Ward' is second to none. It is a single piece of mountain-grown Balkan maple. The wide wild flames slope down from the treble to the bass side. The ribs are a perfect match and may well have been cut from the back wood. Like almost all of Stradivari's violins, the figure of the ribs runs in the same direction all around the sides.

The belly wood of all three instruments is also re-

markably similar, with the 'Castelbarco', as might be expected for an instrument from the 1690's, just snatching the prize for fineness of growth.

The Varnish of the 'Ward' is somewhat darker and redder than either the 'Castelbarco' or the 'Betts', and also appears slightly thicker and richer in texture.

The 'Ward' takes its name from a Mr. J. Ward of London, who bought it from a dealer called John Alvey Turner, around 1860. After Wards death in 1907, it passed though the firm of W. E. Hill and Sons, who later sold it to Herr Von Donop. On his death the instrument passed into Swiss ownership, before re-tuning again to London, where it was bought by Arthur Beare, the well-known London dealer. Arthur Beare sold the violin to Nathan E. Posner who took it to the Brooklyn, New York. From here it was acquired by Mrs. Gertrude Clarke Whittall who presented it to the American Library of Congress in 1937. Speaking of the different instruments, Mrs Whittall said: 'The three violins are as different as human beings. They have strong personality: the 'Betts' is of royalty; it is outstanding in beauty and perfection, and, as Walt Whitman once said of Mt. Shasta, 'Alone as God.' The 'Castelbarco' is feminine. The 'Ward' is sophisticated - it lived long in London and knows so many things'.

The 'Betts' Stradivari 1704

The name 'Betts' comes up again and again in connection with fine instruments. In the first half of the nineteenth century, John Betts was the head of a famous London firm of violin dealers and makers. Although they were responsible for importing a large number of Italian works into Britain, no individual piece was to create as much excitement as the 1704 violin by Antonio Stradivari which now bears their name. Legend has it that the sum of one pound was paid for the instrument, that a family row broke out over ownership, and that this row eventually led to the dissolution of the Betts family partnership. In 1852 after the death of Arthur Betts, the violin was in the possession of John Boue, a retired judge, who subsequently sold it to J. B. Vuillaume, the celebrated Parisian violin maker and dealer. Before the turn of the century the instrument returned to Britain, where it was acquired by Hills of London. The Hill brothers had the following to say about the 'Betts': 'The 'Betts' violin, another masterpiece, made in 1704, is a notable and wonderfully preserved instru-

ment, standing out from the violins made in the adjoining years... The distinguishing features of the tone are the mellow brilliancy of the quality and the facile articulation."

The 'Betts' marks the point at which Stradivari arrived at the principles of acoustical construction for his violins, which were to serve him until the end of his career. Antonio Stradivari was sixty years old in 1704, at an age - when most people might be thinking about slowing down and taking life easier - he was on the threshold of his maturity as a maker. Many connoisseurs would maintain that the 'Betts' violin marks the true beginning of Stradivari's 'golden period'.

Apart from its innovative features the 'Betts' itself is an overwhelmingly attractive violin. Nothing was spared in its construction or the materials from which it was fashioned. The straight grained, two-piece belly is of fine growth which becomes gradually wider towards the outer edges. It is as attractive a piece of wood as any violin maker could wish for.

The quarter-sawn backwood, also of two pieces, has strong deeply curling flames sloping upwards from the centre joint. This is almost certainly imported wood and may well have come across the Adriatic Sea from the mountain forests of Bosnia. The ribs or sides of the instrument appear to have been cut from the same log as the back wood, which they closely resemble. As is usual for Stradivari violin ribs, the slope of the flame flows in the same direction all around the instrument. The lower rib, like the upper rib, was characteristically formed from one piece.

The head wood is of an even finer growth than that of the back and ribs. Although the flame has clearly been selected to match the back and ribs, typically for most Cremonese heads, the curl of the flame is shallower. Shallow flamed and even plain wood was probably selected to make the scroll carving process easier. At about this time Stradivari's heads were becoming more imposing and slightly heavier in composition. In this respect the 'Betts' head is typical of the period. Viewed from the sides, the turns of the scroll have a discernible forward tilting oval appearance on the bass and a backward tilting oval on the treble. Where the front of the scroll faces the pegbox, its side profile flattens significantly. It is as if the cutting of the flute or perhaps some correction of the chamfer has altered the projected curves. These features are not unique to the 'Betts' and can be found on all but the earliest Stradivari scrolls.

The volutes around the side of the scroll are cleanly cut and remain quite shallow, deepening only slightly towards the eye in the final turn. This shallow cut is in sharp contrast to the heads of most of Stradivari's Cremonese colleagues who generally finished their volutes deeper. When viewed from the front, back and top, the symmetry of the scroll is exceptional, without being stiff. Here again, in contrast to the 'Brookings' Amati, the overall impression is one of boldness and strength.

The walls of the pegbox are substantial, but not heavy and they are finished with a sharp unchamfered inner edge. As on all Stradivari's scrolls from this period onward, the bold chamfer on the outside of both the pegbox and the scroll, is picked out in black. This Stradivari innovation probably developed from his celebrated inlaid instruments.

As has already been established, with the earlier 'Castelbarco', Stradivari was not afraid to re-thinking his designs. Although Stradivari has shaken off much of the Amati lightness on the head of the 'Betts', in the body outline he seems to be paying one final tribute to his great master. The elegant long corners and their corresponding purfling mitres are reminiscent of the Amatis in a way which was never to be repeated in the years which followed.

The purfling blacks are intense and shiny, again revealing the influence of the Amatis. They are probably a stained wood, but they have all the appearance of ebony. (In his later period Stradivari's purfling blacks lost some of this quality). The finish of the 'Betts' outline, edgework and purfling is of the highest order, and its excellent state of preservation is extremely rare.

From the pristine edgework and purfling flutings, equally well preserved archings rise quickly to become full but not too high. The flutings of the soundhole wings are well defined but not extreme. They continue up the sides of the soundholes, forming a crisp outside edge to the body of the holes. Above the soundholes, again a slight 'eyebrow' effect again occurs where the cross arch blends with the flutings. (This 'eyebrow' effect was often exaggerated by the 19th century French copyists of Stradivari). The soundholes are accurately worked and bold in format, and in spite their upright setting there is no hint of stiffness. Like the outline itself, they are highly symmetrical, reflecting each other in both position and shape. With the exception of the Amatis, such mathematical harmony was, and still is, uncommon.

he exceptional level of craftsmanship which the 'Betts' embodies was not an unusual feature of Stradivari's work at this time. Although the 'golden period' is generally believed to represent the zenith of Stradivari's abilities as a complete violin maker, but the period from the early 1690's until the time of the 'Betts' probably represents the pinnacle of his craftsmanship skills. There are almost no visible tool marks to distract from the sculptural elegance of the work.

The perfect finish of the instrument is heightened to grandeur by its varnish. Although relatively thin, the varnish is richly coloured and present in large amounts. It has an extremely fine crackle, indicating that the violin has not been excessively polished. The pure orange colour of the varnish tends towards a pleasant orange-pink at certain angles. Where the varnish has been worn away the bare wood has a beautifully reflective golden tint. Typically, this 'Cremonese ground' has remained clean, protected the wood from dirt and contamination.

Presented to the Library of Congress in 1937 by Mrs. Gertrude Clarke Whittall, together with the 'Castelbarco', the 'Betts' forms part of the Library's quartet of Stradivari instruments.

The 'Kreisler' Guarneri del Gesu 1733

Giuseppe Giovanni Battista Guarneri (1698-1744) is better known today as Guarneri 'del Gesu' after his habit of printing I.H.S. (an abbreviation of the Latin phrase 'Jesus Saviour of Man') surmounted by a cross on his labels. There are probably between 160 and 170 surviving violins (including two interesting piccolo violins) by del Gesu. Although two cello's bearing his father's label appear to show the hand of del Gesu, there are no instruments of any other type known to have been made entirely by the him. In spite of his limited output in comparison with that of Antonio Stradivari, del Gesu violins have gained a reputation for tone at least equal to that of Stradivari's. Indeed, since the time of Paganini, there has been a long line of players who have actually preferred the sound of a Del Gesu to that of a Stradivari.

The direct lineage linking del Gesu to Andrea Amati through the 'Brothers' and Nicola Amati, and then through the Guarneri line is well established. Nevertheless, if we compare the works of Andrea Amati or even Nicola Amati with a late Del Gesu, we might easily be forgiven for thinking that there could be no possible link. In fact the connection was very strong. The constructional method adopted by Del Gesu was, in virtually every detail, identical to that which Andrea Amati was using almost two hundred years earlier.

The 1733 'Ex Kreisler' del Gesu is of particular interest, since it has design features linking it inextricably with both Nicola Amati and Antonio Stradivari. The outline of the body is clearly derived from Nicola Amati's 'grand pattern', upon which the 'Brookings' violin was constructed. However, the soundhole and head patterns, are identical to those used by Stradivari for the 'Betts' violin. It is only the maker's highly individual styles of working which obscures these factors. There can be no doubt, that the five great Cremonese violins illustrated and played here have far more in common than might initially be imagined.

In *The Violin Makers of the Guarneri Family*, published in 1931, the Hill Brothers selected six violins, which in their opinion were the most outstanding examples of del Gesu's work. The earliest of these, dated 1733, and noted as being in the possession of Fritz Kreisler, was described as follows: 'We feel, and feel very strongly, that no specimen can exemplify del Gesu in his mature youth more strikingly than that dated 1733 (Kreisler), which conceivably was made some years previous to that year. It stands on the threshold of the master's emancipation from the past, the f holes still reveal his indebtedness to Stradivari, but model and form are his own. Timid of conception, perhaps when contrasted with the audacity of later years, yet admirably typifying those closely knit examples which from a tonal view stand up to the greatest.'

Comparing the "Kreisler" to the "Betts", it is clearly evident that del Gesu paid less attention to detail and finish than Stradivari would have allowed himself, even in 1733 when Antonio was probably 89 years old. (Nevertheless it must be conceded that late Stradivari's are also noted more for their superb tone

rather than their exceptional craftsmanship.) This somewhat looser quality of finish may have been due to variations in the demand for Del Gesu's work. Financial pressures appear to have been an ever-increasing problem throughout Del Gesu's life. Although he was clearly capable of fine craftsmanship, he was almost certainly not working for the type of clientele, who had previously filled Stradivari's order books. However, by the 1730's even the Stradivari family were probably 'feeling the pinch'. By the beginning of the 18th century, almost every town in Europe had someone calling himself a violin maker. The resulting increased productivity, especially in towns like Milan, was breaking the once exclusive Cremonese market.

In spite of the increasing competition del Gesu was certainly not scraping the bottom of the barrel when it came to materials. Curiously, he was using maple of a much finer quality than that used by Stradivari at the same time. The pretty two-piece back of the 'Kreisler' is cut on the quarter. It has a well-pronounced medium to narrow flame which descends slightly from the centre joint. This particular wood is not of the extremely fine growth which we normally associate with Del Gesu. In places the year rings are up to four millimetres apart.

The back outline is a combination of full and open curves flowing both into and out of the corners. The corners themselves provide a key to Del Gesu's style. In combination with the overhang, they help disguise the basic Amati 'grand pattern' form. With perhaps one or two surviving early examples, del Gesu used this pattern until the end of his life.

The edgework is of an even thickness all around the back plate, (however, this may be misleading, since the corners are certainly more worn than the rest of the edge). The purfling fluting though well defined is not very deep. There are clear traces of the gouge in the channel, something which would have been an absolute anathema to the Amatis and Stradivari. In spite of the rough appearance of the fluted channel, the lines of the purfling flow evenly. The Blacks are dark, but not as intense as those of the 'Betts' and there is a strong tendency for them to become grey in areas affected by contact with the skin. At the corners the purflings come together as short neat mitres pointing towards the middle of the corner.

From the purfling the back arching rises quickly without scooping, retaining a convex appearance even in the upper and lower bouts. In the centre

bouts the arching rises so quickly that over the years repairers' closing cramps have dug into the first stages of the arching. This damage makes the edgework appear more roughly finished than it actually is.

For the 'Kreisler', del Gesu chose a two-piece belly similar in structure, though of fractionally wider growth, than the 1704 'Betts' Stradivari. The wood is quarter-sawn and has fine but well pronounced year-rings. It is the kind of belly wood which is frequently associated with Stradivari violins of this period. The belly arching, like the back arching, rises quickly especially under the tailpiece and fingerboard. It has a slightly flatness, not quite a scoop, as it leaves the edges in the upper and lower bouts. Otherwise the arch is full, particular above the soundholes. The soundhole wings are fluted only slightly, and, similar in style to the Amati's, they do not interrupt the general flow of the arching, as do those of Stradivari.

The soundholes are beautifully cut; bold and upright, they are distinctly del Gesu in character, yet drawn from the same pattern which Stradivari used for the 'Betts'. The bodies of the f's are identical, but del Gesu's top and bottom circles were drilled slightly smaller leaving the wings wider than those of Stradivari.

The rib wood is similar to the back wood with a deep flame running slightly off the vertical all around the instrument. Unlike almost all of Stradivari's ribs the flames change direction in the centre bouts, a regular feature of del Gesu's work. Around the ribs, del Gesu's hasty finishing has created a corrugated effect with the flames. Into these ripples varnish has penetrated deeply into the pores of the wood. The rib corners joints are characteristically short and stubby and picked out in black like the chamfers of the scroll, a continuing trait of Del Gesu's work. With only one known exception Stradivari never blackened the ends of the ribs.

In common with many classical works the 'Kreisler's' head is made of plain unfigured wood of fine growth. This kind of wood was probably chosen to make the carving process easier. Nevertheless, many tool marks still garnish the scroll. Although not as many as adorn the more urgent creations of del Gesu's later period, there are already far more than Stradivari would have tolerated. (Nicola Amati would probably have had nightmares about them). All the instruments del Gesu made after 1731, (the date of the earliest unquestionable Del Gesu label), have

heads which were cut from the same template. Stylistically the “Kreisler” head is quite different from the ‘Betts’, with a distinctive square appearance to the turns of the scroll that often characterizes the work of Del Gesu.¹ As already noted Stradivari’s scrolls tend to be slightly oval.

Like most Cremonese heads, the ‘Kreisler’s’ scroll and pegbox belong together like the uncurling leaf of a fern belongs to its stem.² The Pegbox itself is practical. Although not quite as large as a Stradivari box, its taper is not as narrow as that of the Amatis. Unlike Stradivari, del Gesu chamfered the top edges of his pegboxes on the inside and these were also blackened. Typically for del Gesu, the flutings are shallow. The letters W. T. which are stamped several times on the pegbox are the initials of a previous owner, William Thompson, and were added later.

In spite of the somewhat spirited workmanship, the ‘Kreisler’ is a stylish violin which even without varnish would stand up to the harshest criticism. Nevertheless, it is the varnish which gives this violin its overwhelming seal of approval, and shows instantly why the Hill Brothers selected it as one of their top six del Gesu’s. It is of excellent transparency, orange-red in colour, and has a florescence in certain lights.

The “Kreisler” Del Gesu has a long, well documented history, which is best summed up by a letter to Fritz Kreisler, dated 23 November 1926: ‘The history of the Guarneri Violin, ex Marshal Junot, is one of exceptional interest. The instrument found its way to our shores in the following manner: It was being transported with Marshal Junot’s baggage from Bordeaux to Lisbon, at the beginning of the XIX century, (the latter city being occupied by French troops under his command), when the vessel was captured by an English privateer and brought into Whitehaven, Cumberland. The violin passed into the hands of a sailor who sold it to the Parson of Whitehaven for £2. He subsequently sold it to Mr. William Thomson (whose initials are branded on the scroll), an excellent amateur and brother of Geo. Thomson of Edinburgh, who published several volumes of Scottish melodies, the words by Burns set to music by Beethoven, Hayden and other contemporary composers. Mr. Thomson retained possession of the violin for many years, dying, upwards of ninety years of age, about 1840-50, when the fiddle was sold by his son to another amateur, Mr. Thomson Sinclair, from whom it passed, by way of inheritance, to two ladies of the name of Day, whose existence I can just recall.

They guarded the instrument so jealously that they would not even show it to a dealer, nor was my father who had previously become acquainted with it, allowed to have the instrument on sale, or to introduce a buyer! Thus it happened that when Mr. John Mountford, one of his intimate clients expressed the wish to purchase a “Guarneri” my father advised him to go and see the ladies but on no account to reveal the source of his information. Mr. Mountford went, saw the violin and, being captivated by it, purchased it on the spot, despite the price asked, 500 guineas which, in those days, i.e. about 1875, was considered a high figure. Mr. Mountford, a well known character and faithful client of our firm, retained the fiddle practically to the end of his days, reluctantly parting with it at the age of some four-score years, when it passed into our hands. We then sold it to Mr. R. E. Brandt only to re-purchase it within recent years. My father declared it to be the finest “Guarneri” he had ever seen. I recognize it to be one of the few of the first rank. You will read our views concerning it in our forthcoming book on the Guarneri Family. It is an example of the early type of the maker’s work and reveals, in certain features, the influence of Stradivari, which is not surprising when one considers that these great makers were working only a few hundred yards apart!

I congratulate you on the acquisition of this violin, commend the instrument to your loving care, and hope that it may afford you as much pleasure as that experienced by less illustrious owners of a bygone day!’

In 1952, the violin was donated by Fritz Kreisler to the government of the United States of America, and is now safely deposited in the Library of Congress.

1 See comments on the various styles of del Gesu heads, pp. 137 142 Vol. II “Giuseppe Guarneri Del Gesu”. Published by Peter Biddulph, London 1998.

2 Numerous exceptions can be found amongst the late heads of del Gesu. See pp. 137 142 Vol. II “Giuseppe Guarneri Del Gesu”. Published by Peter Biddulph, London 1998.
