LONDON CELLO SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER

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NEWSLETTER
Autumn 2013 Issue

# A Stradivari Cello

## By any other name would sound as sweet? by Valerie Walden



Stradivari – a magical name for wooden boxes called violoncellos. Always admired, these instruments did not begin as the most highly sought-after cellos in the world. According to the Hill brothers, who published their findings on Stradivari in 1902, this was a state of affairs seen from the 1870s onwards as, 'the ever-increasing admiration for Stradivari's instruments has caused their value to rise by leaps and bounds…' In the first issue of *The Strad,* the magazine named after him in 1890, the romance with the instrument maker was unequivocal:

> To Stradivarius, the making of stringed instruments was the whole world… No wonder then, that his labours were crowned with success and that as yet he stands alone in the world of violin making, surrounded by many, but surpassed or equalled by none!

Continued reverence for these instruments is reflected in current prices. The Countess of Stanlein, Bernard Greenhouse's cello, sold in 2012 for over 6 million dollars and the Duport and King of Spain (appraised by insurance adjustors when its neck was broken in 2012) are valued at 20 million dollars.

Success during Stradivari's lifetime had a different feel to it than the adoration of nineteenth and twentieth-century string aficionados. As a luthier (one who makes lutes), Stradivari began his career as a common tradesman, following in the footsteps of his probable teacher, Nicolò Amati, in Cremona. They made their living making instruments for wealthy patrons; aristocrats who provided instruments for their servants; or affluent amateurs looking for the latest and greatest model. In an era of rapidly changing expectations for violin-family instruments, Stradivari was an ambitious innovator, a trait most apparent in his approach to cello construction.

Among luthiers, cellos were a speciality for Stradivari: not all makers wanted to deal with these larger instruments and he built over 70 during his career. His early cellos, those constructed before 1707, were the workhorses of the period, being used to play incalculable Baroque bass lines – thousands of notes and no glory. These were the larger instruments, often called 'church basses', known for their deep, rich sonority. Discounting two conversions from viola da gambas, there are 24 of these instruments remaining, with just three in their original dimensions. Although several of these instruments were destined for such distinguished patrons as the Medici Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III and Philip V of Spain (the King of Spain cello didn't actually make it to Spain until 1775), the inglorious purpose of their use is reflected in the lower-grade woods of willow or poplar used for most of these cellos and the total disregard for their construction integrity as they were cut down in size in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

When Stradivari began his career in the 1660s, the concept of using cellos as solo instruments was unfathomable. However, during this decade in neighbouring Bologna, new developments in wire-wound string technology made it possible for cellos of smaller dimensions to make pleasing sound and cellists soon began to compose solo works. The earliest smaller-form cellos are associated with Francesco Rugeri and Andrea

Guarneri, rival Cremonese builders, but Stradivari began to transition his cello sizing in the late 1690s, coming up with dimensions in 1707 that seem to have satisfied the luthier and his patrons for the subsequent twenty-five years. His final cellos, made in the 1730s, are experiments with even smaller sizing.

Stradivari achieved financial success as a respected workman during his very long life, but fame came after his death with the changing nature of recreation, as instrumental soloists became popular public entertainers in the second half of the eighteenth century. The development of the public concert was directly tied to the growth of the Enlightenment and the epicentre of both was Paris, where the *Concert spirituel* promoted virtuosi string players beginning in 1725. The need to amaze an audience with virtuosity and blanket them with sound eventually led to changes in fittings and bow design by the 1780s, events which seemed to suit Stradivari's instruments better than any others built by his contemporaries. The association of stardom and Stradivari is usually attributed to G.B. Viotti, whose debut with his Stradivari violin at the *Concert spirituel* in 1782 ignited the Parisian music scene, but it is likely that the Duport brothers, prominent in Paris since the 1760s, had already found Stradivari instruments to produce their ideal sound. The change in bow design was led by the Tourte family and the pre-eminence of both Stradivari and Tourte and their interdependence was affirmed by the early 19th century. In naming François Tourte the "Stradivari" of bow making in his 1806 *La Chélonomie ou le Parfait Luthier,* Abbé Sibire firmly dated the popularity of both makers.

Cozio records indicate that both J.P. and J.L. Duport owned Stradivari cellos; J.P. the 1700 instrument known as the Cristiani (name after Lisa Cristiani) and J.L. the 1711 cello named after him and immortalised in its ownership by Mstislav Rostropovich. J.P.'s relationship to Strads is lost in history, but the Hill brothers recount that J.L. bought his cello (originally built for a Lyons doctor) while he was in the employ of the Prince de Soubisse and the Prince Guémenée. The Prince Guémenée went bankrupt in 1782 in a massive scandal that would have restricted his support of musicians, the inference being that Duport likely bought the instrument before 1782. Regardless, J.L. Duport and Viotti became very good friends and musical associates. Both promoted the innovations of Tourte, whose bows further enhanced the capabilities of Stradivari's instruments as they were reconstructed with 'modernised' fittings. Duport seemed to think that the Stradivari far outshone the Amati that he was playing at the time of his purchase.

The other cellist associated with the 'Stradivari revolution' was Bernard Romberg, who offered the measurements of his c.1711 Stradivari as perfection in cello construction (he is also thought to have owned a 1728 model, as well as a Tecchler) and was responsible for designing the modern shaping of the fingerboard. Romberg initially came into contact with Viotti and J.L.


Duport in 1785, when he first visited Paris. When he bought his Stradivari is speculative, but he is believed to have purchased Boccherini's instrument, likely acquired in 1800 when he visited Boccherini in Madrid (both the Duport and Romberg cellos probably sat side-by-side at the Prussian court orchestra from 1805-1806). What is not arguable is that Romberg was as influential as Viotti in popularising refitted Stradivari instruments and Tourte bows by performing throughout Europe for the ensuing thirty years. Every cellist of the era wanted to play like Romberg.

Duport and Romberg bought their cellos before prices started to inflate, but the cellists who sought to emulate their sound were not so lucky. By the early nineteenth century these instruments were becoming coveted commodities and as the Hills noted, by the 1870s Stradivari instruments had become the *ne plus ultra*. Nineteenth-century owners tended to be French, English or Russian; players, like Duport, associated with the Paris Conservatoire; affluent Russian nobility who came into contact with Romberg during his stays there; or French and British entrepreneurs, particularly J.P. Vuillaume and the Hill family. In the twentieth century, Stradivari cellos have had owners from all parts of the globe.

For anyone not a string player, the monetary worth of Stradivari instruments is staggering. It is all about the sound and whether describing the playing of Romberg or Rostropovich, the characteristics of Stradivari cello tones are described similarly. 'Clear, firm, penetrating,' described Romberg's playing, while Rostropovich's Duport possesses 'A clear and articulate tone and a fast response with strong projection and full bass register.' Steven Isserlis notes the laser-like qualities of the sound, while Yo-Yo Ma sensuously describes the Davidoff (previously owned by Jacqueline Du Pré) as having, 'A remarkable combination of attributes. The pianissimos float effortlessly. The instrument's response is instantaneous. The sound can be rich, sensuous or throbbing at every range, yet can also be clear, cultured and pure.'

Be forewarned, however, if wishing to play a Stradivari, they are reported to have egocentric personalities. The Davidov and Ms. Du Pré did not always get along, as she thought it to be idiosyncratic. Ma notes about this cello that: 'You have to coax the instrument. The more you attack it, the less it returns.' Isserlis concurs, stating that his de Munck: 'Likes being talked to, sung to, dreamed over.' It is not unusual for players to humanise their instruments, but Janos Starker, who owned the Lord Aylesford, considered his cello to be possessed of more than just personality, stating that: 'Although his Lordship was created by man's hands, he definitely has a soul.' Linked forever by name with previous owners, most of Stradivari's cellos have been hugged by the world's greatest players and several of them have had perilous adventures. The Castelbarco was marched in street parades, the Duport spurred by Napoleon, and the Mara drowned first in liquor and then in a shipwreck. The poor Prince Gursky was completely unglued so it could be smuggled out of Russia in 1922, before being reassembled in Germany. The General Kyd was recently rescued from a Los Angeles dump. These wooden boxes give so much and perhaps that is the enduring magic of Antonio Stradivari. He has given cellists a means to express the full range of human emotions with incredible beauty, power, and love. As Gregor Piatigorsky, the owner the Aylesford, the Baudiot, and the Batta cellos, explained, 'The violoncello is a part of all things, and a central substance of this universe.'

**The London Cello Society presents our tenth anniversary event 'Simply Strad' at the Royal Academy of Music on Sunday 3rd November 2013. To book tickets, please visit www.londoncellos.org**

## Brian Meddemmen

It was with great sadness that I heard of the death of Brian Meddemmen. This news came as a considerable shock, since he was a mere 75 years old and until recently there didn't appear to be any indication that his health might be failing.

I only got to know Brian when he retired after many years as a member of the Covent Garden Orchestra. His love and affinity for this instrument was reflected in the many interesting articles he wrote for the Society's newsletters concerning recent cello CD releases. Driven by his great enthusiasm he apparently bought these at an astonishing rate to supplement his vast collection.

Whilst I never succeeded in persuading Brian to play a single note on any of the wonderful cellos that briefly came my way, his exemplary style was clearly evident when he played in the orchestra on our Elgar Day.

Finally, it was good to learn that Brian enjoyed such a fabulous cruise to the Amazon during what proved to be the final months of his life. This gentle and very likeable connoisseur will be sorely missed.

Keith Harvey

# Of Special Interest

## Janos Starker: an appreciation by Felicity Vincent

Janos Starker belonged to a small handful of truly great cellists whose careers were shaped by world strife in the first half of the twentieth century. Over 150 recordings show his unequalled playing prowess but it was as a passionate teacher who influenced global playing standards that he wished to be remembered. For this reason any cellist who studied with him, however brilliant a player, left knowing how to teach every aspect of cello playing.

In the 1950s he had success in this country with a debut recital at the Wigmore Hall sold out and acclaimed. In 1957 he played the Elgar *Concerto in E minor* at the Proms and the opening concert of the Edinburgh Festival and Walter Legge gave him a contract to make ten LPs for EMI over three years. Then it went quiet. I had studied at the Royal Academy of Music and been a member of Barbirolli's Hallé before, and as the wife of an up-and-coming guest conductor, I first had the opportunity to hear Starker in Seattle, playing Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations*. I don't know why but I hated it.

We met a year later in Israel. He played the Haydn *Concerto in D major* and it was the most exquisite playing I had ever heard – elegant, impeccable and moving. Wreathed in cigarette smoke and drinking scotch (he claimed, a pint a day, but never before playing), he was approachable in the relaxed atmosphere of the Israel Philharmonic guesthouse where we all stayed - and of course he saw my cello! I subsequently found myself in Bloomington, Indiana, invited to play in his class which he introduced by talking about professionalism: 'Before you walk on to a platform you must not only know the piece but how you play it.' Before I'd even played there was a reason to work with him because I had no idea *how* I did it! And was I nervous!

One-horse-town Bloomington was an extraordinary musical oasis. The doors in the circular Music Building bore the names of the world's great – central Europe personified - and Starker was to a great extent responsible. Students came from all over the world, practice rooms were booked from five in the morning and the standards were amazing.

His instruction was not so much about musical content, rather it was based on the forward-looking training of his 'doctor-teachers' in Budapest in the '30s: Adolf Schiffer (a pupil of David Popper), Imre Waldbauer and Leo Weiner. His seminars looked at balance, breathing and holistic movement. Stress was laid on organisation of left and right hands, and timing of shifts and conscious alternation of muscular tension and relaxation analysed. He encouraged his students to spend an hour each day in 'playing-experimentation'; swimming was recommended and we were encouraged to discover unusual repertoire. In his earlier teaching days Starker had a reputation for destructive criticism: he discouraged playing mannerisms and could be personal. He had high standards of both playing and decency (as he saw it) and didn't tolerate dissent. Doing as he said was undoubtedly a way to improve cellistic knowledge, ability and confidence in performance. Mammoth teaching days (aided by chain-smoking) were broken up by his own playing, always stunningly beautiful whatever cello he was handed, a demonstration of timing, sound and rhythm absorbed from and passed down from his mid-European forebears. He had heard and been kissed by Casals at seven, heard Feuermann at nine and played Brahms' E minor Sonata with Enescu as pianist, who had heard Brahms play it. He'd played for Kodaly, and later worked on the Elgar *Concerto in E minor* with Barbirolli, who'd played in its first performance under Elgar. While technique is learned and must be practised, tradition is osmosis.

Starker was a natural cellist; his hands were fairly small and his body, though short and slight, was wiry and strong. His co-ordination was out of this world and he had further improved his accuracy by slowing down tape recordings, the better to hear inaccuracies and refine his already-exceptional ear. This was a precision machine - with a heart!
Born in Budapest in 1924, he did not gain Hungarian citizenship until he was 21. His Ukrainian mother

and Polish tailor father were both Jewish. He started to play the cello at six. At eight he taught the six-year-old Eva Czako who later joined him in Bloomington. At fourteen he left school to concentrate on music, although friends gave him an informal education, also helping the family to stay together during the Nazi time. In 1943 his two older violinist brothers were sent to a labour camp and died in Yugoslavia. Janos was interned and sent to a labour camp, but due to the daredevil bravery of his pianist girlfriend Eva Uranyi he was released because he had been promised a job in Gothenburg and granted a Swedish passport.

He married Eva but before they could leave Budapest it was besieged, falling to the Russians in 1945. Eventually they boarded a freight train going to the Romanian border. There, Russian soldiers, who were not satisfied by anyone's papers, stopped them. Incorrect papers meant you could be shot but they saw Starker's cello. That night he gave the performance of (and for) his life playing while their captors danced, sang, and plied them with vodka and food. Next morning they were allowed to continue into Romania. There, Starker made a living but within a few months returned to Budapest to become principal cello of the Philharmonic. Starker loathed the duplicity of those who had been in charge during the Nazi time and retained their status under Communism, and soon he looked for an opportunity to leave. In 1946 he managed to gain a visa to play in Vienna, remaining in Austria to prepare for the Geneva International Competition, which meant a further visa into Switzerland. From there he and Eva reached Paris. Vienna brought the life-changing and distressing experience of hearing Menuhin, no longer a prodigy and deserted by his talent. Afraid this could happen to him too, Starker began to analyse how he played.

In Paris he practised, earned enough to keep him and Eva, forged important friendships with Tortelier and Fournier and recorded the Kodaly *Unaccompanied Sonata* on 78s. Antal Dorati wanted him for his orchestra in Dallas but visas were only available for teachers. By devious means one was obtained and Starker went to the Dallas Symphony, moving on a year later to play under Fritz Reiner as principal of New York's Metropolitan Opera. There his 'ability to sight-read anything' stood him in good stead and he found the great singers inspiring. Whether it was the language barrier, the fact that his ability was found threatening, or simply that he was an outsider, Starker made enemies in New York. He sustained the demanding Met job along with recordings and worldwide solo performances until 1953 when he followed Reiner (a 'dictatorial bastard' whose methods achieved fantastic results) to the Chicago Symphony.

In 1958 he divorced his first wife, left Chicago and moved to a teaching post at Indiana University. His international career continued, although England soon forgot him. Even so he remained faithful to the friends in London whose help had been crucial in war-stricken Budapest.

His early years were hard but music was a gift from the Gods and, as he found, literally life-saving. If his teaching methods sometimes seemed harsh we have to understand where he came from. No serious musician's life is going to be easy and part of essential professional training is to understand that. When I last played for him three years ago, the large portrait of David Popper staring down at me, it was as hard as ever. Afterwards he made for the elevator, I for the stairs; he didn't look back. He continued on his path and I on mine. But I feel a responsibility to take his knowledge and generosity further, keeping tradition intact in a changing world.

*Janos Starker was born in Budapest, Hungary, 5th July 1924 and died in Bloomington, Indiana, USA, 28th April 2013.*

## Bunting Bowing by William Bruce

*By way of introduction to his presentation '**A Cello Technique for Life**' on 23rd March 2014, William Bruce outlines Christopher Bunting's approach.*

'The higher our artistic aims the more must we realise the importance of a sound practical basis. An eagle needs wings! It is beneficial to establish a constantly adjusted personal programme embracing a mixture of items of greater and lesser priority' Christopher Bunting.


High on the wall of Bunting's teaching room at the Menuhin School was a poster displaying just one word: **CLARITY**.

Christopher studied with Maurice Eisenberg and later Pablo Casals, going on to become a pioneer of contemporary cello music. Lessons were always a revelation and even at the end of six years study I felt I had barely scratched the surface of what he had to offer. His detailed and analytical method embraced an extraordinary holistic breadth balancing technique, self awareness, interpretation, philosophy, art, literature and science, removing the technical blocks through a hierarchical awareness and refinement of the different functions of each part of the body and allowing musical intentions to flow unimpeded. No part of the body should attempt to usurp the function of another - the head most often being the biggest usurper! Instructions to each limb are specific and sequential.

His students' notebooks were works of art in their own right with deeply insightful analysis and detailed technical illustrations. His rubber stamp of "Left Arm Up!" certainly made the point. As well as giving inspirational demonstrations on his cello including orchestral reductions of concerti and ad hoc counterpoints to Bach's *Unaccompanied Suites* he was a fine pianist, recording the Brahms *E minor Sonata* for BBC Radio 3 as both the cellist and the pianist. Compositions included a concerto which he premiered at St Paul's, Covent Garden, an elegy for cello and piano, the *Dance Caprice*, a fugue for six cellos and three pieces for cello ensemble. His 'Essay on the Craft of Cello Playing' makes a leading contribution to cello pedagogy.

In the presentation we will be exploring Christopher's technical approach through volumes 1 and 2 of his Portfolio of Cello Exercises published by

Sangeeta Publications. This remarkable collection can be used to hone technique in any school of cello playing from beginners through to advanced players. They cover simple exercises covering right hand flexibility, bow control, left hand finger action, coordination, bowing articulation, spiccato, left hand finger independence, shifting, right arm choreography, interval training, portamenti, string crossing, double stops and pizzicato.

To find out more bring your cellos along on 23rd March. Copies of the volumes will be available for purchase at the venue.

# On the Edge

## Report from the back desk by Stephanie Oade

As the new girl in the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, I think I was forgiven for finding everything very exciting. A year on, I'm still, unashamedly, very excited. Working in a professional orchestra is not the easiest of jobs, but it offers such pleasures that the negatives dwindle to insignificance. What could compare to being immersed in the greatest music of the Western classical tradition; to hear an orchestra morph and grow each week as it accommodates a new conductor and different repertoire and to play such wonderful music to over 25,000 people every year, audiences across the south and south-west who turn out come sunshine or snow to support us with tremendous enthusiasm and warm appreciation.

When I left college I spent two years freelancing and performing in recitals around the country, meeting many wonderful people and learning a great deal along the way. I knew, however, that I dearly wanted an orchestral job and I felt extremely fortunate to be offered a job in the superb BSO cello section. I fully expected to enjoy the job (and so far I certainly haven't been disappointed), but I did not expect to learn so much so fast and to be so endlessly challenged in new and different ways. There is of course a specific technique to playing in an orchestra; we learn it to some extent at music college and professional freelancing pushes it to an incomparably higher level, but playing with the same people every day means that there is a firm and consistent musical framework within which this technique can be refined and explored. Day by day I feel myself change and develop, but there's so much to it, the learning continues. You need to constantly refine your listening skills, not just hearing the music around you, but being able to throw your ears over to different sections of the orchestra at appropriate times and to do this intuitively as the music or ensemble requires; you need to comprehend the multitudinous musical strands as fast as possible; to refine directional listening so as to be able to accurately pinpoint any problems or points of musical interest; and you need to do all this simultaneously. Our most relied upon senses need to be adjusted: you can't just read the music and watch the conductor, you need to glance at the music, keep an eye on the conductor whilst eyeballing your section principal, keeping your desk partner in your peripheral vision and closely following the leader of the orchestra and the other section principals in view. Equally, you

can't (and shouldn't) always hear yourself, so you have to use a heightened awareness of sensation and muscle memory to be sure of sound quality and intonation at all times. Playing the notes really is the easiest part!

This last year has been particularly interesting for another reason: the BSO's year long celebration of the cello. It's no wonder I bounce to work with a smile on my face! To begin, Truls Mørk played Prokofiev's *Sinfonia Concertante* (and much to our delight, he returned in the summer to record it for the Onyx label), Steven Isserlis has played three concertos – Elgar, Shostakovich *Concerto 1* and Haydn *Concerto in D Major* - Paul Watkins played the gorgeous Delius, Johannes Moser, the extraordinary Lutoslawski, young cellist Philip Higham and the wonderful Natalie Clein both performed Elgar, and our very own principal cello, Jesper Svedberg played Saint-Saens *Concerto 1*. The audiences' response to each concert was overwhelming, proving the cello's status as a widely beloved instrument. The celebrations culminated in a post-concert performance of Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras* and Bruch *Kol Nidrei* by the cello section of the BSO with Natalie Clein as special guest. We rehearsed hard, we wore flowers in our hair and it was a great success.

But don't think it all over. In the 2013–2014 season, cello lovers mustn't miss Prokofiev *Sinfonia Concertante* with Alisa Weilerstein (Basingstoke and London in October), the Elgar *Concerto in E minor* with Andreas Brantelid (Cheltenham and Exeter in October), Britten *Cello Symphony* with Johannes Moser (Poole and Bristol in November), and Schumann *Concerto in A minor* with Pieter Wispelwey (Poole and Portsmouth in April and May). And as an extra special treat, the cello section of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra with Natalie Clein will be making a special appearance in Swanage on October 5th. What more could you want to brighten the autumn gloom?

# Members' News & Views

### From Alison Wrenn

French cello for sale, made by Gustave Bazin c.1900. Suitable for advanced students and any other cellists or teachers who may be interested. Valued by Howard Hill of Hill & Co. in Welwyn at £10,000. Contemporary bow made by Howard Green c.1995, valued by Howard Hill of Hill & Co. at £1,600. Both are located in Hertfordshire. Looking for these amounts or a near offer. Viewing possible by arrangement. I am also selling a large amount of cello sheet music, ranging from beginner music to concertos.
Contact: 07759 234354 or alisonwrenn@yahoo.com
www.alisonwrenn.co.uk/forsale

### From Naomi Yandel

ScaleBox App: A brand-new app is available for iPhone, iPod-touch and iPad covering ABRSM Grades 1-5 scales - cello and 10 other popular instruments. It is designed to focus and organise scale practice. Progress is logged with a traffic light system and the app stores information from one practice session to the next, in order to throw up trickier scales more often. There is also a mock exam section. Cost: £1.99. An android version is in development.
www.scalebox.co.uk
www.bridgemusicpublications.co.uk

### From Richard Holmes

The cellist with the monster bow: For many years I have been pioneering a new bow hold, using a heavy bow which now has a more open throat. The combined effects of tensioning the hairs together with attacking with the bow allows the balanced left hand to gently lean against the strings with no, or minimal articulation. I am now beginning to produce inexpensive 'starter bows' which cellists may like to try.
doctorcello@gmail.com
holmesdrs@gmail.com
Twitter:@holmesbow

### From Michel Oriano

Tribute to Janos Starker: The Association Française du Violoncelle will organise a tribute to Janos Starker at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, Paris on the 4th of October. In 2000, it was Starker who advised us to create our association and he was our honorary chairman. Several of his former pupils including Marc Coppey, Raphaël Pidoux, Marie-Paule Milone and Henri Demarquette, will give a concert (solo pieces as wall as cello ensembles); we shall also show fragments of the DVD registered by our association, entitled "Une Leçon de musique". Note that this DVD can be bought on our website: www.leviolonceelle.com. In the afternoon before the concert, several cello teachers will coach students at the same place and give a series of masterclasses aimed to remind us of the precious advice given by Starker in Bloomington.

### From Ros Kane

'Departures': Look out for this Japanese film about a young cellist who loses his job in an orchestra and just happens upon another job preparing corpses for their funeral. He still plays his cello in his spare time and the sensitivity needed is reflected in his careful work with the corpses. This is a very unusual film and extremely beautiful.

### From Lionel Handy

My Bax CD received a 5 star recommendation in the BBC Music Magazine (July 2013) and said 'excellent performances'.

### From Ashok Klouda

Cello ensemble 'Cellophony' - who featured in the LCS newsletter earlier this year - are about to release a new CD, featuring music by Bach, Barber, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Sollima, Wagner and Wieniawski. The disc will be released on the Edition Classics label and will be available in October 2013.
www.cellophony.net