

The Loft Violin Shop

Stradivarius Violins – How Genuine?

So You Think You've Found A Strad? In over thirty-one years in business and after looking at countless thousands of violins at The Loft Violin Shop, only once have we found an actual Stradivarius. It ended up belonging to a collection and was reported "missing" a number of years earlier. The chances of finding or discovering a genuine "Strad" are very, very low indeed.

In 1908 a famous Belgian violinist named Eugene Ysaye was on a concert tour in St. Petersburg in Russia. He had with him four Stradivarius violins. One of the Strads was stolen from his hotel room, and was not recovered.

In 1951 a soldier in the Korean war found a violin hidden in the wall of a rundown farm house. It was subsequently authenticated as a genuine Stradivarius.

Out of such stories as these – which are supposed to be true – has arisen a collectors' myth. That myth is that you might find an incredibly valuable Strad yourself – hidden away in your attic or basement or perhaps at a yard sale down the block. And many people actually have found violins which carry the name of that master genius of violin-makers, the maestro of Cremona, Antonius Stradivari (whose name some misrepresent as "Stradivarius"). But these people are most often the victims of a cruel, if perhaps unwitting, hoax.

Antonio Stradivari was born in 1644 and set up his shop in Cremona, Italy, where he made violins and other stringed instruments (harps, guitars, violas and cellos) until his death in 1737. He took a basic concept for the violin and refined its geometry and design to produce an instrument which has served violin makers ever since as the standard to strive for. His violins sang as none had before them, with a clearer voice and greater volume, and with a pureness of tone which made them seem almost alive in the hands of a great violinist. He was one of three great families of violin makers in Cremona during the 1700s and 1800s, the other two being those of Guarneri and Amati, but Stradivari's violins have been judged by history to be the best. Two of Stradivari's sons continued his work after his death.

Every Strad was made entirely by hand, with a painstaking care devoted to the selection of woods and even the texture of the finishing varnishes. This was no assembly-line operation, and the best estimates have Antonio producing no more than around 1,100 instruments, including the violins, in his entire lifetime. Of these, an estimated 630 to 650 still survive the more than 250 years since they were made. 512 of these survivors are violins. Many others were destroyed in fires or other accidents, were lost at sea or in floods, and some were destroyed by the fire-bombing of Dresden in World War II. Virtually none are unaccounted for. Today a genuine Strad is worth two to three million dollars.

So where did those violins which have turned up in attics and closets all over the world come from? Why would anyone who found one think he had a real Strad? The answer is very simple: copies.

Today master violin-makers are using modern science – including the latest scanning devices and digital imaging techniques – to unlock the "secrets" of Stradivari and recreate instruments of his quality. One Canadian violin-maker, Joseph Curtin, and his American partner, Gregg Alf, created a copy, right down to every scratch and shading of varnish, of a specific instrument known as the Booth Stradivari, which Stradivari made in 1716. It sold at a Sotheby's auction in 1993 for \$42,460 – to a concert violinist.

But for close to two centuries much shabbier copies have been made and sold – bearing “Stradivarius” labels. For this reason, the presence of a Stradivarius label in a violin does not mean the instrument is genuine.

The usual label – both genuine and false – carries the Latin inscription “Antonius Stradivarius Cremonensis Faciebat Anno [date],” which gives the maker (Antonio Stradivari), the place (Cremonia), and the year of manufacture, the actual date either printed or handwritten. It was this Latin label which gave the world the name “Stradivarius.” After 1891, when the United States required it, copies might also have the actual country of origin printed in English at the bottom of the label: “Made in Czechoslovakia,” or just “Germany.”

Hundreds of thousands of these copies were made in Germany, France, central and eastern Europe, England, China, and Japan, starting in the mid-19th century and continuing into current times – and literally millions exist today. They bear counterfeit labels proclaiming them to be by not only Stradivari but Vuillaume, Amati, Bergonzi, Guarneri, Gasparo da Salo, Stainer, and others. While some of these spuriously labeled violins are well made instruments, the majority are inexpensive, carelessly made and poorly crafted. They were not made to be fine violins, and are not very valuable from a collector’s or player’s perspective.

Music shops and mail order houses originally sold these violins at prices which made it plain no deception of the buyer was intended – some were claimed to be “tributes” – they ranged from \$8.00 to \$27.00 apiece, and were identified in advertisements as “copies” or “models.” But their similarity to the instruments they were copied from is minimal to a trained eye – or ear. While some involved hand-crafting, the vast majority were mass-produced. It was not until 1957 that the words “Copy of” were added to some of the labels.

Even today one can find advertisements for a “Stradivarius Violin” which comes “Complete with Decorative Stand and Bow,” and is claimed to be “a wonderful replica of the eminent Stradivarius violin,” designed for displaying “on the wall or atop a bureau or coffee table” for a mere \$29.95.

So what should you do if you find a violin with a Stradivarius label – or that of any other famous violin maker from centuries ago? You should have it appraised by an expert, and most such experts are members of the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers. Expect to pay for the appraisal. The authentication of a violin can be determined only by a careful examination of such factors as the design, model, craftsmanship, wood, and varnish. It’s not hard to separate out the mass-produced violins from the actual hand-made instruments, but it takes a well-trained violin appraiser to be able to attribute the violin to a specific maker or place of manufacture.

Don’t expect your find to be genuine. The odds against finding the real thing are miniscule. Often the costs of repair and restoration far exceed the extrinsic value of the instrument. If you would like an estimate on repair and restoration, we can provide that for you, understanding that putting too much money and effort into a poorly made instrument is not very cost – effective.

Excerpted from “Holeintheweb.com”