

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Antonio Stradivari (1644 – 1737) is universally acknowledged as one of the ‘giants’ of the violin making world. Not only was he the consummate craftsman but he continually experimented with the design and development of the instruments he crafted. He is regarded by most to be the greatest violin maker to have ever lived.

The instrument that the ‘Cello Challenge’ team will be modelling their work on during the Adelaide International Cello Festival is the “Countess of Stainlein ex Paganini” Stradivarius of 1707. This is the cello played by the celebrated cellist Bernard Greenhouse of The Beaux Arts Trio for much of his life.

Important instruments are often named for their association with oft-times equally important owners or players and the following colourful account of the “Countess of Stainlein” cello is given by the Hill brothers in their work on Stradivari:

“... The most interesting fact known to us concerning this instrument is the episode of its purchase early in the last century by Signor Merighi, a violoncellist of Milan, and Piatti’s master. We have it on the authority both of Piatti and of Signor Pezze, also a pupil of Merighi, that in 1822, while the last-named was passing through the streets of Milan, he perceived a working man carrying, among other things, a violoncello on a truck or barrow. Merighi at once accosted him and ended by becoming the owner of the instrument, which was in a dilapidated state, for a sum equivalent to 4s! Eventually, about 1834-35, Merighi disposed of the ‘cello to Paganini, who sold it to J B Vuillaume, who resold it in 1854 to the late Count Stanlein.”¹

The terms “Strad copy” or “it’s a copy of ...” are frequently heard in violin circles but, in fact, “genuine copies”, to use that oxymoron, are rare. Exact copies of celebrated old instruments are made from time to time by a small number of dedicated makers; however, most makers of new instruments focus on the model in as close as possible to its original form.

Stringed musical instruments are placed under enormous stress when set up for their normal playing function and old instruments develop distortions caused by this stress. A magnificent old instrument may play beautifully and sound well, despite its various stress induced distortions, but that’s not necessarily a good enough reason to copy the distortion in a new instrument. The model is therefore that of the “Countess of Stainlein” with the various distortions of old age removed or corrected. This corrected model was drawn up from the original by Frank Ravatin and the templates and mould used for the construction were made by Rainer Beilharz.

The “Countess of Stainlein” is a ‘*Forma B*’ model from Stradivari’s golden period (c. 1700 – 1720). The ‘*Forma B*’ model first appeared at around the date the “Countess of Stainlein” was made, i.e. around 1707 and was the result of Stradivari progressively diminishing the dimensions of the cello both in length and width. Although he went on to make other changes, further diminishing dimensions, the ‘*Forma B*’ came to be recognised as the ideal model, being beautifully proportioned and allowing for a superb tonal potential combined with relative ease of playing.

Some people may wonder if the development of instruments has come to a standstill given that makers in general seem to be working on models first developed in the early 18th century.

Our craft is firmly established on empirical knowledge. Over the past five centuries just about every possible experiment with different dimensions and materials has already been tried - there is little new under the sun. Five centuries has given the craft time to sort out what works and what doesn’t.

However, it’s in our nature to tinker with things. Most makers carry out little experiments with instruments as they’re being made, but with an instrument already so close to perfection, such experiments are often so subtle as to remain unseen.

There are, of course, some makers who are not content with subtle manipulations and are going at it hell for leather, turning out ultra-light instruments made from balsa wood, forbidding looking creations in black carbon fibre, re-designing bass bars, filling their workshops with computerised analytical equipment and weighing instruments down with on-board electronics. So it’s by no means over!

Yet our craft is firmly based on empirical knowledge and it will not be shaken by passing fads. New developments are welcome but they have to prove themselves over time before there is any hope of acceptance.

In homage to Stradivari and the “Countess of Stainlein” cello, we can let Sir Isaac Newton have the last few words. When complimented on the brilliance of his discoveries, he modestly said “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants”.

¹Hill, W. Henry, Hill, Arthur F., & Hill, Alfred E., *Antonio Stradivari, His Life & Work (1644-1737)*, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1963