

## Instrument Authenticity.

### Is this a real Stradivari (Guarneri, Amati, Stainer, etc.) my Uncle Harry left me?

Almost certainly not! Antonio Stradivari's designs and labels, as well as those of many other famous makers, have been copied more than just about any art objects in history except possibly the Mona Lisa. Virtually all genuine Strad's and Guarneri del Jesu's that are known to still exist are accounted for. The odds that you are going to find a genuine old Italian masterwork in your uncle's cupboard or in the attic are slim to none.

**HOWEVER!** Just like the millions of people who play the lottery, occasionally someone will hit the jackpot. While your odds are similar, there is always that slim possibility that your instrument is actually worth something. Even if it's not a Strad, it could be, for example, a fine instrument made by one of many other important makers in Italy, Germany and France. An anonymous Italian instrument that is over 200 years old and is a fine work of art may still be worth several thousands or even tens of thousands of pounds. Note also that there were roughly 20,000 violin makers over more than 250 years, making instruments in the Italian tradition in the city of Cremona, Italy alone (the home of Stradivari). In the Victorian era, it was a common marketing technique to attach fake, or even authentic, Stradivari labels to mass produced instruments made in Germany and France. This practice was not considered deceptive at the time, since it was common knowledge that these were cheap replicas. Some of these were actually reasonably well made and are worth keeping, while many others are inevitably second-rate or worse.

### Reading a Violin Label



If you look inside almost any violin through the bass side f-hole, you should see a paper label glued to the inside back of the instrument. For practical purposes this can be ignored unless it clearly says something in English like "Made in Germany," "Made in Bohemia" or "Made in China". (Labelling laws in the U.S. demanded 'Made in' labels) Such a mark is an indicator that it was factory made for the American market and you need go no further. If the label appears to be very old and in similar condition to the rest of the violin, it may be authentic, but no reputable appraiser would ever consider the label as more than one of many factors in authenticating an instrument.

Labels may be printed or hand written. Stradivari normally used a printed label that said: "Antonius Stradiuarius Cremonensis; Faciebat Anno 17\_\_" and has a circular logo device with a cross and the initials AS. The text on this label is in Latin which means "Antonio Stradivari, Cremona (the city he worked in), Made in the Year 17\_\_." The last two digits of the year were written by hand in pencil or ink. This is the most commonly copied label of all, appearing on untold thousands of not so good to fair-quality instruments.

Because some of the instruments made in the Victorian heyday have now become attractive instruments to own, and as such have a reasonable value, these instruments, which were the 'fakes' of the day, are themselves being faked! After cutting paper from old book flyleaves, and printing one of the labels shown left onto this paper, this paper is then dirtied to make it look genuine, and then put into an instrument of lesser quality. This is a despicable practice and definitely illegal.

The whole subject thus goes full circle. However the test must be in the quality of sound produced, not the label. Legislation was enacted to encourage the removal of such labels by Violin dealers, however, providing no intent to defraud is intended, most labels have remained intact, as part of the instruments' history.

### Label Terms

Term	Means	For example
<i>faciebat, fece, fecit or me fecit</i>	made	<i>me fecit</i> ="made me" or "made by"
<i>anno</i>	in the year	<i>Faciebat Anno 1723</i> = "Made in the year 1723."
<i>et</i>	and	
<i>in or a</i>	in or of (referring to a place name)	<i>a Brescia, in Brescia, in Mittenwald</i>
<i>alumnus</i>	student of	
<i>nepos</i>	descendant of	
<i>nach</i> (German)	after, i.e., copy of, or in imitation of	
<i>sub titulo</i>	patron saint	<i>sub titulo S.Teresie, or sub tit: Sanctae Teresiae</i> = "under the patronage of Saint Theresa"

<b>Label Terms Contd.</b>		
Fr. or <i>frater</i>	brother of	
<i>filius</i>	son of	

#### Latinized maker names:

- Stradivarius = Stradivari
- Guarnerius = Guarneri
- Amatus = Amati

#### Common Place Names:

Cremonae, Cremonensis, etc. = The Italian city of Cremona, home of Stradivari, Guarneri and many other famous makers and still a centre for violin making to this day.  
Mittenwald, Brescia, Markneukirchen, Mirecourt, *Venetis* (Venice), Napoli, Milano etc.= Some of the many respected violin regions of Europe.

#### Ask a professional

There are levels of expertise in the appraisal of musical instruments, but if you want to be confident that you will obtain an accurate result, you need to contact a reputable Violin dealer, who will be able to advise you. Mostly if it is just a verbal opinion you require, this will not be chargeable, but if you want a written valuation, say for insurance purposes, this of course will be chargeable. Should you be one of the lucky finders of something a bit special, generally a Violin dealer will suggest a second opinion (often a reputable Auction house, specialising in instrument valuations), be obtained. This ensures that nothing has been missed, and will guarantee accuracy.

#### About Factory-Made Violins

Around the turn of the (20th) century, musical instrument manufacturing experienced an explosion of popularity, both in the U.K. and in Europe. Processes were developed that allowed old-world craftsmen, with the assistance of many lesser-skilled tradesmen, to turn out large numbers of instruments at a low cost. While many mass-produced instruments are decidedly inferior, some, especially those manufactured in the traditional centres of instrument making, such as Markneukirchen in Germany, & Czechoslovakia, produced perfectly serviceable instruments of decent quality. These do not have the value or prestige of a fine old hand-made violin, but they can have a reasonably good tone and be perfectly adequate for the advanced student.

On the other hand, the old catalogues advertised inexpensive violin outfits that included a bow, case and instruction booklet for couple of pounds. If you find one of these intact, it is fairly rare, since most have long since fallen to pieces and were not worth repairing. These are truly worthless as a playable instrument, but if complete and with the instrument in one piece, as an antique item, they may have some value.

#### Bows

One of the most commonly overlooked items when evaluating a violin is the bow that may be with it. Since it is just a simple curved stick, it doesn't seem like it would be very valuable, but people often find that their bows are actually worth more than their violins. Bows will often look ratty, with shredded hair and even broken or missing parts. But as long as the stick itself is in good condition, it could be restored and retains its value. A fine W.E. Hill bow can be worth £5,000 or more. Be sure when getting an appraisal to have the bow appraised as well.

#### Violin Cases and Storing Instruments

You may have an old violin in an old case. In nearly all instances, an old case should be thrown away and a new case purchased. Old cases rarely have any value as antiques. (The only exception I am aware of is a case covered in genuine alligator. These are sometimes restored with new compartments and sold as portable mini-bars.) Even the cheapest new cases provide much greater protection against climate, damage from impact, and potential infestation by mites than all but the best older cases.

If you have a bow that has no hair, odds are it has been eaten by invisible mites. They also eat the silk velvet or wool felt case linings and the glue that holds everything together. There is no good way to eliminate mites from an old case. Do not use mothballs or insecticidal chemicals as these can react with the varnish on your violin and cause irreparable damage.

Instruments should ideally be stored in a climate-controlled place with good air circulation, not always easy in this country! A room that is not often used, but is none the less heated and aired e.g. a Dining/bedroom is a sensible place to consider. A lounge or kitchen, whilst dry and generally aired, will also be subject to large temperature & humidity swings, which can be disastrous to an old instrument.

The worst places to put them include:

- 1) Under a bed ,
- 2) In a cupboard or wardrobe,
- 3) In a basement, garage, or attic.

This is one of a series of Instruction sheets prepared by JPB Music to help players gain a better understanding. We write these to assist, but if you are still unsure, please either phone for more advice, or ask your teacher for help.

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