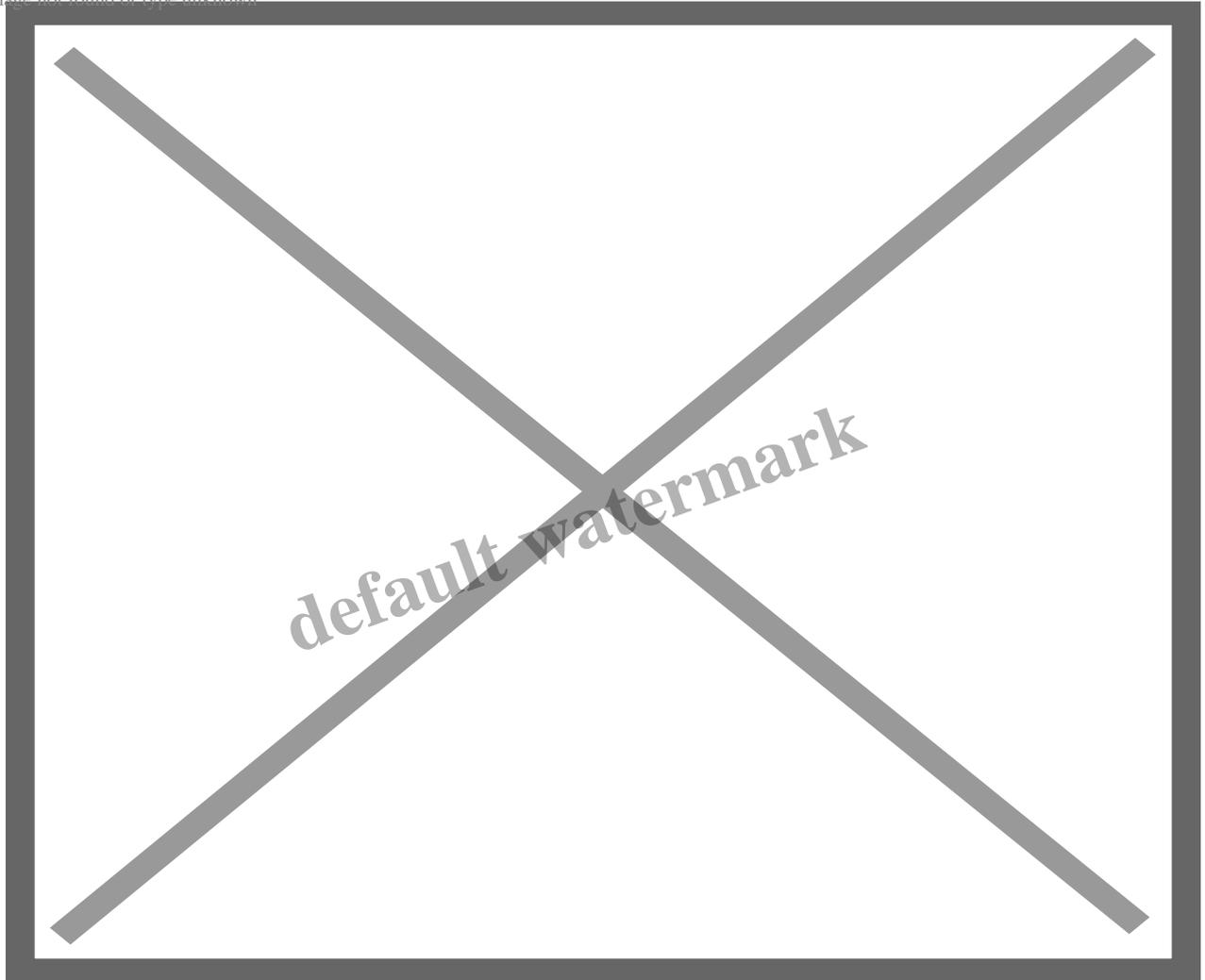


The curious case of the violin in a cage

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Stradivari's "The Messiah" at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England

Following visits to museums in Oxford and Cremona to see historic guitars and violins, I discuss the world of rare instruments and explore issues around their value, whether they should be played or not, and how their authenticity is established – and how this all relates to modern instrument building.

This post comes to you from the hillside above the Italian village of Bellagio, on Lake Como. I'm here at the [Rockefeller Bellagio Center](#) doing the writing residency that was originally supposed to happen in March/April 2020.

The aim of the residency at that time was to produce some early material for a book on the ecology and conservation of the trees that produce guitar tonewoods. When the COVID maelstrom overtook northern Italy and the rest of the world, I ended up locked-down in my study in Fremantle, Western

Australia, rather than writing in Bellagio. That's when the project morphed into the Nature of Music website, which I've been writing posts for since then.

As part of the residency, I had planned to visit the town of Cremona, 2.5 hours away by train, to find out about the birthplace of modern violins – where, in the 1600s and early 1700s, the Amatis, Guarneris and Stradivari produced violins that still stand the test of time as some of the best ever made. In the absence of actually being able to visit, I researched the topic and wrote a [post](#) from Fremantle about Cremona, Stradivari and violins.

Fortunately, the residency was rescheduled for October/November 2022, and I had planned to use the time to work on a post focusing on the illegal timber trade and another on Sitka spruce, a wood highly favoured for guitar tops.

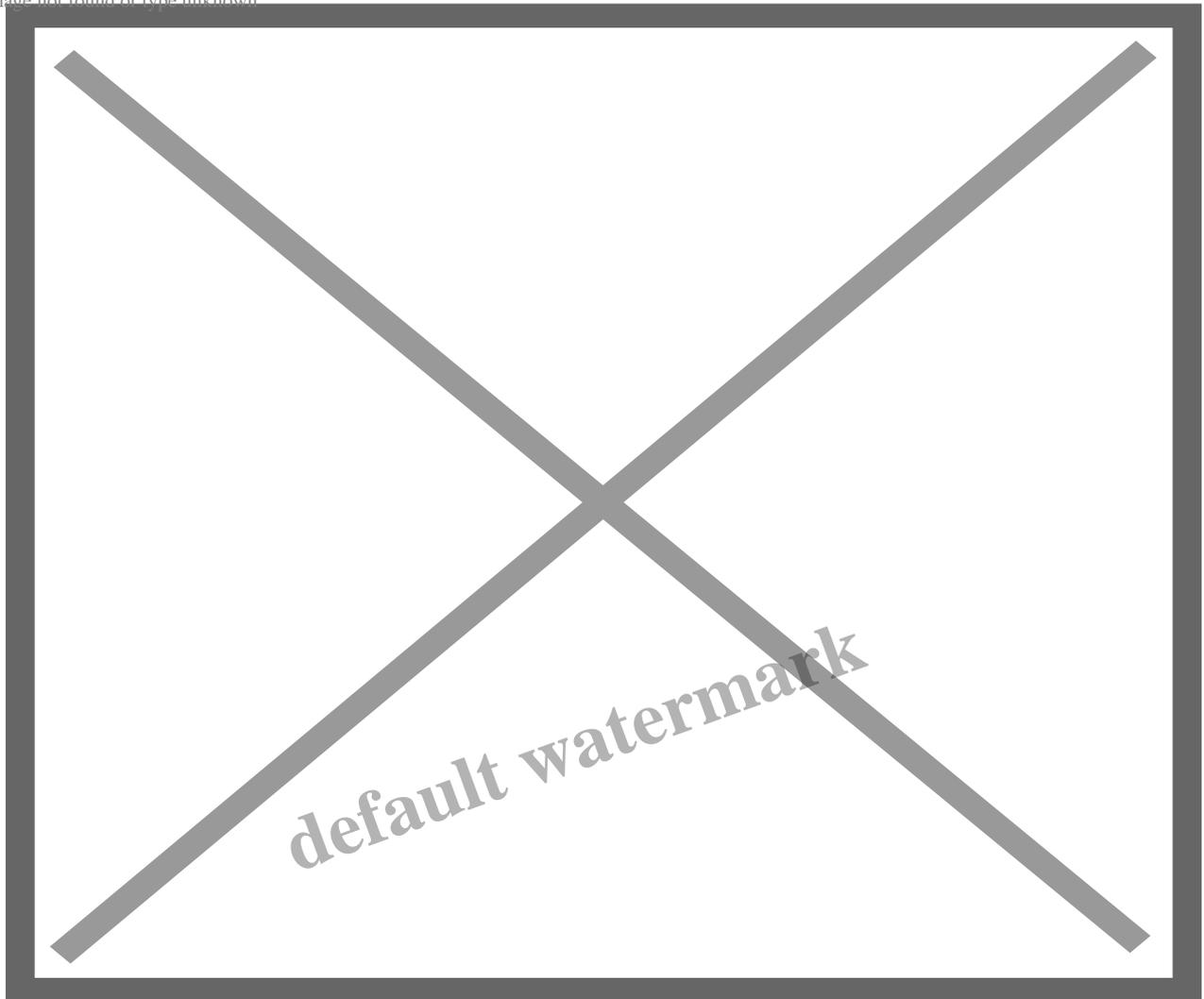
However, I also finally got to actually visit Cremona and immerse myself in the world of Stradivari and violin making. My visit there filled my head with so many ideas that I had to divert my attention from the tasks I had assigned myself and instead shift the focus back to violins.

Oxford and “The Messiah”

This story begins not in Cremona, but in Oxford, England. We spent a week there visiting our son at the start of our trip. As well as soaking up the college atmosphere and visiting cosy English pubs, I sought out the [Ashmolean Museum](#) where I knew a guitar made by Stradivari was on exhibit.

I found the guitar in a room devoted to early [stringed instruments](#), and it was a big thrill for me to see this guitar – one of only a few made by Stradivari over 300 years ago. Although clearly recognisable as a guitar, it had many features that were quite different from modern guitars, including its shape, string number and arrangement, and its moveable frets.

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Guitar made by Antonio Stradivari in 1688 (center), flanked by guitars by Rene Voboam (1641) and Antonio dos Santos Vieira (early 18th century). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

The big-ticket items in the instrument room were not guitars, however, but violins. I hadn't done much preparatory research on what else I might find at the Ashmolean, but I suddenly came face to face with one of the most famous violins in the world – Stradivari's ["The Messiah"](#). I'd read about this, along with other famous violins by Stradivari, Amati and Guarneri, while researching my post on Cremona.

The Messiah has perhaps had more written about it than any other violin. It's considered the most valuable violin in existence – probably worth about US\$20million. It's rarely been played and was donated to the Ashmolean on the basis that it would never be played, but rather preserved as a pristine example of Stradivari's work. It was also at the centre of a controversy in the late 1990s over whether it is a genuine Stradivari or a fake.

Let's take a few moments to unpack that set of things – its value, its role as an exhibit rather than an instrument to be played, and its status as a genuine Stradivari violin.

Dollars and sense

How do you figure out the value of an instrument? Most new instruments come with a price fixed by the manufacturer and/or the retail outlet – although sometimes there is room to negotiate on this. But what about a used instrument? Most used things cost less than brand new things, right? And often that is the case with instruments too – but certainly not always. The asking price will be determined by the quality of the instrument and the condition it's in, including whether there's obvious wear and tear or notable modifications

But it will also be determined by how scarce that type and age of instrument is, and whether it's been owned by somebody famous, and whether it's seen as "collectable" or not. That's because not all instruments are bought to be played – some are bought as investments or to form part of a collection. Often the instrument's value to a collector depends greatly on its condition – the closer to "pristine" it is, the more valuable it is likely to be.

There's a whole business around valuation of instruments of all sorts – for both insurance and sale purposes. You can find quick guides to the value of instruments of particular makes, ages and conditions on sites like [Reverb](#). But these are only guides, and the actual value pretty much depends on what someone is prepared to pay for it. And that is a highly unpredictable thing, especially for high-end, rare or iconic instruments. For instance, when Eric Clapton auctioned a lot of his guitars to benefit the Crossroads treatment centre he founded in 1998, the guitars often sold for many times more than the estimated value (see the 2021 book, [Six String Stories](#)).

Priceless or very, very expensive

Often, therefore, it's impossible to put a price on rare and vintage instruments until they are put up for sale. Indeed some probably merit the description "priceless", especially if they are already in a collection somewhere.

So, saying that the Messiah is worth \$20million is really just grabbing a figure out of thin air. It's valued so highly because it's considered one of the best, if not the best, preserved Stradivari violin in existence. It's rarely been played and hence has retained its original finish and so on. Interestingly, though, it's not 100% original- in the late 19th century, its then owner Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume gave it a new fingerboard, pegs, bass bar and tailpiece with the intention of bringing it up to modern playing standards. This seems like a pretty significant set of modifications, but is clearly not enough to diminish the authentic status of the violin (although in a [2013 newspaper article](#), curator of the Ashmolean exhibition, John Whitely, noted "I wish he hadn't done it").

The Messiah tops the list of the most highly valued violins in the world, but there are several other violins worth millions of dollars – with their value determined by the price they reached at auction. The "Vieuxtemps" Guarneri, made by Guarneri del Jesu in 1741, reached the highest price ever paid for a violin, selling in 2016 for an estimated \$16 million.

Various lists are available online that detail the “world’s most expensive violins” – for instance, [OrchestraCentral](#), [My Luthier](#) and [Cmuse](#).

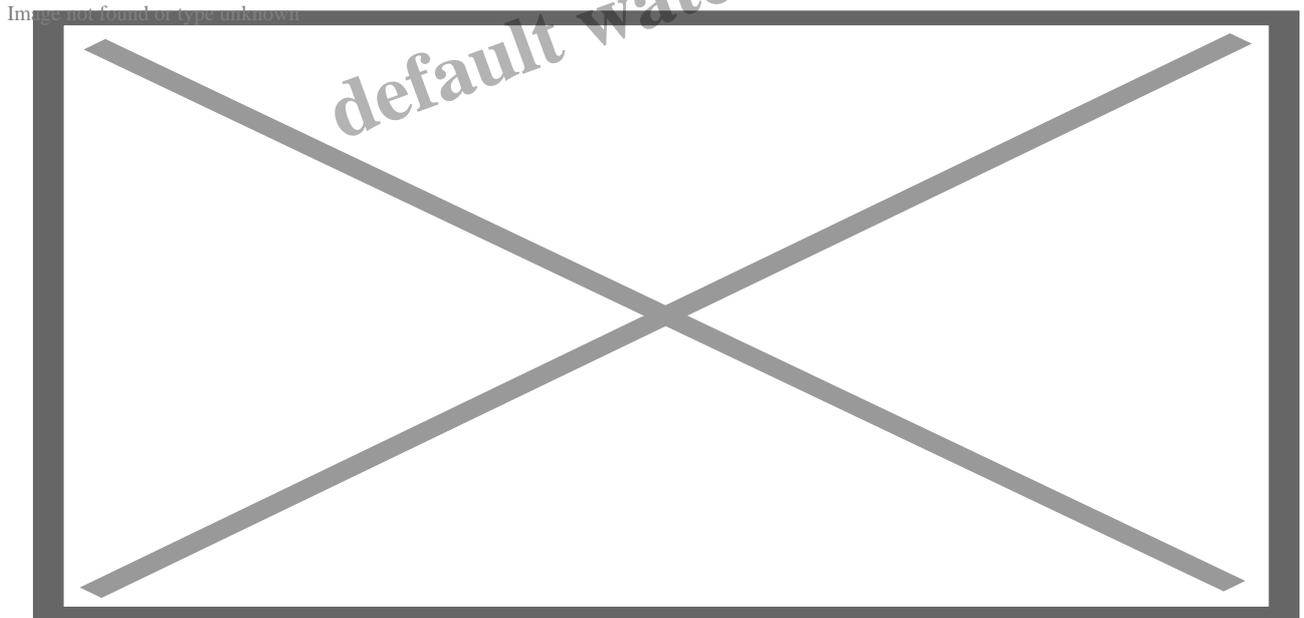
Most of the violins in these lists are so-called Golden Age instruments by Stradivari, Guarneri and the Amati family. However, there are some exceptions, including the much more recent [“Titanic” violin](#).

Short aside: The Titanic violin

The dance band on the Titanic featured in another [recent post](#). The story of how the musicians on the Titanic continued playing as the ship went down is legendary.

From the 1997 movie ‘Titanic’ : the band playing “Nearer My God To Thee”

I was fascinated to find that the story continued to this day, with the uncovering of the tale of the violin played by band leader Wallace Hartley. Hartley, along with many others, died in the icy Atlantic waters after the ship went down, but it turns out that his violin somehow survived more-or-less intact in its case inside a waterproof bag that floated. The violin made its way to Hartley’s fiancé Mary Robinson and then passed through numerous hands before being rediscovered in an attic in 2004.



The violin from the Titanic. Source: [DW](#)

It’s unclear how it was recognised as potentially being the violin from the Titanic, and the claim was certainly greeted with scepticism – obviously, it would be tempting for someone finding an old violin to pass it off as having historical value. However, [extensive forensic detective work](#) led experts to finally agree that this was, indeed, the violin played by Hartley.

Despite its condition, the violin was [sold at auction](#) for \$1.7m in 2013 to an unknown buyer. It has more

recently been [on display](#) at the Titanic Museum in Branson, Missouri, and is considered one of the most important artefacts that survived the Titanic disaster.

As [Siena Linton wrote](#), “This violin holds a lifetime of stories in the grain of its wood...”

Look but don't touch

“The Messiah” sits resplendent in its glass case in the Ashmolean, along with the other musical treasures in the room. It rarely leaves the case and, as we've seen, is never played. It's for looking at only. As [Robert Samuels wrote](#) in February 2020, “You can see it today. You can see it, but you cannot hear it. No-one can. The violin rests in its glass case, mute symbol of perfection in sound, unplayed, forever”. What should we make of that? Certainly, it can be admired as a work of art, and Stradivari's skill as a craftsman is clear to see.

But can it really also be viewed as a musical instrument if it never actually makes music? Guitar wisdom generally suggests that a guitar will [sound better the more it is played](#). That's partly because of the aging process itself in which the wood dries and changes in density, but this process appears to be enhanced by playing the guitar.

In my [original post](#) on Stradivari violins, I commented on the strong belief in the violin world that violins get better as they age. Taking things even further, some people who own or play these instruments are convinced that they take on something of the persona of past and present players and develop a “memory” – to the extent that the instrument almost plays itself or anticipates the player's intentions.

The Messiah has hardly been exposed to this process and hence might be expected to not sound as good as other violins from the same era that have been constantly played. At the same time, not allowing the violin to be played certainly protects it from any likely damage. There's much debate about whether it should be allowed to be played or not. In an article titled “[Caged Messiah](#)”, Benjamin Hebbert reflects: “For more than half of its life, debates have raged between those who want to hear it play and those who prefer preservation and it's totemic status has been increased with its incarceration behind glass at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford”.

Hebberts agrees with the idea that it should not be played, but appreciates that “there will always be a desire to have the instrument played, and many of the conventional arguments against its use can be countered by equally compelling views from the other side”. He also suggests that the argument for playing it should be considered in the context of the many other Stradivari that are currently are being kept silent or away from the public in other ways – given the Messiah is considered the most pristine, there are many other instruments that should come before it as candidates for being made available.

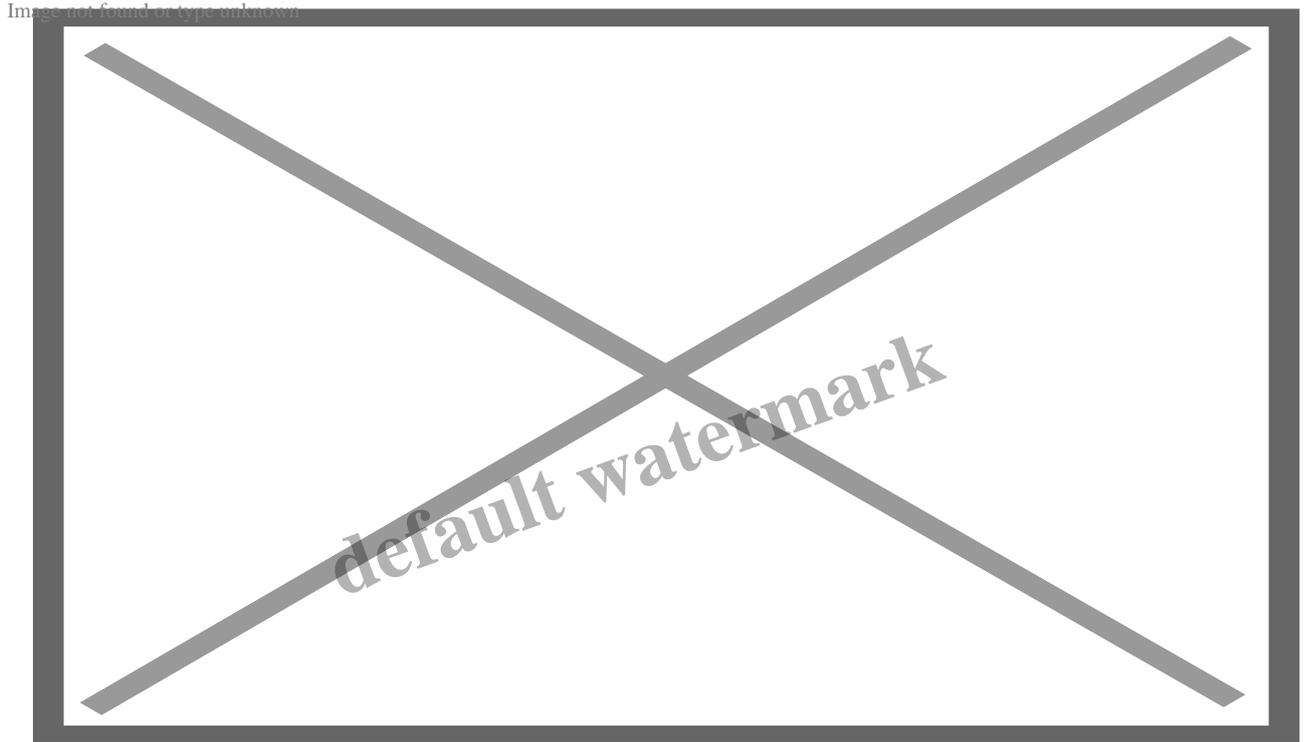
For me, it just seems a bit sad that something created to make music will never be allowed to do so. Much like a caged bird sits on a perch but can't fly, the Messiah sits resplendent in its glass box but can't fulfill its purpose.

Meanwhile in Cremona...

Fast forward from the Ashmolean in Oxford to our visit to the [Violin Museum](#) in Cremona a few weeks

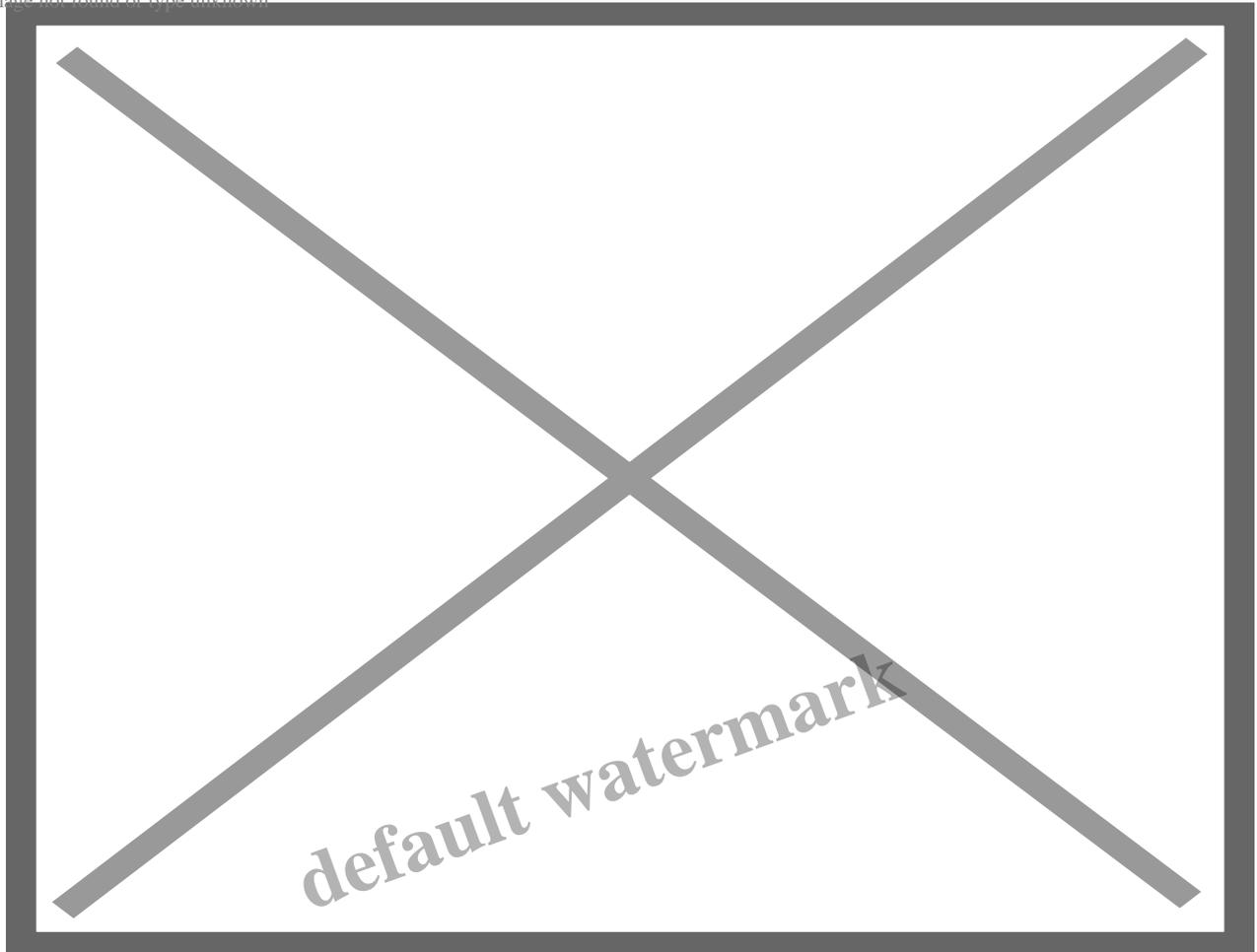
later. Much like the music room in the Ashmolean, the “Treasure Chest” in the Violin Museum contains an eye-watering array of amazing violins by the Cremonese greats. Another Stradivari guitar is also displayed in an adjacent room. As in the Ashmolean, these are all tastefully displayed in glass cases.

As we moved among the Amati, Guarneri and Stradivari violins, we ended up in front of Stradivari’s “[Clisbee](#)”. Made in 1669, it’s one of Stradivari’s earliest instruments and was acquired by the museum in 2003 and has been there ever since. It is described as one of the most precious pieces in the collection.



The “Treasure Chest” at the Violin Museum in Cremona

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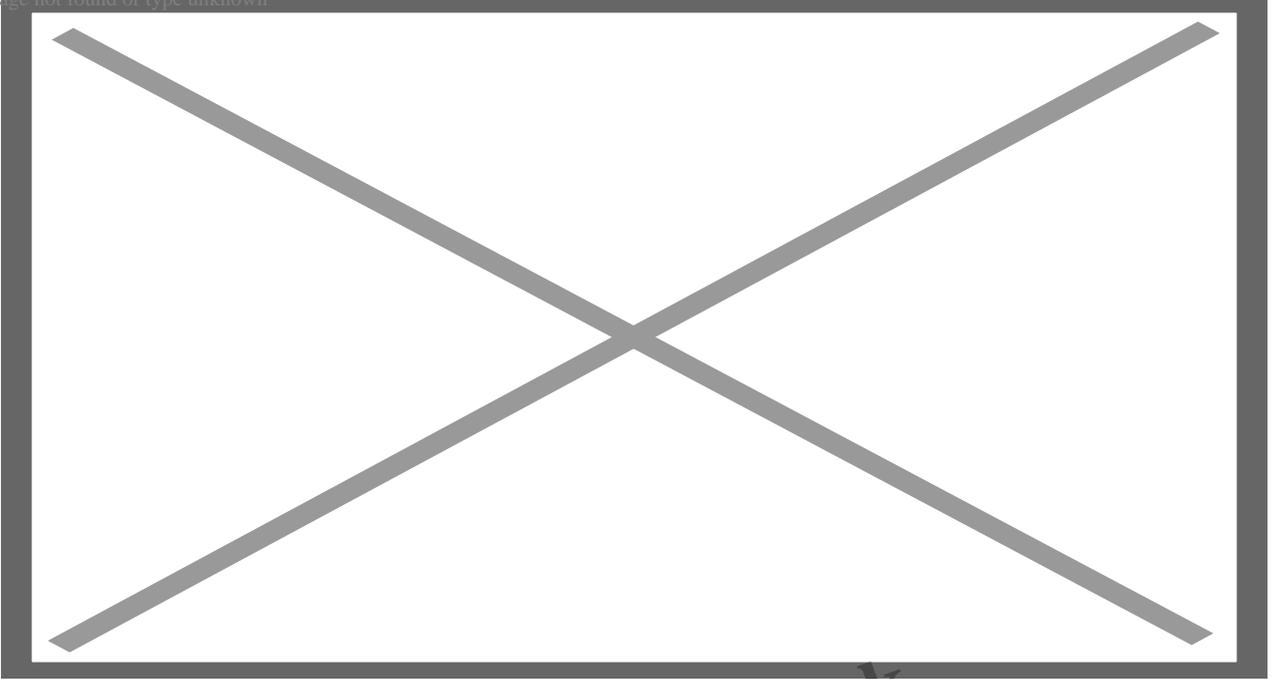
Stradivari's "Clisbee"

Imagine our surprise then, when a member of the museum staff (flanked by a security guard) approached the glass case containing the violin, opened the back and slipped the violin off its supports and into a padded bag, and disappeared out the room carrying it.

Elena, our guide, explained that the violin was to be played in the recital due to start in half an hour or so. These recitals happen weekly in the purpose-built auditorium within the museum, and feature amazingly talented musicians playing one of the equally amazing instruments from the collection.

Sure enough, seated in the auditorium we saw the same guy bring the violin in, take it out its case and place it on a table on the floor of the auditorium. Shortly afterwards, [Aurelia Macovei](#), resplendent in a blue ballgown, entered the auditorium, picked up the 350-year-old violin and played it for the next 40 minutes. The pieces she played were obviously chosen to display the full range of what the violin was capable of (and in the process also display her amazing talent).

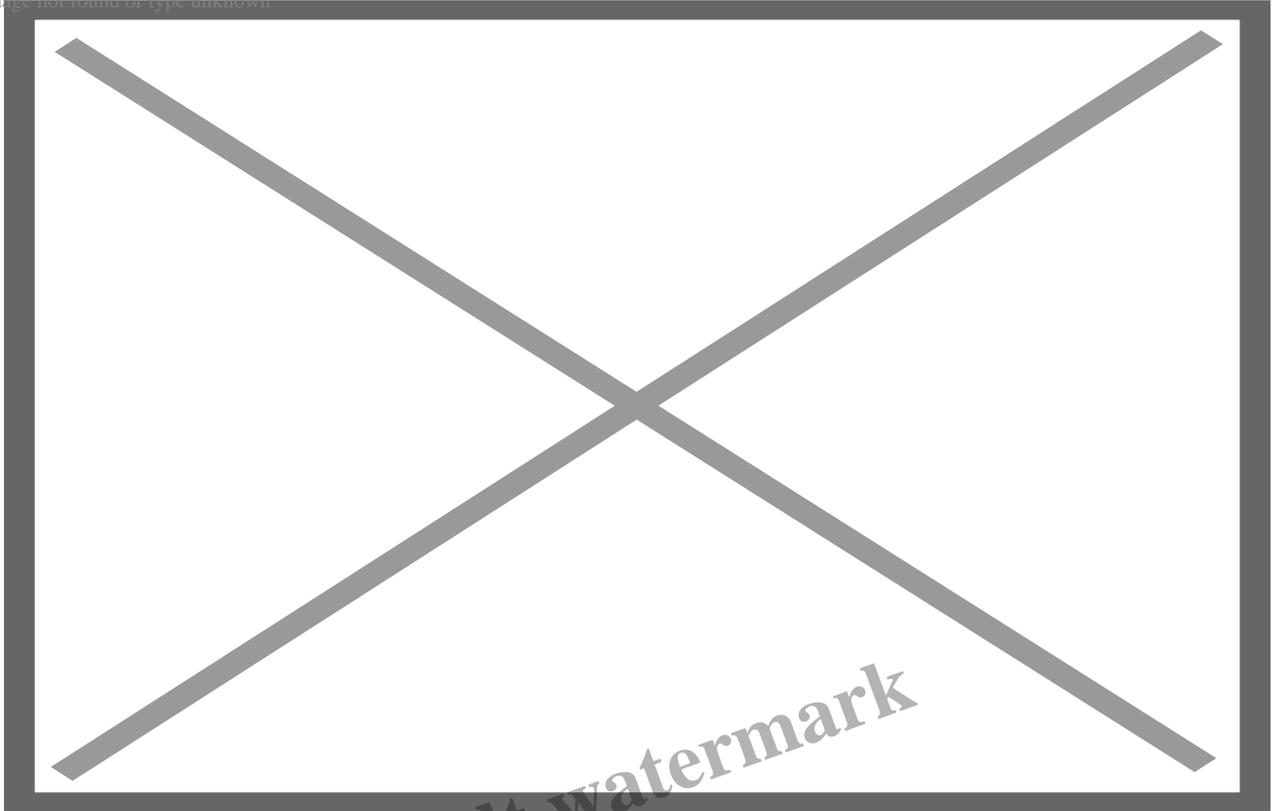
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Taking photos and videos were not allowed during the recital, but here's a photo of Aurelia Macovei playing Stradlvari's Clisbee from an official website (Source: [La Provincia Cremona](#))

It was quite literally breathtaking. The audience erupted into thunderous applause at the end, Aurelia returned for a short encore, and then the museum guy and security guard swiftly returned the violin to its case and spirited it off back to its display cabinet in the Treasure Chest.

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Clisbee safely back in its carry-case at the end of the recital in the Museum [Auditorium](#) (which is a work of art itself).

A different approach

So, we got to not only appreciate the violin in its display case but also marvel at the amazing music it can create. This bird got its chance to fly. The museum apparently rotates through the various instruments so that all the playable ones get played.

Indeed, back to guitars for a moment, the Stradivari “Sabionari” guitar on display in the museum is also taken out and played – the only Stradivari guitar for which this has happened.

Rolf Lislevand plays A. Stradivari Sabionari, 1679 guitar – Santiago de Murcia – Tarantela

A different approach which celebrates great instruments not just by letting people see them, but also by letting people *hear* them. An approach that is shared elsewhere – for instance, a [January 2016 article](#) by Sadie Dingfelder in the Washington post was titled “The Smithsonian’s fine instruments are for playing, not for looking at”. Kenneth Slowik, artistic director of the Smithsonian Chamber Music Society, is quoted as saying, “It’s our philosophy to preserve these instruments ... but we don’t keep them locked up behind glass.” While many museums do keep their million-dollar instruments out of musicians’ hands, the Smithsonian seems proud of the fact that it brings its treasures out for more than a dozen concerts every year.

While many valuable violins are at least available for viewing in museums, others are held by private

collectors. These, too, may never or seldom be played. Again, there are notable exceptions. For instance, the Vieuxtemps Guarneri, mentioned earlier, was crafted by Guiseppe Guarneri del Gesu in 1741 and bought by an anonymous buyer in 2016 for \$16 million, making it the most expensive violin in the world. However, the owner subsequently [loaned it to Anne Akiko Meyers](#), for her use during her lifetime. In the video below, Anne Akiko Meyers talks about being able to play the instrument while so many others are now in museums.

'Vieuxtemps' Guarneri Del Gesu Returns To The Concert Stage...

Fakes and forensics

Back with the Messiah, an intrinsic part of the violin's history is the fact that it remained hidden away for most of its life. From the time Stradivari built the violin until the time it went on display in the Ashmolean, it was rarely seen in public. Even when donated to the museum, it was not on general display but rather kept in a secure room not open to the public. It wasn't until 2009 that visiting the Messiah was possible except by special appointment, and [not until 2014](#) that it could be observed in a properly lit case for the first time.

This all added to the violin's mystique, but also led to speculation that there was no proof that this was, in fact, a genuine Stradivari violin. The world of rare instruments is full of stories of unscrupulous people trying to pass off fake instruments as the real thing. Similarly, there is constant vigilance and an array of scholarly techniques available to test the authenticity of instruments.

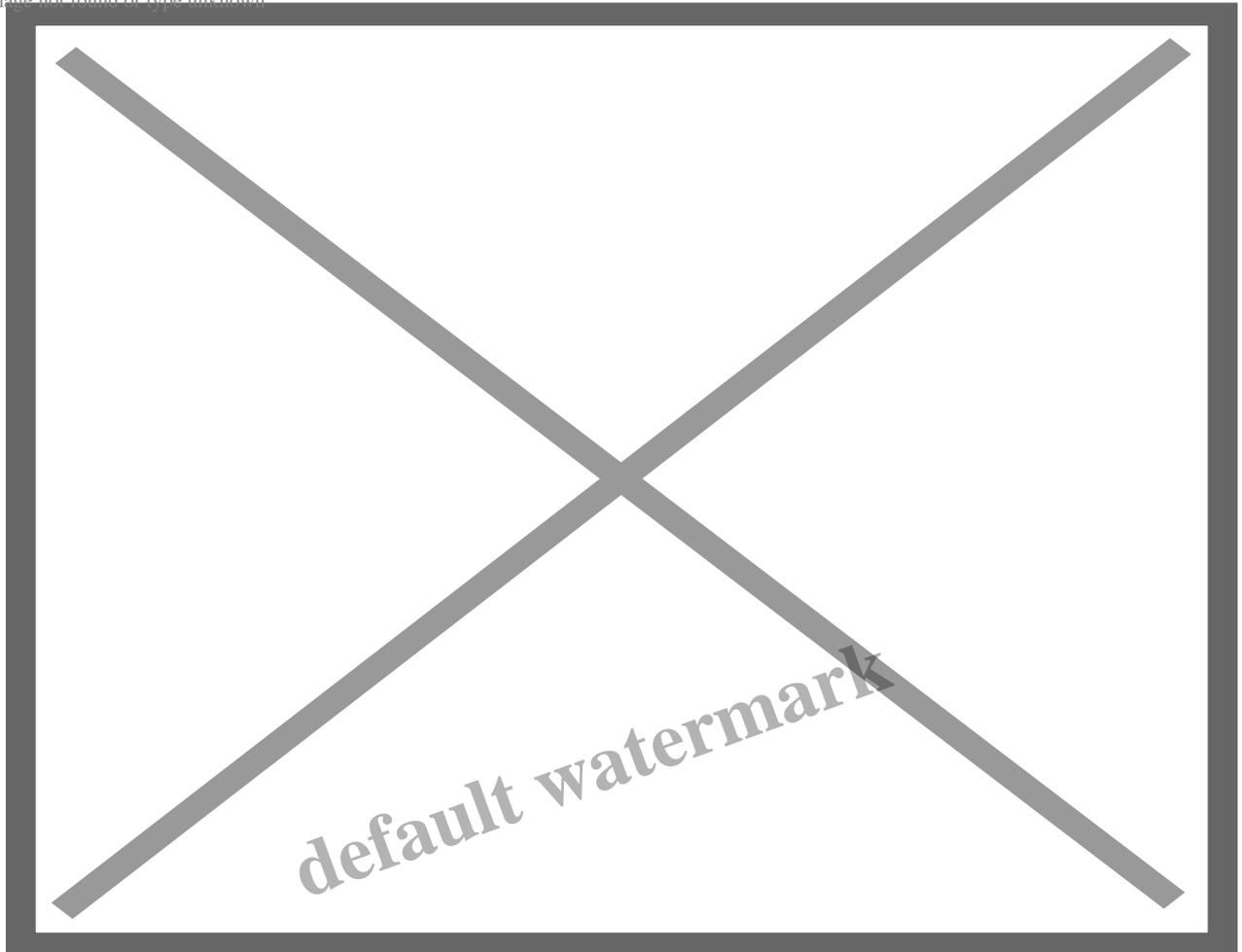
[Questions about the Messiah](#) reached fever pitch in the late 1990s when violin expert and photographer Stewart Pollens gained access to the violin to take high quality photographs of it. While inspecting the violin, Pollens noted several characteristics that were suggestive that the instrument was not what it seemed.

Pollens sent his photographs to a leading [dendrochronologist](#), Dr. Peter Klein at Hamburg University, to study the growth rings in the wood of the violin. The process involves comparing the growth rings on the violin against known sequences with established dates. Klein concluded that the tree used to make the instrument's top was felled after Stradivari's death in 1737. And the obvious conclusion was therefore that this could not be a Stradivari violin.

In 1998 Klein presented his findings at the Violin Society of America Conference, declaring that the Messiah was a fake.

This sent shockwaves through the violin world. The findings were immediately questioned, and in the meantime two other dendrochronologists, John Topham and Derek McCormick in Britain, were undertaking further studies on the Messiah, this time on the violin itself, rather than from photographs. Their findings, published in Journal of Archaeological Science suggested an outer-ring date of 1682, indicating that the tree was cut down before the Messiah was made. They also corroborated their suggested date with cross matches against other Stradivari violins of undisputed authenticity.

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The controversy over the authenticity of the Messiah was well covered in the media.
Source: Violinsandviolinists.com

The arcane world of dendrochronology was suddenly at the center of a fierce debate. Whose results were correct? Was Klein's result accurate, and were his critics simply reflecting a strong stake in maintaining the authenticity of the violin? Although dendrochronology is a well-established technique, there are many factors that can affect the accuracy of findings – as is the case in many other scientific practices. To clear things up, the Violin Society of America commissioned a group of independent scientists to arbitrate between the two results. Their findings clearly indicated that the Topham and McCormick results were accurate. The reputation of the Messiah as a genuine Stradivari was saved.

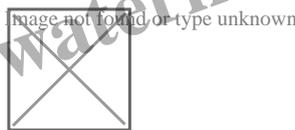
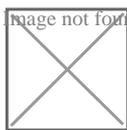
The controversy did not entirely disappear though. [Benjamin Hebbert wrote](#) in 2017: “Over the years accusations rumbled on. The spectre of a world-wide mafia with much to lose if the instrument was fake reared its head”.

Further scientific analyses have been carried out on the instrument, including CT scans, and these all point to the instrument being a genuine Stradivari. This is how science works – evidence is collected in different ways and this builds a more accurate picture than any one technique alone can provide. Like most things, however, evidence does not necessarily diminish the enthusiasm for conspiracy theories amongst those who doubt the official story.

Modern violin making – in the footsteps of the Golden Age

It's obviously wrong to try to dupe a prospective buyer into thinking that a violin is older and more valuable than it actually is. But modern violin making prides itself in using much the same techniques as those used by Stradivari and his Cremonese colleagues. Priceless violins such as the Messiah are used as templates from which modern violins can be crafted. Indeed, Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume, who owned the Messiah in the mid 1800s, made multiple copies of it, and the violin also inspired numerous other violin makers. Benjamin Hebbert suggests that "There are simply millions of violins, good and bad that are derived from the Messiah".

The practice continues to this day. While in Cremona, we had the good fortune to visit a present-day violin maker in her workshop. [Katharina Abbuehl](#) is one of over 160 luthiers working in Cremona, most of whom are graduates of the [International Violinmaking School](#) in Cremona.



It was a joy to watch Katharina demonstrating the various techniques and stages involved in crafting a high-quality hand-made violin. She prides herself in making violins that are modelled on those made in the Golden Age, and her instruments sell for 15,000euros or more.

Katharina and the other violin makers of Cremona are continuing a tradition established over 300 years ago, and making excellent instruments using pretty much the same materials and techniques used by Stradivari. While guitars have evolved dramatically since Stradivari's times, violins have remained remarkably similar. There is apparently a large market for violins that are modelled on those made in the 1600s and 1700s.

Here's Aurelia Macovei playing a violin made by Stefano Trabucchi modelled on a Guarneri Del Gesù violin.

It is just as well that Katharina and her fellow violin makers are producing outstanding violins that can be purchased for far less than your average Stradivari or Guarneri. The supply of these vintage violins is obviously limited and their price-point is well beyond that of most players. Away from the rarified atmosphere of the rare instruments made by the early masters, the craft of making fine violins continues in small workshops in Cremona – and other parts of the world.

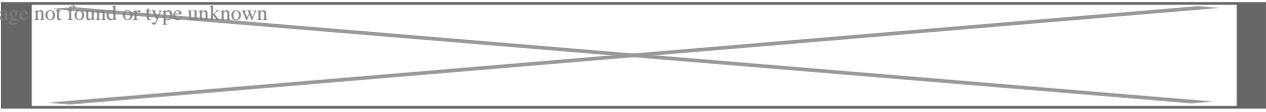
So, while violins such as the Messiah sit in museum cases, the modern violins they have inspired are now in the hands of violinists playing in orchestras and ensembles around the world.

Perhaps the violin in the cage is not such a sad story after all.

Clarissa Bevilacqua plays A.Stradivari "Clisbee" 1669 in the Auditorium of the Violin Museum in Cremona – J.S.Bach, Sonata n.2 – Andante

This post was written while undertaking a Writing Residency at the Rockefeller Bellagio Center. I am deeply grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation for providing me with this opportunity – and especially for keeping the opportunity open despite its initial cancellation due to COVID. As well as providing a wonderful writing environment, the residency allowed me to visit Cremona, which provided the inspiration for this post. I thank my wife Gillian, my fellow residents, and Pilar, Alice and all the Center staff for making the residency such an amazing experience.

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