

9 The 'Viotti' Violin by Antonio Stradivari

36 In June 2003, MLA was asked by HM Revenue & Customs if it would consider, in principle, a proposed offer of an important violin, and advise whether such an instrument was an appropriate object for an offer in lieu. It was also asked to advise how, if the offer was successful, the violin could be allocated in a way that respected both the purpose of the instrument – to make music – and the normal process of allocating items to a museum for display. The AIL Panel advised the Revenue that, in its view, such an offer could be accommodated within the AIL Scheme. As a result, the formal offer was made in November 2003 with a condition that, if accepted, the violin should be allocated to the Royal Academy of Music.

The violin was made in 1709 by Antonio Stradivari (1644–1737) of Cremona, Italy, widely regarded as the finest of all violin makers. Although about 600 of his instruments survive, of which about 540 are violins, very few are in anything like their original condition. Andrea Amati (c.1505–1577) created the classical design of the violin, setting the standard of tone and appearance that remained unequalled until the genius of Stradivari gradually took it to new heights. He steadily perfected his designs and the instruments which he made in the first two decades of the 18th century have always been considered to be the finest of those produced in his long years of craftsmanship.

The violin is known as the 'Viotti' after the Italian composer-virtuoso Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755–1824), who was its most famous owner. After early training in his native Italy, Viotti joined the orchestra of the royal chapel in Turin. In 1780 he began the life of a travelling virtuoso and published his first concerto in 1781. In the following year he performed to great success in Paris and soon entered the employment of Queen Marie Antoinette. He also gave private concerts at the home of the composer Cherubini which regularly featured his latest compositions. As a result of the Revolution he left France and moved to

London where he was very successful and in the 1790s he was the city's foremost violinist. In 1798 he had to leave London on account of his supposed Jacobin sympathies but was able to return in 1801. He was a founder member of the London Philharmonic Society in 1813, and the first violin professor at the Royal Academy of Music was one of his pupils. He died in London in March 1824, leaving behind the Stradivari violin which he had used until his death and a sizable body of compositions, mostly for the violin.

Despite Viotti's regular use of his Stradivari, the instrument is in a remarkable state of preservation. On Viotti's death it passed into French ownership and in the 1850s was considered to be the third most important of all Stradivari's violins. Alfred Hill (1862–1940) of the celebrated Bond Street dealers W E Hill & Sons acquired the Viotti violin through a colleague in Paris in 1897. He considered it, *"one of the handsomest I have ever seen and the figure of the wood and the colour of the varnish are both of the most magnificent description"*. When he later sold it to Baron Knoop, he wrote, *"We have come to the conclusion that the Viotti Strad is the finest type of the great maker's work that we have ever seen"*. In 1928 the violin came into the ownership of the Bruce family.

The expert advisers noted that the importance of the violin lay in its manufacture, condition and history of ownership. Its near pristine condition was due to the fact that it had not been owned or used intensively by a professional player since Viotti's death. It had not suffered any of the major changes or rebuilding that might have compromised significantly its original condition. Most of the Stradivari instruments used by professional musicians today have had so much work carried out on them to keep them up to current performance standards that there was little left that the maker himself would have recognised. Rare uncompromised instruments such as the Viotti had enormous importance as they provided the purest models of Stradivari's



9. The Viotti Stradivari Violin: front, side and back views © The Royal Academy of Music

workmanship which can be studied by today's luthiers (violin makers). It was only by seeing instruments such as the Viotti that musicians, students and luthiers could appreciate Stradivari's remarkable skills. The Viotti was described as a striking example, boldly executed, following a fine design and using the finest materials.

The Panel considered that the instrument met the third criterion, that it was in acceptable, indeed outstanding, condition and that it was fairly valued. The Panel recommended that the offer should be approved. MLA, on behalf of the Secretary of State, accepted this recommendation in May 2005. The offer was completed in July 2005. The acceptance of this offer settled £395,453 of tax. Since the instrument could have settled £2,450,000 of

tax, the intended allocatee, the Royal Academy of Music, had to raise the difference. This required an enormous effort on the part of the Academy which launched a public appeal on BBC2's *The Culture Show*. The National Heritage Memorial Fund, in its Silver Jubilee year, gave £250,000, and a further £1.45m was raised from private donors and the public. The National Art Collections Fund provided a grant of £151,000. This still left a significant gap and the Offerors generously agreed to waive the remaining amount to ensure that the violin would stay in the UK. The violin will now be known as the Viotti Ex-Bruce. The instrument has been allocated to the Royal Academy of Music for display in the York Gate Collection Museum.