

THE 'BETTS' STRAD 1704

Roger Hargrave examines one of Stradivari's finest violins.

Photographs: Stewart Pollens

Research Assistant: Julie Reed

The `Betts' Stradivari was previously illustrated in THE STRAD in 1909 and again in 1937. We are pleased to have the opportunity to illustrate it again, this time in the form of a STRAD poster.

The name Betts crops up again and again in the history of many fine instruments. Betts was a famous (one might say infamous) London firm of dealers and makers who were responsible for importing a large number of Italian works into Britain in the first half of the 19th century. No individual piece, passing through this firm's hands however, was destined to cause as much excitement as the 1704 violin by Antonio Stradivari which now bears their name.

Legend had it that the sum. of one pound was paid for the instrument, that a family row broke out over ownership, and that this row eventually led to the dissolution of the Betts family partnership. In 1852 after the death of Arthur Betts, the violin was in the possession of John Boue, a retired judge who subsequently sold it to J.B. Vuillame. Before the turn of the century the violin was inevitably acquired by Hills of London. The Hill brothers had the following to say about the `Betts' in their book on the Life and Work of Antonio Stradivari.

In 1704 Antonio Stradivari was sixty years old, a time when most men might be thinking of slowing down and taking life easier. Stradivari, however, was on the threshold of his maturity as a maker and there are those who would maintain that the `Betts' violin marks the true beginning of his golden period. Quite apart from the obvious innovative qualities of the

year in question (1704), the `Betts' itself is genuinely an overwhelmingly attractive violin; nothing was spared in its concept, its construction or the materials from which it was fashioned. The straight-grained, two piece belly is of fine growth becoming very slightly wider in the flanks. It is as attractive a piece of wood as one could wish for with a suggestion of hazel in places. As would be expected it is cut perfectly on the quarter. Under the tailpiece a small piece has been inserted which is almost certainly original. Such tiny lozenge shaped strips were often

used by classical makers probably to fill in resin pockets which may not have become evident until the work was well on the way.

The quarter sawn backwood, also of two pieces has strong, deeply curling flames sloping upwards from the centre joint. Like the belly it is imported wood. The ribs may well have been cut from the back, which

they closely resemble. Here the flame has a slight slope running upwards from left to right off the back. As is usual for Stradivari the figure on the ribs flows in the same direction all around the instrument. The bottom rib is of one piece and has a small knife cut marking the centre line of the ribs against the back. I have seen this tiny, almost invisible knife cut on several Stradivaris which still retain their one piece bottom rib.

Fewer Stradivaris now retain this one-piece bottom rib. They have often been cut through in order to shorten the ribs where plate shrinkage has caused

The `Betts' violin, another masterpiece made in 1704 is a notable and wonderfully preserved instrument, standing out from the violins made in the adjoining years... The distinguishing features of the tone are the mel-low brilliancy of the quality and the facile articulation. From the year of the `Betts' it is immediately evident that Stradivari had arrived at the principles of tonal or acoustical construction for his violins which were to serve him until the end of his career.

the overhangs to become too small. The top rib of the Betts was also made up from one piece before being cut to accept the modern neck.

The wood of the head is, if anything, of an even finer growth than either the back or the ribs, whereas the flame, though slightly shallower, matches them extremely well. The head of the wood is cut exactly on the quarter.

At about this time Stradivari's heads were becoming imposing and slightly heavier in character and in this respect respect the 'Betts' is quite typical of the period. It has been suggested that all Stradivari heads cut after about 1700 were the work of one of Antonio's sons. Perhaps there is some truth in this, but it is also slightly irrelevant in anything except an academic way. After all, his sons must have been doing something before Antonio died in his nineties. We must beware of thinking that the sons' work had always been similar to that which they produced in the 1730s and 40s. By this time they too were old men.

Seen from the side, particularly the right hand side, the scroll itself has a slightly forward tilting oval appearance and the front of the scroll where it faces the pegbox also has distinct flatness. It is almost as if the cutting of the flute or perhaps some correction of the chamfer has altered the projected curves. These features are by no means unique to the 'Betts' however, and they can be seen on most Strad scrolls until the end of the dynasty.

The volutes around the side of the scroll are cut very cleanly and remain quite shallow deepening only slightly towards the eye in the final turn. This shallow cut to the volutes is in sharp contrast to most of his Cremonese colleagues who generally worked the volutes quite deeply. In some cases, the volutes were worked almost as if the makers were trying to break through to the other side. Bergonzi is a good example of this. The effect was for the scroll to lose strength. In Stradivari's scrolls the converse is the case and the scrolls, particularly after 1700, have a bold strong feel about them.

On the left hand side of the 'Betts' scroll the eye finishes with a string whereas on the right hand side it finishes with a tiny flat cut similar to that of the Guarneri school. This flat cut is not generally a feature of Stradivari.

As readers of these articles will have come to expect, there are traces of the gouge on the vertical surfaces of the turns.

Before leaving the sides of the head it is worth pointing out that the head and pegbox belong together, like an uncurling leaf of a fern belongs to its stem. There is no break in the flow at the throat; modern copies often fail to capture this essential quality.

When viewed from the front, back and top, the symmetry of the scroll is exceptional, but not stiff. Again the feeling is one of boldness and strength. Although the back of the pegbox seems perhaps slightly narrower than some later scrolls, gone is the feminine delicacy of the Amatis, here instead is the youthful strength of early manhood. The pegbox itself bears all the hallmarks of Stradivari. It is deep, wide and cleanly cut, and like a soundly designed building, the walls are strong but not too heavy. At the end of the box under the head the top edge is very sharply defined. This feature is often chipped and softened on less pristine works.

The head, though cut as Stradivari only knew how to cut it, lacks something, there is a squareness in the design, the fluting is wanting in breadth, the throat is hesitantly cut, in a word it does not rise to the occasion.

The back of the pegbox and the head are finished with sharply defined flutings in the true baroque style. The hollowing of the flutings is characterised by their flat bottomed curves which become rounder in form as they run up the top of the head over the front and down into the throat. The work in this restricted area around the throat shows an impressive ability in the use of tools. In several places along the spine, between the flutes, the pin holes from the marking out process =are still clearly visible. The whole head is set off rather smartly by a strong chamfer carefully picked out in black.

This then is the head, and unless something has been altered here (which I very much doubt) I fail to understand the comments upon the 'Betts' scroll made by the Hill brothers in 1902.

It almost seems as if, in the year of the 'Betts' violin, exactly 20 years after the death of Nicolo Amati, Antonio paid one last tribute to the finest of Amati styling by combining it with the maturing grandeur of his own work. The outline of the 'Betts', with its elegant long corners and the corresponding long purfling mitres, so reminiscent of the Amatis, was never repeated in the years which followed. The ef-

fect which this combination creates is that of a cultured beauty, with a forceful personality and a mature temperament. Not unlike my wife, in fact.

The edgework is very well preserved, a feature which sadly can be compared with only a few very rare examples today. Beautifully modelled throughout, the whole edgework has been carefully finished, to the point where the usual knife cut chamfer on the underside is barely visible. As might be expected, the overhangs of the edges are extremely even; however, because of the extra long corners, they remain even to the ends of the ribs not only in the upper and lower bouts but also in the centre bouts. Normally this overhang increases in width in the centre bouts as it approaches the corners, especially the heavier corners of the later periods.

Like the 'Salabue' Stradivari of 1716 more commonly known as the 'Messia', it is obvious that the highest point of the edge was originally very close to the outline. I would estimate this to be at least two thirds of the distance between the outer black of the purfling and the outline itself; something we might now describe as 'French style'. However, this is because those 19th century French makers were taking their lead from such pristine works by Stradivari.

The purfling blacks are intense and shiny with all the appearance of ebony although it is probably a stained wood (often described as pear but as far as I know it has never been analysed). The whites have the usual fine longitudinal flecks which we associate with most Cremonese instruments. There is some evidence of black filler in the long mitres but this does not detract from the overall quality of the purfling which has been elegantly fashioned throughout. It may have been that the Cremonese makers used 'black filler' as a matter of course. I have experimented with running black filler into the bottom of the channel before inserting the purfling strips. The effect is three fold. Firstly, it glues the purfling firmly in place. Secondly, it squeezes up the sides and around the mitres, filling any small gaps which might have occurred and finally it fills the uneven bottom of the channel, strengthening it and offering less chance for a purfling buzz to develop.

The channels or flutings of the edgework are well defined with the purfling for the most part lying at the deepest point. On the back by the button the purfling is jointed on the centre line with a scarffed joint. Also here the locating pin protrudes slightly outside the line of the purfling. In contrast, at the bottom it protrudes on the inside, which is more usually the

case.

From the purfling channel the archings rise quickly, to become full, but not overhigh. There is a flatness, which is not quite a scoop in the upper and lower bouts. This is more pronounced on the belly but there is no weakness there. The archings have a strong appearance. A lasting impression is made by the excellent state of the preservation of the archings. With the exception of a slight depression to the lower soundhole wing on the right hand side the harmonious proportions show little sign of distortion. The flutings of the soundhole wings are well defined but not extreme. They continue up the sides of the soundholes forming a crisp edge to the body of the holes. A slight 'eyebrow' effect occurs where the cross arch blends with the flutings above the soundholes. This eyebrow effect was often exaggerated by French copyists of Stradivari.

The soundholes are upright and strong in appearance but with no sign of stiffness. Like the outline they balance each other almost exactly in both position and shape. Such mathematical harmony is rare even for Stradivari. The exceptionally high calibre of the work on this violin from top to bottom is epitomised in the work of the soundholes. They are cut in the usual Cremonese style. The top and bottom holes are cleanly drilled circles, with the bodies of the holes cut at right angles to the arching. Using a mirror it is possible to see the compass points on the inside tips of the wings on the left hand soundhole. Traces of the arcs of the compass which marked the nick position were also clearly visible. (For further details on this

feature see Sacconi and the December 1985 STRAD poster.. The remaining inside work is clean and strong in appearance. The blocks and linings are of the usual white wood which both Sacconi and the Hill brothers describe as willow. The label is clean and easily read. Only the figure 1 of the date is printed, the other figures 704 are all written. Stradivari's separate round seal has been printed over the label with a slightly darker ink.

With the exception of those tool marks on the head, there is nothing to distract us from the sculptural elegance of the work nor the brilliant varnish which heightens its grandeur. Although relatively thin, the varnish is intensely coloured. It is present in large amounts and it has a fine crachleur which has mercifully not been polished out. Generally of a pure orange colour the varnish has a pinkish orangey hue on the belly, this is difficult to describe but it is not in any way unpleasant. Where the varnish has been worn away the glowing golden ground has remained for the most part relatively clean. Only where the ground itself has been broken down has the dirt entered the pores of the wood.

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Measurements				
(in millimetres)				
			Back	Belly
Length (over arch)			356	354
Upper bouts			168.5	168
Middle bouts			112	112
Lower bouts			208	208
Edge Thickness				
	Comers (back)		4.5	4
	Centre		4	3.75
	Bouts		3.75-4	3.25
Overhang (back)				
	Centre bouts			3-3,25
	Top and bottom bouts			2,5
Rib heights				
			Left	Right
	Neck root		29.95	29,5
	Upper comer		32	31.75
	Lower comer		31.75	31,5
	End pin		31	31
Purfling				
				3.75-4
	Total width			1,5
	Filled area between purfling			0.75
	(excluding purfling blacks)			
Button				
		Height	Width	Thickness
	(from outside of purfling)	16	18.75	4*
- *compass point lies exactly 7mm from purfling				

