

One woman's quest to find a quartet of Stradivaris in the 1930s was the origin of the Library of Congress's outstanding Cremonese collection.

PHILIP KASS reports

# NATIONAL TREASURE

A common complaint among musicians has been that great instruments are too often put into museums, where they live behind glass plates and are never heard again; both musicians and audiences are thus deprived of their tonal glories. One can never bring this charge against the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and its extraordinary ensemble of Stradivaris. In fact Gertrude Clarke Whittall, its donor, was motivated by exactly that sentiment, and the library has since become an ideal home for the instruments in its care, giving generations of Americans the experience of their multifaceted beauty through 70 years of exhibitions, broadcasts, recitals and recordings.

The inspiration for the gift arose quite early, in 1908, when the Flonzaley Quartet, on a tour of the US, performed a recital in Whittall's salon, thus sparking in her a lifelong love of chamber music. A woman of vision and generosity, Whittall was also remarkably strong-minded; she knew what she wanted to do, and how she wanted to do it. She had originally planned to establish an ensemble in Boston that would perform entirely on Stradivaris, but in late 1935 she moved to Washington, promptly becoming a regular at the Library of Congress recitals, and most likely the character and nature of the library suggested her course of action.

The donation of the Stradivaris was only the largest and most public contribution of Whittall, a woman who gave lifelong support to music. Among those who had benefited from her patronage in Massachusetts was a young concert violinist named Louis Krasner, who rose to international prominence as one of the leading soloists of his day, and who commissioned, among other works, the Berg Violin Concerto. Krasner had also developed an eye for fine instruments and a trail of contacts around Europe

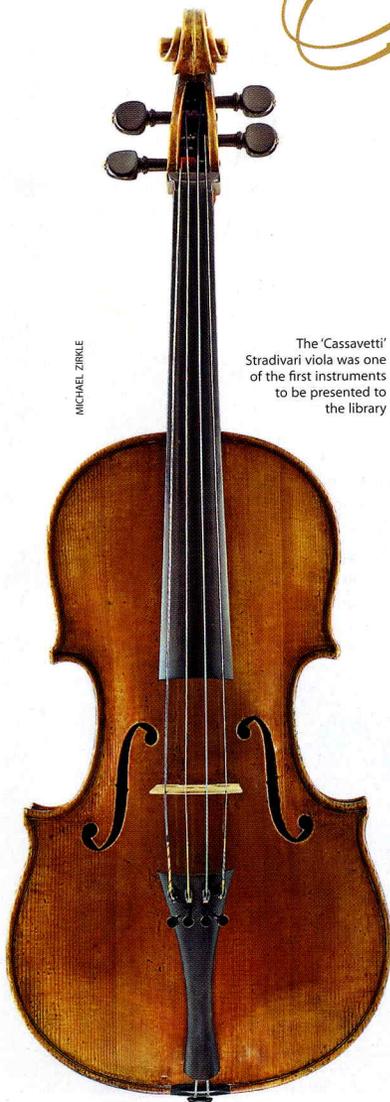


COURTESY JOHN MONTGOMERY

Gertrude Clarke Whittall: woman of vision

and the US, and so was a good associate in Whittall's search for fine Stradivaris. She commissioned him to assemble the ensemble at the end of 1932; the collection was complete by mid-1934.

The first contact was from close to home. John T. Roberts was a collector in Hartford, Connecticut, who had acquired some of the finest instruments through Wurlitzer in New York. He sold Whittall the 'Betts' violin and the 'Cassavetti' viola. From the collector Nathan Posner of Brooklyn, who owned and imported to the US many of the finest Stradivaris, came the 'Castelbarco' and 'Ward' violins. Meanwhile, in December 1933 Krasner found the 'Castelbarco' cello at Hills in London. He acquired it, and had it shipped to Wurlitzer, where it was transferred to Whittall. In July 1934 the Hills updated their records to confirm Whittall's ownership. This was probably a surprise



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The 'Cassavetti' Stradivari viola was one of the first instruments to be presented to the library

to them; the buyer's intentions were kept secret until the end.

This ensemble, minus the 'Ward' violin but accompanied by four Tourte bows, was presented to the Library of Congress in December 1935 and received its library debut as a concert ensemble the following January. The 'Ward' and an additional Tourte followed in 1937.

## It was Whittall's intent that the finest artists worldwide would be invited to perform at the library on these instruments

Whittall's gift left nothing to chance. The instruments were to be kept at all times within the walls of the library except under very prescribed circumstances such as necessary repairs or restoration. They were to be kept in top playing order and used regularly in concerts in the Coolidge Auditorium. She expanded the number of library concerts open to the public, financed their broadcast on the radio and built a pavilion next to the Coolidge Auditorium for the safe display of the instruments. Finally, it was her intent that the finest artists worldwide would be invited to perform at the library on these instruments.

Since Whittall's gift the collection has grown further, with some exceptional donations. The first was the addition of a fine Nicolò Amati of 1654, a gift from the widow of its owner, Robert Somers Brookings. A noted economist and founder of the Brookings Institution, he had originally wanted to become a violinist and went to Vienna to study under Joachim. The great virtuoso recognised that his protégé's talents lay elsewhere and persuaded him to return home with a fine violin as a souvenir. His widow donated it in 1938, 'for useful service to the library'. In 1952 the collection was joined by Kreisler's magnificent Guarneri 'del Gesù', along with his papers, manuscripts and one of his Hill fleur-de-lis bows. In 1977 the library received on indefinite loan the 'Tuscan-Medici' Stradivari viola, the property of the Tuscan Foundation.

It had belonged to Cameron Baird, whose husband was chairman of the music department at the State University of New York, Buffalo. The Budapest Quartet had been quartet-in-residence at the library from 1938 to 1962, and during their subsequent residency at the university they had occasionally borrowed the viola for performances.

After decades of use, all stringed instruments eventually require some measure of restoration, even those in the condition of the library's Stradivaris. Glues ooze and lose their reliability, neck angles gradually fall under constant tension, and polishes and retouching, which are often not entirely colourfast, will oxidise and discolour. Furthermore, restoration techniques today are far more sophisticated than those used in the 1930s. After 70 years the library's instruments had reached that stage, and so a thorough refreshing of all of them was necessary. Over the years, the maintenance of the collection has been entrusted to Albert Moglie and later to René Morel. Recently, John Montgomery of Raleigh, North Carolina, was assigned the task of giving each instrument its needed refreshment. That task was completed in spring of this year, and so visitors to the library today can see these marvellous instruments looking, if anything, very much better than they would have when they arrived in its halls in 1935.

Of the library's instruments, the one that always draws the most attention is the 'Betts' Stradivari (1704). This is partly for its exquisite preservation and partly for its colourful history. Its first documented owner was Arthur Betts, the noted London dealer, or perhaps more accurately the anonymous individual who brought it into his shop in the 1820s and offered it for a guinea. Betts leapt at the offer but then refused to sell it. His family sold it after his

The 'Betts' violin is a definitive example from the beginning of Stradivari's golden period



death and it eventually came into Vuillaume's hands. Later it belonged to the Duc de Camposelice, as part of two Stradivari quartets financed by his wife, the heiress of the Singer sewing machine fortune. In 1923, Jay C. Freeman of Wurlitzer managed to get it from its then owner, R.D. Waddell of Glasgow, and sold it to John T. Roberts, from whom Whittall acquired it.

The 'Betts' violin remains today a definitive and highly characteristic example from the beginning of Stradivari's golden period. Most striking are the long corners and purfling joints and crisply defined edging, still marvellously intact after hundreds of years and multiple owners. What also strikes the viewer is the curiously lopsided placement of the f-holes, like the asymmetry of human eyes, which gives its visage an almost human character. It is also still plentifully covered with Stradivari's varnish of the period, sparkling like a luscious liquid gold.

Although the 'Betts' might capture our attention, the other two Stradivari violins >



Kreisler's magnificent 'del Gesù'

## What strikes the viewer is the curiously lopsided placement of the f-holes, which gives its visage an almost human character

possess charms of equal if more subtle quality. The 'Castelbarco' of 1699 is one of the last and most perfectly preserved of Stradivari's long-form instruments, built on a pattern both longer and narrower than any he had used before or was to use afterwards. The 'Ward' of 1700 is in exquisite condition and represents Stradivari's relentless experimentation as he sought a different approach from his long form, an approach that was to evolve into that used for the 'Betts'.

There are but twelve Stradivari violas known to us today, so it is a particular pleasure to have two of the finest together in the collection. The 'Cassavetti' is a late work, dating from 1727, when Stradivari was 83. Evidence of his ageing hand can be found everywhere on this instrument – in its stiffer work and less symmetrical composition, even in the quirky double-exposure of Stradivari's stamp on the label, applied by hand only after the label had been inserted in the instrument. As with the 'Betts', the f-holes are decidedly irregular, the treble f-hole being visibly higher than the bass f-hole. The 'Tuscan-Medici', on the other hand, was made almost 40 years earlier, in 1690, as part of the

ensemble made for the Medici family. It represents the mature Stradivari's work from the beginning of his long period. Even so, both instruments were created on the same mould, the CV form, with slight variations between their measurements reflective of the fuller barrel-shaped arching of the earlier years.

Curiously, both instruments arrived in the US in connections with the world of American retail sales. The 'Cassavetti' was acquired from Hart in 1928 by Rodman Wanamaker, scion of the John Wanamaker department store in Philadelphia, who planned to use it in a chamber orchestra of classic Italian instruments. In a plan not entirely

throughout his life. On his death it was returned to the Fabbri family, which was by then partly American through marriage, and in the 1920s it was stored in their New York home. By 1933 it had made its way to Hills, where Krasner found it and acquired it for Whittall. Adding it to the collection reunited two of the instruments that had made up the Conte's quartet, the other being the violin of 1699.

Seventeenth-century Stradivari cellos in uncut dimensions are rare, and the 'Castelbarco' is one of just three ▶

dissimilar to Whittall's, this ensemble would perform in a special concert hall in the department store's main Philadelphia office and would broadcast from an on-site radio studio built for the purpose. Wanamaker's untimely death in 1929 put paid to the scheme, and his heirs sold the entire collection to Wurlitzer. Several years earlier, Wurlitzer had acquired the 'Tuscan-Medici' viola in England and had sold it to Herbert N. Straus, an amateur chamber musician, whose family empire, Macy's department store in New York City, was Wanamaker's greatest rival. It is also interesting that these two were the first and second, and for many years the only, Stradivari violas to reach the US.

The 'Castelbarco' cello (1697) also has a New York connection. Conte Cesare Castelbarco's quartet had been sold to Vuillaume in 1862 and subsequently separated. Vuillaume sold the cello to Egidio Fabbri, related by marriage to the Marchese de Piccolellis, author of the important early reference work *Liutai antichi e moderni* (1885). The Marchese's son was a cellist, a pupil of Servais, and he used the instrument



The 'Castelbarco' Stradivari cello: one of the three of his cellos from the 17th century to survive intact

from those years to have survived intact. It has retained its original linen rib-linings, which is perhaps why they remain in such a clean state today. The back and sides are of willow or poplar – the wood here has so far defied exact identification. The scroll is carved from pearwood, a stable and reliable wood for such purposes.

The Amati and Guarneri 'del Gesù' arrived under different terms (for example they can be removed from the library for concerts and exhibitions), but they

## Visitors today can see these marvellous instruments looking better than they would have in 1935

are cared for in the same manner as the other instruments. All of them can be examined, but only under strict staff supervision. They can also be used in concerts by visiting ensembles, although most groups respect the tradition of performing entirely on Stradivaris and preserve that symmetry.

The Amati is a lovely example and reflects Nicolò's mature style. Andrea Guarneri was still in the Amati workshop at the time of making, but this work shows strongly the master's craft.

The 'del Gesù' bears a label of 1733 but is generally held to be a work of the 1730 period; until recently, its virtual twin, Szymon Goldberg's 'Baron Vitta' Guarneri 'del Gesù', could be seen across town at the Smithsonian.

Kreisler acquired the Library of Congress instrument in 1926 and used it throughout the 1930s. It remains one of only two 'del Gesù' violins in American museum collections, the other being Heifetz's 'David' in San Francisco, and, since the loan of that instrument for performances, the only one on public display.

All these treasures are usually on display in the Whittall Pavilion, which is included on all guided tours of the library. They certainly merit a visit from any serious lover of the violin. ■

*For further information visit [www.loc.gov/rr/perform/concert](http://www.loc.gov/rr/perform/concert). Please confirm dates with the venue before booking.*

The 'Castelbarco' violin was built on a longer and narrower pattern than Stradivari had used before



### FURTHER LISTENING AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The Library of Congress no longer has an official quartet-in-residence. However, quartets due to perform there – many using the Whittall ensemble of instruments – in the coming months include:

>> Cassatt Quartet  
3 November 2006

>> Ebène Quartet  
4 November 2006

>> Steven Isserlis and Friends  
15 December 2006

>> Enso Quartet  
15 December 2006  
Stradivari anniversary concert, including a pre-concert presentation on Stradivari's cellos

>> Robert Mann and Friends  
16 February 2007

>> Venice Baroque Orchestra  
21 February 2007

>> Artis Quartet Vienna  
28 February 2007

>> Aron Quartet  
2 March 2007

>> Camerata Ireland  
23 March 2007

>> Jerusalem Quartet  
11 April 2007

>> Euclid and Degas quartets  
20 April 2007  
Joint recital including an octet specially written for them by Armando Bayolo

>> American Chamber Players  
4 May 2007

>> Borromeo Quartet  
18 May 2007

