

# Strumenti

*Fine Stringed Instruments & Bows*

**Geoffrey M. Maingart,**  
*Founder and Director of Strumenti*



Strumenti, originally of Belgium was created primarily as a string instrument brokerage and a concert management service.

For several years, Strumenti successfully provided one of the finest concert series in Antwerp called Het Nieuwe Salon.

Geoffrey M. Maingart is not only a fine concert violinist but also a master luthier since 1980 and an experienced broker of fine rare stringed instruments.

Geoffrey Maingart learned his craft from renowned luthiers and experts, including Adolph Primavera and Jacques Francais. His instruments are now played in major orchestras in the United States and in Europe. Fine musicians and professors, including Eugene Fodor, have endorsed them.

Mr. Maingart has an extensive educational background having studied with renowned violinists Charles Castleman, Aaron Rosand and Eliot Chapo.

Truly a gifted performer, he has achieved such honorable positions as serving as Concertmaster of the Royal Flemish Opera in Belgium as well as Concertmaster the White House Orchestra under Presidents Nixon and Ford.

Additionally, he was the founding member and first violinist of the renowned Belgian chamber music ensemble, the Lydian Chamber Players.

His artistic accolades include performances at such widely acclaimed music festivals as the Colorado Music Festival, the Eastern Music Festival in North Carolina, the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts, the Festival of Flanders in Belgium and the Puccini Festival in Italy.

Whether it is an original violin made by Geoffrey or a certified old Italian or modern violin, our clients are always satisfied.



***"With over 20 years of experience,  
and excellence in service,  
Strumenti has sold fine vintage  
Instruments worldwide!"***

*Strumenti*

**Strumenti International - Geoffrey Maingart - President**  
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# *Strumenti International*

## *Investing in Fine Rare Instruments by Jacques Francais*

*Several international business organizations and private foundations have undertaken the purchase of rare violins as a matter of important investment strategy —  
These instruments truly non-renewable resource increase in value from year to year  
— Jacques Francais Rare Violins*

One of the most perfect acoustical instruments to be found — the Cremonese violin — produces a magnificent expression so beautiful, it's tone is said to rival that of its model — the human voice.

The works of such masters as Antonio Stradivari, Andrea Guarneri and their mentor, Nicolo Amati, have left a legacy of glorious sound that has made their stringed instruments among the most treasured objects of the last three centuries.

Rarely are these instruments available through ordinary channels. A select cadre of luthiers, dealers and brokers around the world deals with the dwindling trove of the Cremonese school pieces.

Jacques Francais, one of the preeminent luthiers of our era, is part of this small group. He follows in the great tradition of his father — and grandfathers — before him. The family's reputation spans nearly a century and a half.

Records kept by Jacques Francais of New York show that the asset value of instruments made by Stradivari, Amati, Guarneri, etc al, has arisen at a rate in excess of 20% annually.

Banks in Germany and public and private institutions in Japan, for example, maintain collections of fine violins which they make available to talented groups and individuals performing around the world. This identified sponsorship achieves positive exposure on a unique level.

There are already in place a variety of means for the proper selection and administration of performers that might utilize such instruments. The owner/sponsor need not become involved in such details — unless they choose to do so.

In addition to the increase of an asset base, acquisition of rare instruments identifies the chief executive or other officer authorizing such action as a true "patron of the arts"

It is a simple case of supply and demand — there are not enough of these glorious 18th century masterpieces to go around. Growing interest in European classical music. In Asia, as well; as the dramatic increase worldwide in the number of young artists anxious to demonstrate their skills, make ownership of rare violins a distinction that cannot be equaled.

Acquisition can be undertaken in a variety of ways, structured to the special circumstances of the purchaser. Once owned, they may be held for a period of time, increasing rapidly in value, then sold or donated to a non-profit entity — using the means that best suits the owner's financial objectives. (N.B. Recent changes in the US tax code make such procedures extremely advantageous.)

As the 21st century races toward us, the need for global recognition becomes more critical, especially in business. The name "Stradivari" has become synonymous with the highest level of protection. Ownership (or, if you will, "stewardship") of such masterfully crafted works of art can reap enormous benefits.

## *Appreciation of Value:*

### *Instruments sold twice by Jacques Francois Rare Violins*

Stradivarius Violin, dated 1723 - "The Spanish"  
Sold to Itzhak Perlman in 1968 for \$55,000  
Resold to Chen of Hong Kong in 1981 for \$450,000

Stradivarius Violin, dated 1726 - "The Marquis de Ville Franche"  
Sold to Steven Elliot in 1969 for \$35,000  
Resold to Robert Mann in new York for \$800,000

Stradivarius Violin, dated 1690 - "The Theodore"  
Sold to Jeannette Medina in 1967 for \$18,000  
Resold in Boston in 1991 for \$550,000

Stradivarius Violin, dated 1720 - "The Red Mendelssohn"  
Sold to Mr. Smith of Cincinnati in 1956 for \$35,000  
Resold at Christie's in 1990 for \$1,700,000 plus 10%

Stradivarius Cello, dated 1712 - "The Davidoff"  
Sold by Rembert Wurlitzer to Jacqueline Dupres of London in 1961 for \$75,000  
Resold to the French Foundation in Paris in 1989 for \$2,200,000  
Currently on loan to Yo Yo Ma

Stradivarius Cello, dated 1690 - "The Cholmondeley"  
Sold to Cho Ming Sing of Hong Kong in 1968 for \$50,000  
Resold to Sotheby's to Martin Lovett of London in 1988 for \$1,000,000  
Resold in Tokyo in 1991 for \$2,500,000

Dominicus Montagnana Cello  
Sold to Peter Schenkman of Toronto in 1971 for \$50,000  
Resold to Martin Lovett of London in 1991 for \$760,000

Lorenzo Guadagnini Violin dated 1747  
Sold to Guy Lumia of New York in 1969 for \$20,000  
Resold to Anne Meyer of New York in 1989 for \$250,000

# Stradivari. *The most sought after name in the violin world*

*From the desk of Florian Leonhard*



Stradivari is the most sought after name in the violin world. The demand is much higher than the supply, and therefore prices do not stop rising.

As with many things there are “vintages that are more sought after than others.” In the case of Antonio Stradivari, the most sought after violins are the ones from the golden period (the name speaks for itself), which started in 1700 and faded out after 1720.

Stradivari’s work is divided into four different periods. The earliest period is the so-called Amatiisee, the one to follow is the *long pattern*, then the *golden period* referred above (1700-1722) and finally the *late period*. Stradivari lived a very long life and at the age of 76 was still an exceptionally strong maker. In his early 70’s he built his best violins, with the year 1716 being the *golden middle*. Of his achievements. In that period he found the “golden middle” of everything concerning a good sounding violin — perfect proportions, a very well executed arching (neither too Amati like pigeon breasted nor too high, nor too full), a good amount of precision and attention to detail, high quality varnish and choice of wood.

In view of the above, Stradivari violins from the golden period are the most sought after violins and as a result the most valuable.

The value of a fine example of a Antonio Stradivari violin (excluding composite and highly damaged instruments) presently range from \$1,800,000—\$7,000,000.

Composite violins, i.e. those which have parts of different periods by the same maker or different parts from different makers, or those



those which are damaged or do not have the conservation and sound qualities required by players, are sold on the market for a lower price and cannot be compared to a fine Stradivari.

Some of the prices recently achieved by Stradivarius violins on the market:

-Composite Stradivari called “The Barrerre”

Despite the fact that it has a composite, i.e. it has a table from a different period which had to altered to fit, it was sold for \$2,000,000

- 2 Stradivarius violins from the late period 1733 are being sold for \$4,000,000 each.

Certainly every example is preserved differently and therefore is valued differently taking all aspects—period, model size, preservation of arching, all over condition, patches on back or table, visual beauty, choice of wood and last but not least sound (brilliance, depth, projection, etc.) into account.

*Mr. Leonhard of Florian Leonhard Fine Violins of London, is a well respected restorer and expert consultant of fine rare stringed instruments*



# STAR TRIBUNE

Minneapolis, - St. Paul MN

March 4, 2003

*Excerpts from.....*

## ***“A Violin Bargain, Strings Attached”***

by Gwendolyn Freed



The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra closed a sweetheart deal on Valentine’s Day, paying philanthropist, Herbert Axelrod and his wife, Evelyn, 18 million in cash and notes for a rare antique Italian stringed instruments appraised at nearly 50 million. Coveted by collectors and soloists for their storied provenance and lustrous sound, the Axelrod violins, violas and cellos are expected to boost dramatically the orchestra’s artistic profile in the global music community.

According to Dr. Axelrod, orchestras on both sides of the Atlantic, including the New York Philharmonic, had offered to purchase the collection if the New Jersey deal fell through. So the New Jersey Symphony acted, despite the fact that it is already straining under a \$1 million deficit and reeling from news that Gov. James McGreevey has proposed eliminating \$21.7 million in state arts and cultural funding, including \$1.4 million that the orchestra had counted on for the coming fiscal year. And ticket sales are a major challenge these days, as the organization struggles to build to build up its subscription base to pre-9/11 levels. “This is the kickoff of a major fund-raising campaign,” said Mr. Tamburri. The total goal is \$50 million in five years, to pay back the instrument loans and beef up the orchestra’s endowment, annual fund and working capital. “So far, we’ve already had \$2 million in recent pledges.”

Reached recently at his home in Deal, N.J., Dr. Axelrod was feeling somewhat wistful. “Parting is such sweet sorrow,” he said, recalling the decades he spent amassing his peerless collection of 24 violins, two violas and four cellos, by such makers as Antonio Stradivari, Nicolo Amati, and Guarneri del Gesu. “It’s like when your daughter grows up and gets married and you are happy. Then the next day she and husband go live across the country and you’re all alone.”

Dr. Axelrod has thought up a plan for raising the rest of the money to pay off the loan: “The orchestra could name the instruments after the donors who helped pay for them....There might well be tax advantages, besides the gratification of helping an orchestra be unique in the world.” Indeed, said Mr. Tamburri, “naming opportunities will be a part of the fund-raising campaign.”

The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra is in the midst of a music director search that should go better now that it has these extraordinary instruments in hand. “Every conductor who comes here talks about these violins,” said Mr. Tamburri, and

Dr. Axelrod notes that “more than one maestro has agreed to lead the orchestra, providing they have the 30 instruments,” said Dr. Axelrod. The 65 year old Estonian Neeme Jarvi, music director of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, is rumored to be among them.

In the long run, the orchestra will probably not regret snagging the instruments at Dr. Axelrod’s fire-sale price. **“The best investments I ever made were in violins,” said Dr. Axelrod. “Strads I bought 20 years ago for \$100,000 are now worth over \$2 million each. Not a single violin from my collection of 50 instruments has ever gone down in value.... My cost for the New Jersey Symphony instruments was \$29 million. They were appraised in 2002 at \$49.5 million.”**

Referring to his own past practice. He noted that “violins are also a good investment because they can be loaned to great players for short periods of time, in exchange for which the famous players will give free concerts for the charity of the investor’s choice.”

Dr. Axelrod, a publisher, ichthyologist and amateur musician, has lent violins to numerous soloists, including Schlomo Mintz, Pamela Frank and Leila Josefowicz. He’s donated to the Smithsonian four string quartets by such craftsmen as Stradivari and Amati, 19th-century French maker J.B. Vuillaume and modern New Jersey maker Sergio Peresson. As well as nearly a dozen rare bows and a piano once owned by Queen Victoria.

Dr. Axelrod said he also plans to donate to the Smithsonian seven instruments currently on loan there: a quartet by 17th-century Austrian maker Jacob Stainer, a violin by Guarneri del Gesu and two famous decorated Stradivarius violins: the “Hellier” and the “Sunrise”.

Meanwhile, in Newark, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra is weighing the costs of its purchase against the benefits. Mr. Tamburri said of the Valentine’s Day deal: “Even in these times, we feel this move is a bold and optimistic statement for the arts.” No doubt, said Mr. Koblar of the orchestra board, “we’d be kicking ourselves mercilessly if we hadn’t been able to do this.”

- Ms. Freed is a staff arts writer for the Star Tribune newspaper in Minneapolis. This is her second article on the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra’s efforts to acquire Dr. Axelrod’s stringed instruments.

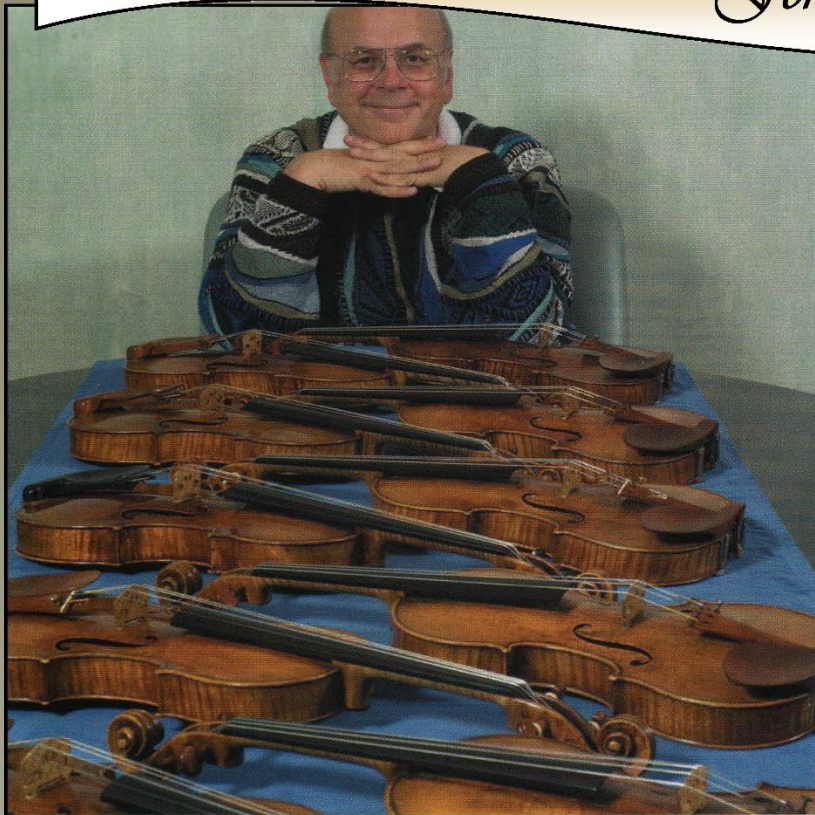


## Personal Treasures : Collector David Fulton's Fortune in Violins

**Strad Magazine**  
November 2002

If David Fulton's house was burning down, it wouldn't be Isaac Stern's prized 'Panette' 'del Gesù' violin that he would grab as he headed for the door. Nor, indeed, the 'Lord Wilton', Yehudi Menuhin's beloved instrument that has set a world record price every time it has been sold. The 'General Kyd' Stradivari, the instrument Itzhak Perlman made his name on, would be reduced to charcoal, as would the gorgeous, thickly varnished 'La Pucelle' Strad, unseen for the last half-century and hardly touched for 50 years before that (although I see his hand hovering over that one). Up in smoke would go the 'Conte Vitale' Andrea Guarneri viola and Louis Krasner's c.1580 Gaspar – both with full varnish and not a jot smaller than when they left their makers. Three out of five of the world's Tourte viola bows: well, nothing but ash, and nearly a dozen Peccattes would go with them.

No, the instrument in his hand would be the Stradivari 'Bass of Spain' cello. 'The "Bass" never fails to move me emotionally when I see it and, most especially, when I hear it,' declares Fulton. 'Of all my instruments that one is, in my view, certainly the most majestic and may well be the greatest of all.'



# Personal treasures

David Fulton made a fortune in software – and he's spent one on fabulous violins. But it's the most interesting thing he's ever done, he tells **Joanna Pieters**

He had, he says, long hankered after a Strad cello, one of the great B form models. 'Many are in institutions, or are otherwise out of reach – and quite a few have been hurt. I assumed that the "Bass of Spain" was an authentic instrument, but probably not exceptional, although no one had seen it in years. So the cello arrives, it's in a very shabby case and we're sure it really is a somewhat beat-up cello. But when [dealer] Robert Bein and [luthier] John Becker open that shabby case, they figuratively fall to their knees and knock their heads on the floor proclaiming, "We're not worthy!" I was right alongside them, mind you, for it is a *very* great cello.' And I believe it: when he opens the case for me, I'm shocked into silence by its extraordinary luminescence and colour.

The reality is, though, that while Fulton's house might burn, the instruments themselves would

probably be the safest things. While these are some of the world's most valuable instruments, they also must be some of the most cared for: which extends to his purpose-built, climate-controlled vault.

'I love the instruments,' he says, 'and an awful lot of what I have is tied up in the instruments. You know, you are not really the owner of these instruments; you are more like a custodian. And you pay a rather hefty price to be the custodian! You could almost resent it a bit if you think about it. I mean, you love an instrument, presently you'll die and someone else will love that same instrument. They're a little faithless! But gathering this collection is the most interesting thing I have done in my life. I am quite sure if my name is ever pronounced aloud a hundred years from now outside my immediate family, it will be because of the collection.'

Fulton made his name through software development, but musicians know him for other reasons. His collection is one of the most important in private hands, admired as much for the quality of the instruments it contains as for the quantity. His collection of 'del Gesùs', he says, is probably the finest assembled since the 1920s – and as more instruments are damaged or go to museums, it may well be the last of its kind. Fifteen violins, four violas, three cellos and 34 bows count in their number some of the finest examples of their makers' work.

It was an alumnus of Chicago University who unwittingly set Fulton on his path, donating a Testore for use by the university orchestra concertmaster: Fulton, a final-year maths student, until then played a very average German fiddle. One day he took the Testore to William Lewis & Son, the main dealer at that time in Chicago, and talked them into showing him 'a succession of Guadagninis and Strads and other wonderful instruments. And so to my everlasting financial detriment I started liking fine violins very much.'

Owning them took a while longer, however. After graduation he spent three years working by day in the insurance industry in Connecticut and doubling up after hours in the professional Hartford Symphony Orchestra. He considered switching career, but finally opted for a PhD and life first in academia, and then running his own database company, Fox Software. Microsoft bought the firm in 1992, but 'I am not really cut out for a large company,' and he has been 'busy but retired' since 1994.

It was in 1981 that a college friend, doctor and fellow 'fiddle nut' took Fulton along to Bein & Fushi in Chicago when he went to collect a Strad. While his friend did business, Fulton picked up a Pietro Guarneri of Mantua instrument. Several hours later he was still playing – and a few days later he had taken out a loan bigger than his mortgage. The Fulton Collection had its first item. His 'little Petrus' still has a particular place in his affections. He still laughs at a later memory: ▶



The 'King Josephi' 'del Gesù', one of Fulton's most precious violins. Changing it recently to gut strings and a much looser set-up has 'opened up the sound enormously', says Fulton



'I thought it would be a fine thing to have a "del Gesù" so I negotiated an arrangement to trade in my little Peter of Mantua. But when the time came, I couldn't do it! I realised I was in trouble at that point, but I'm glad I didn't. It's an awfully good little Guarneri.'

When his business took off, he went straight for the best. 'I had in my mind that I wanted a Strad. I wanted one that was in all the books. And I wanted one from the years 1714, 15 or 16: the peak golden-period years. My feeling was that if you had one that's famous, you are probably on good solid ground. I played on the 'Baron Knoop', which at that time had a very peculiar set-up on it. But there was something I thought was extraordinary, so I bought it.

'Then I heard that Heifetz carried with him a Strad and a "del Gesù" in a double case and I felt that sounded like a fine idea, so I negotiated to buy a "del Gesù".' That was the 1734 'Haddock', which he later sold: 'That was a mistake.'

### 'I HEARD THAT HEIFETZ CARRIED A STRAD AND A DEL GESÙ – THAT SOUNDED A FINE IDEA'

No question, Fulton is a seriously wealthy man. But he's also reassuringly normal. His house, while beautifully designed and with sophisticated technical gear, such as the intercom family members use to call each other, is open-plan and welcoming; cheerful green armchairs and sofas stand around a low table, while huge picture windows light the whole space; there's coffee on the side, music stands set up for a string quartet and a stream of teenagers at the door for his two sons. It's the kind of place where visitors feel at home – and I'm clearly not the only one to think so. Gil Shaham, Joshua Bell, Sarah Chang and Lynn Harrell are just a few of the regular house guests, while the late Oscar Shumsky and Isaac Stern also found it a bolt-hole when they were in the area.

'I think musicians like coming here,' says Fulton modestly. 'They are not fawned on, they can talk about industry gossip, about which I am usually pretty well informed. I don't have any reporters hiding in the closets and nobody is going to record or comment on their performance so they can let their hair down. Some of them let their hair down very far indeed! We have a lot of fun.' With some he has become close friends: he recalls evenings with Stern with particular fondness, as well as happy, memorable hours of chamber music with Shaham and Bell.

And, of course, they get to play instruments that must make even their eyes water. The watchwords of Fulton's collection are quality and authenticity. If there's any doubt about an instrument's provenance, he's not interested. And they have to sound good. 'My objective has never been to have the maximum number of instruments ▶



Fulton's first violin, his 'little Petrus', a 1698 Pietro Guarneri of Mantua. It belonged to Laurence Shapiro, second violinist of the Fine Arts Quartet and is, says Fulton, 'perhaps the finest second violin in the world'

but I have always tried to get the best specimens.' Like many players, he was drawn to collecting as much by the sound as the history, a fascination which remains.

'I have heard most of the great concert artists in the world play in this room with a known acoustic and known instruments,' he points out. 'I can usually predict within a minute's playing which instrument a player will sound best on. Among my instruments I am pretty familiar with the bow stroke they need and the kind of sounds they give. For example many Strads don't respond well to forceful vertical pressure: certain of the Strads don't like vertical pressure and if a violinist has a powerful, Isaac Stern-like, slow, gluey bow stroke, then I can forget about bringing out the Strads! On the other hand, violinists with an elegant, Milstein-like, sweeping bow arm that mainly produces tone with bow velocity, as opposed to vertical pressure, usually discover very quickly that they are more comfortable with and sound better on a Strad. Sometimes a violinist's favourite violin will not be the one he or she actually sounds best on. Tonally, there's no "best violin" in the collection: only a violin that's best for a particular player at a

**BELOW AND OPPOSITE**

the spectacular 1709 Stradivari 'La Pucelle'. Vuillaume partnered it with the 'Messiah' at the 1872 South Kensington exhibition, but for the last century it has been virtually untouched

particular time, with a particular bow and with a particular set-up.'

Many people first heard Fulton's name when he bought the 'Lord Wilton' Guarneri in 1999 after Menuhin's death. 'When Menuhin died it broke up a logjam of Guarneris. Everyone was waiting for the "Lord Wilton" to be sold and everyone knew it would set the new price for "del Gesùs", because the "Lord Wilton" has sold for a world record price every time it has changed hands over the last 150 years.' He'd first fallen in love with it at the Guarneri 'del Gesù' exhibition in New York in 1994: 'It was the one violin I saw there that I really thought that was incredible.' At the time of the New York exhibition he owned two of the instruments on display; now six of them are in his hands.

It's the understated, aristocratic 'Lord Wilton' that he's been playing this morning and that now rests on the piano. But his latest pride and joy is a violin that has been out of circulation for a century, and which radiates a kind of calm beauty from its extraordinary, thick, dark-red and unpolished varnish, the wood free of cracks and patching. This is 'La Pucelle' – 'the maiden' – according to Charles Beare, he tells me, the first golden-period Stradivari, dating from 1709. Beare phoned shortly before Fulton was due to go on a family trip. 'I had three or four days to decide whether to buy it or not. Beare said, "Look, this is basically the finest Strad you will ever be presented with". It's not untouched: there's evidence of a knock here and there, and the side of the scroll has been slightly worn away. 'You can see it was used in church,' points out Fulton. He's kept gut strings and a very gentle set-up on it. 'I think it has the most marvellous tone colour and quality and it could fill any hall just as it is. You could put in a heavier bass-bar and nice tight soundpost and good synthetic strings and a good, healthy soundpost patch, and it might make it louder. But why?'

The violin, he says, helps to explain why Strad was so long regarded as pre-eminent. 'The Hills certainly loved "del Gesùs" but they clearly preferred Strads. I could never quite understand that because now "del Gesùs" are often more valuable than comparable Strads and preferred by many artists, perhaps by the majority.

'But the perfection of "La Pucelle" tells you that a hundred years ago, on average, the Strads actually were better instruments. And as a result they were used and received much more wear than the "del Gesùs" over the past century. "La Pucelle" was an exceptional instrument a hundred years ago but I don't think it was as unique then as it is now. I think a hundred years ago the "Baron Knoop", for example, might have compared favourably, but it's been used as a concert instrument for most of the past hundred years. The ranking of these instruments changes over time, not because lesser ones somehow improve, but because greater ones are worn and damaged. And I think the 20th century was very hard on Strads.'



That said, Fulton is no museum curator. It's clear he loves having players drop in for chamber music, for interest and just to compare notes. He plays a lot himself, too, cycling between instruments as the mood takes him, and is currently on the look-out for a new duo partner. He occasionally loans out an instrument for concerts in the local area, or to a friend for a special project. Joshua Bell has a bow on long-term loan, and Fulton bought the 'Marsick' Strad especially to loan to the young Canadian player James Ehnes. But he's extremely cautious about which ones are played further afield. 'I guess as I have gotten further into collecting, my thoughts have turned more toward conservatorship for certain instruments. My greatest instruments are played from time to time, but

### 'LA PUCELLE' TELLS YOU THAT 100 YEARS AGO, THE STRADS WERE FINER INSTRUMENTS

giving them to a young artist to take on the road is another thing. If you knock the corner off one of them, a luthier can replace it, it looks fine and the instrument sounds just as good, but it is not as it was.' Violin makers he 'discourages' from visiting. 'They always want to measure instruments or drop magnets in them and I get kind of nervous,' he says apologetically.

And then there are the deliberate actions of musicians and luthiers. He fetches me a small piece of wood from his desk. 'Look! The most exotic paperweight in the world!' It is a violin neck: from the time it left Stradivari's hands in 1714 until a decade ago the original neck of the 'General Kyd'. 'Someone persuaded Uto Ughi it needed a different neck,' he says.

He tells me the story of his beautiful, uncut Gaspar viola of c.1580: how its owner was refusing to sell it unless he signed a contract that he would not have it reduced in size, on pain of draconian fines. 'Her concern was not misplaced, because on two occasions she negotiated a sale only to discover that the purchaser intended to reduce the instrument immediately. One of these was Alexander Schneider [violinist of the Budapest Quartet]. She discovered that he had arranged to have the viola reduced in New York.' Fulton refused to sign – 'the contract was so loosely drawn that the viola could change size by a fraction of a millimetre and it would trigger the penalty clause' – and instead convinced the owner that his intentions were honourable. None of his instruments are cut – and he's well aware that makes the cellos, and particularly the violas, rare birds.



Does he still long for certain instruments? 'Well, I have an unlisted number for a good reason. Dealers call up and say we have this wonderful violin, and I say, I am only interested in ones that are better than what I have got. I could name those, and one is in Genoa and the last I heard it was not for sale. One's in the Ashmolean Museum and I don't think that's for sale either. ►

The Stradivari 'General Kyd' of 1714. Itzhak Perlman made his name on it, and it later passed to Uto Ughi



'The greatest cello in the world is probably the "Batta" 1714 Strad. It is in the Piatigorsky family. However, Piatigorsky married one of the Rothschilds, and the last I heard they didn't need to sell the cello to raise money.' He'd love a Strad viola, 'but there are only two running around loose that I know of. The greatest Strad viola – the 1701 "MacDonald" – belonged to Peter Schidlof. I think that his heirs are well to do and are very happy with the instrument. It certainly is the most valuable instrument on the planet, and frankly I can't imagine what it would be worth. And so it goes on and on.' But isn't that a bit sad, that the collection is complete? He looks thoughtful. 'Well, you have to be optimistic. You never know what may happen.'

Ultimately, he says, the majority of his collection will 'simply be sold, I imagine, after my death. But it's something I concern myself about quite a lot, particularly over a few of the purest instruments – the "Bass of Spain", the "Lord Wilton" and "La Pucelle", the "King Joseph" "del Gesù" and probably the "Conte Vitale" Guarneri viola, which is very exceptional. Instruments like that should be heard and admired, but it's also important that a hundred years from now people will be able to see them as they are today. But the majority of the instruments should probably be in players' hands.' As to where they should go, he's still undecided. 'I'd like the greatest of them situated so everyone can see them, but in the right context. I'd like them to be played and heard, but also properly protected. It's a delicate balance. But it's for sure that I'm not going to take them with me!'

However, there seems no question that the collection will remain together for the foreseeable future. 'People say, well, aren't they great investments?' he exclaims. 'And the answer is from my point of view, they are pure consumption! If they are to be investments you have to sell them, and I seem to be much better at buying them than selling them. I don't know how something can be an investment if you never sell it.'

And if consumption can be defined as making the most of his acquisitions, there's no question that David Fulton consumes with a passion. We finally head into the vault, emerging with caseloads of instruments for an afternoon of quite mind-boggling playing. His regular quartet will be round later in the week, and in a few days he'll be visiting the International Viola Society convention to show his violas. In the meantime, he'll also be pursuing his other interests: digital instrument photography, in a purpose-built studio filled with high-tech equipment, and violin history. No doubt it won't be long before another musician is in town, and the large, pleasant room will again be filled by the sound of some of the greatest instruments ever made – and which are, for a few decades, gathered together by someone who seems to want them for all the right reasons. ■