

Celebrating the Stradivarius

By DAVID MERMELSTEIN
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From left, the 1714 'Leonora Jackson' Stradivarius, played by Chee-Yun; the 1708 'Ruby,' played by Philippe Quint; and the 1716 'Milstein,' played by Margaret Batjer. *Associated Press*

Los Angeles

The prized string instruments made by Antonio Stradivari are rarely out of the news. Already this year, music lovers felt a collective shudder on learning that the concertmaster of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra was relieved of his 1715 Stradivarius in a mugging shortly after a performance. (Happily, the fiddle was recovered in good condition and the alleged thieves apprehended about a week after the incident.) And now we're facing the news that one of Stradivari's few violas, from 1719, will soon be on the auction block at Sotheby's with an asking price starting at an unprecedented \$45 million. The cost of these instruments—many more than 300 years old—has long far outpaced inflation. But until recently, successful artists could still afford to buy one if they scrimped and saved. Those days may be gone, however. In 2002, Joshua Bell, perhaps the most famous classical violinist of our day, paid \$4 million for a Stradivarius once owned by Bronislaw Huberman. But Mr. Bell probably couldn't match the winning bid fetched in 2011 by the "Lady Blunt" Stradivarius of 1721. It sold for \$15.9 million, the current record for a Stradivari violin, of which some 600 are said to survive.

So it was with some pride that the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra organized a four-day event last week titled "Strad Fest L.A.," in which eight Stradivarius violins came together in various combinations for the aural delectation of Angelenos partial to the warm, honeyed and substantial sound so famously produced by these instruments.

While the festival was far from the largest concentration of such instruments ever assembled, it was an unusually rich gathering for this city.

Related Video

Wealth management firm LeoGroup purchased a rare "golden period" Stradivarius violin using bitcoin. Matt Allain, LeoGroup senior managing director, explains why on MoneyBeat. Photo: Sothebys.com.

Not that Los Angeles is bereft of Stradivarii. The Los Angeles Philharmonic has a Stradivari cello and two fiddles—one of which, the 1711 "Kreisler," is played regularly by the orchestra's concertmaster, Martin Chalifour, who was featured prominently with that instrument at this festival. Likewise, Margaret Batjer, the concertmaster of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (LACO), also plays a Stradivarius—well, sometimes at least.

Though her own primary instrument is a so-called composite—part Stradivarius, part Amati (the master violin maker who taught Stradivari)—she also performs regularly on the "Milstein" Stradivarius of 1716, an instrument purchased by local philanthropists Jerry and Terri Kohl from the estate of Nathan Milstein, one of the 20th century's most celebrated violinists. (Mr. Chalifour also uses this instrument occasionally.)

With LACO looking for a way to honor Mr. and Mrs. Kohl, who last year became the chamber orchestra's most generous benefactors but didn't want to be feted, Ms. Batjer recalled a seminal experience from her youth: a monthlong festival held in 1987 in Cremona, Italy—long the world center of violin making—to mark the 250th anniversary of the death of Stradivari, the city's most famous son. And so a sort a miniature version of that effort was undertaken, saluting the Kohls while keeping the spotlight from them. In addition to a gala fundraising dinner and concert this past Saturday, events included an invitation-only lecture and demonstration at the Huntington Library in nearby San Marino on Wednesday, a portion of an all-Baroque concert at the Colburn School in downtown Los Angeles on Thursday, and a program of violin bonbons called "Fiddlefest" at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica on Friday.

In addition to the "Milstein" and "Kreisler" Stradivarii, two others of the eight featured also now reside in Southern California. The 1714 "Leonora Jackson" is owned by William Sloan, a urologist and accomplished amateur fiddler; the 1720 "Red Mendelssohn," said to have inspired the film "The Red Violin" (1998), belongs to Elizabeth Pitcairn, a local violinist. The rest were visitors: the "Serdet" of 1666 and the "Beechback" of c.1720, brought from England by Peter Beare, a respected luthier and scion of a storied family of violin dealers; the 1708 "Ruby," lent by the Stradivari Society to Philippe Quint, a New York-based violinist; and the "Titian" of 1715, which the Taiwanese-American soloist Cho-Liang Lin purchased a decade ago.

Mr. Lin, who in addition to performing teaches at the Juilliard School in New York and at Rice University in Houston, was the most famous performer on these programs. The remaining ones were Chee-Yun, from South Korea; Xiang Yu, born in Mongolia; and Ray Ushikubo, a 12-year-old from Riverside, Calif. But the real stars were the violins. On Saturday night, Mr. Yu, who now studies at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, remarked that his fiddle for the evening—the "Serdet," the oldest known Stradivarius in existence—reminded him "of a wild, gorgeous horse," like those in his homeland. And on the same program, Chee-Yun said of the "Leonora Jackson": "All Strads have a big sound, but this one also has warmth. I really don't want to give it back."

Speaking before the festival began, Mr. Lin attempted to characterize his "Titian" in lay terms. "If I can use wine as an analogy," he began, "this instrument is like a great Burgundy, made from pinot noir grapes. It has a ringing, beautiful, bell-like quality. It's effortless. I can just draw the bow across the strings."

Others, on both sides of the stage, might use different words to describe a Stradivarius's singular qualities, but they'd be no less effusive. Stradivari's unique