

# Vanderbilt Holdings

Collections and collectibles

## Playable Art

*The gift of an Amati violin offers students and the community access to a world-class instrument. By KAY WEST*

**B**ACH AND BEETHOVEN might seem worlds apart from country and bluegrass, but in Music City, home of the Grand Ole Opry and the Nashville Opera, the two definitively divergent styles of music traversed the same path across the bridge of an unlikely conduit: a rare, centuries-old Amati violin. That violin began its cross-cultural and international voyage in Cremona, Italy, in the early 1600s; in 2003 it was placed on permanent loan to Vanderbilt's Blair School of Music by retired Vanderbilt professor and one-time Nashville Sound session player Martin Katahn.

"We have had some wonderful gifts over the years, but this is truly a milestone," says Christian Teal, the Joseph Joachim Professor of Violin at Blair and first violinist with the Blair String Quartet. "These instruments are valued and coveted for several things: their sound, their fame, their age. They provoke fascinating questions and prompt discussion and debate among musicians. What are their secrets? Is it the wood, which many believe was floated down the river to Cremona and then dried in the Italian sun? Is it the varnish? The varnish protects the instruments and helps maintain flexibility. We don't know how these masters made their varnish or put it on.

"Is it the aging? The molecules in the wood of these old violins are not as dense as the wood in a new violin, and that makes the old violins more flexible and resonant. Though each violin by these makers varied, and some were better than others, the violins made by these masters are like none made today. The Amati is an amazing gift to this school."

Certainly, the most well-known name in the violin world is Stradivari, and the instruments that bear that name are among the most sought after among musicians, collectors and museums. But what many people outside the rarefied world of professional and amateur violinists do not know is that it was the Amati family who is credited with founding the revered school of Cremonese violin making. Antonio Stradivari apprenticed under Nicolo Amati, who passed the mantle of master violin making to his star pupil.

The violin emerged in Italy in the early 1500s, believed to have evolved from two medieval bowed instruments: the fiddle, also called viella or fiedel, and the rebec, from the

Renaissance lira da braccio, a violin-like instrument with off-the-fingerboard drone strings.

Whether the violin actually was born in Cremona is difficult to prove, but certainly Cremona was and remains important in the evolution of the violin. The founder of the Cremonese School was Andrea Amati (1505–1577), who made one of the first instruments on the pattern of the classical violin, as well as cellos of large dimensions. (The cello he made for King Charles IX of France in 1572, known as "the King," is today known as the first cello in history.)

Andrea Amati's two sons, Antonio and Girolamo (also referenced as Hieronymus and Geronimo), took on their father's craft and made instruments primarily in accordance with his teachings. When Girolamo died in 1630, his son Nicolo took over the business, and with his skills elevated the Amati name to further acclaim.

"In all these families there are many makers, but always one who became very famous for his work. In the Stradivari family it was

Antonio, in the Guarneri family it was Joseph, and in the Amati family it was Nicolo," explains Christian Teal.

Nicolo Amati improved the model passed on to him by the other Amatis, producing instruments with meticulous care and aesthetic sense capable of yielding greater power of tone. Nicolo also made his



mark in the history of violin making through the emergence of his stable of gifted apprentices, who included Francesco Ruggeri, Andrea Guarneri (whose grandson is the celebrated Joseph, or Giuseppe) and, of course, Antonio Stradivari.

Ironically, it was through a Stradivarius that Katahn—whose early career as a professional violinist, instructor and music professor in the Northeast preceded his arrival in Nashville to join the psychology faculty at Vanderbilt—came to acquire the Amati.

Katahn refers to himself as the accidental violinist. “When I was 7 years old, I really wanted to play guitar, but I couldn’t reach the end of the neck. My father, who played the violin, suggested that instrument, so I began taking instruction. I started performing when I was 12.”

He went on to study at Juilliard and met patroness Mabel Degen following a performance in Taos; she subsequently became sponsor of the Degen String Quartet, formed in the summer of 1949 in New York City. At the time, it was the youngest professional string quartet playing under management in the country, its members averaging 19 years of age. That same year he made an unexpected acquisition. Though he remains reluctant these many years later to reveal the entire chain of events, he and a colleague learned of a Muntz Stradivarius that its owner was hoping to sell. From Manhattan, with hardly a suitcase between them, the duo flew to Europe, took a train to Germany, met the seller, came to agreement on a purchase price, and when he returned to the States, Katahn had in his possession a Muntz Stradivarius. “There are about 600 Strad violins in existence; this particular Strad is one of only six that has not been damaged in any way.”

Not everyone was so impressed, Katahn recalls with a laugh. “At one point, while I was living in Greenwich Village, my financial situation became quite precarious. Just out of curiosity, I took the violin to a pawn shop and tried to explain the value of the instrument to the owner. He looked at it quite carefully and sputtered, ‘Muntz Schmuntz! I’ll give you \$100 for it.’ I took the violin home.”

In 1952 the Degen String Quartet moved to the Hart College of Music in Hartford, Conn., and Katahn, in addition to his live performances, began teaching. In the mid-’50s his father suffered a serious illness and appealed to Katahn to come back home to Utica and take over his appliance business while he recu-



DANIEL BURBOS

perated. After two years, Katahn was sure of a job he didn’t care for. While attending night school at the local extension of Syracuse University, he met a psychologist who inspired a course of study that four years later would result in his doctorate.

With the Stradivarius essentially in storage, and his musical career on hold as he studied, Katahn could not resist an offer made to him by an acquaintance. “A fellow violinist knew I was interested in divesting myself of the Strad, and he knew of a physician in Cal-

ifornia who had an Amati and wanted a Strad.” The trade was made, and in 1957 Katahn became the owner of the Amati. “It was beautiful, and so easy to play. The first time I saw it, I picked it up and played it and it was a dream. A Strad is a better concert instrument; it is a soprano and Amatis are contraltos. But the Strad was more difficult to play. I much preferred the Amati.”

The violin he obtained in exchange for the Muntz Stradivarius was made by the master Nicolo Amati in 1638, though the instrument’s credentials hardly mattered to the millions of people who unknowingly heard it played on record or in concert for the next 20 years.

When Katahn moved to Nashville with his wife, Enid, in 1962 to join the Vanderbilt faculty, it was for the princely salary of \$7,500 a year. But he found a side job almost immediately, one that required him to pull the valuable Amati out of its case.

“Brenton Banks, a music contractor in town, called me one day and said, ‘We need 18 violins for a session with Hugo Montenegro.’ I told him I hadn’t played in years. He said, ‘I don’t care; I need 18 violins.’ So I took the Amati and went over to the Quonset Hut, where they were recording. We went into the room, a hand came through a hole in the wall and counted one, two, three, four, and we played. No one there had any idea of the value or acclaim of this instrument. It was just one of 18 violins.”

Over the next many years, particularly during the glory days of the much-vaunted “Nashville Sound,” Katahn and the Amati violin performed on nearly every Nashville-recorded album that required a string section. His work was so highly regarded within the industry and among artists that he became Johnny Cash’s concert master, working closely with him on his national television program.

“I really enjoyed all of it—it was very different from the academic world. My fellow faculty members always wanted to come to sessions with me. The artists were very warm and gracious, with the exception of Webb Pierce. He was not a pleasant man. Jerry Lee

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Perhaps the most common theme is “love science, love people.” Our students have been gifted students, many since kindergarten, although a few late bloomers always emerge. While VUSM collects poets and historians, economists and anthropologists, most of our students found their greatest gift in the study of science and, specifically, the life sciences. But science was not enough. Working alone in a lab did not satisfy their social natures. They needed to be with people. Or science in a vacuum, for its own sake, did not seem completely fulfilling. Science seemed to gain its greatest value and meaning in the context of human application. They wanted to put science into action, to relieve the suffering of other human beings.

This particular sense of service is the most pervasive and humbling. We have gathered together a group of young people who want to serve in Third World countries, want to

equalize access to care, want to practice “poverty medicine,” want to find a cure for AIDS. They want to educate, communicate and understand.

I suppose I feel most humbled when I try to recall my own reasons for wanting to become a doctor. It seems so long ago, and I can’t remember if my reasons now are the same as my reasons then. I did indeed love biology, and I’ve always enjoyed talking to people. My father was a veterinarian, and I loved going on farm calls with him, not just to watch him treat the cows that were “down,” but also to hear him banter with the farmers about their crops and their kids and the weather. But when I asked about following him into veterinary medicine, he answered simply, “Be a doctor.”

As with much parental advice, I placed these words on the back burner—not discarded, just set aside to simmer. I enjoyed a broad liberal arts education, sampling anthropology and religion and lots of literature, but

I always returned to biology. So the question for me, like many of our students, became one of how to use it. I thought about ecology and teaching and writing middle-school textbooks, but in the end I succumbed to the force. Of all the possibilities, medicine seemed like it would be the most fun.

Fun. Compared to the depth and altruism of my students’ motivations, this seems so shallow. And yet I know that we are all motivated to seek rewards, and what differentiates us are the rewards we seek. Money is rarely a true reward for anything, and it can’t be the motivation that sustains a life in medicine. All the money in the world could not induce me to do some of the things I’ve had to do in the past 20 years—it was simply duty and obligation. And all the money in the world cannot match the reward of some of my most memorable moments—a successful outcome against all odds, the gratitude of patients, the meeting of souls. ▼

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Lewis was one of my all-time favorites. The Amati was even used on a commercial for Miller High Life, the Champagne of Bottled Beer!”

His last recording session was in 1981 for Barbara Mandrell. Katahn again put away the Amati and wrote several best-selling diet books.

“I wasn’t using the violin, and it seemed that it would be nice for it to be played by students or faculty who would appreciate it. So I decided to make a permanent loan to Blair.”

A few months ago, before the Blair School took possession of the instrument, Virginia Payne, director of development for Blair, flew with it—rather apprehensively—to New York for an appraisal for insurance purposes. The official verdict sets its value at \$375,000. “The appraisers were very impressed with its condition,” says Payne. “They said it is in excellent shape.” Katahn also donated two valuable bows.

Unfortunately, because Blair lacks a secured space for displaying the instrument, the Amati will be kept locked away. But it most definitely will be played, and discussions are under way within Blair to determine how best to

use the instrument.

Blair School Dean Mark Wait is excited about the possibilities the Amati presents. “Many of our students come from middle-class backgrounds and have parents who have sacrificed much for their educations since childhood. This presents an opportunity for our students of special merit to perform important recitals and competitions on a truly great instrument. I suspect we will have a special celebration of this gift with a performance by one of our faculty violinists, a performance that can be enjoyed by the public.”

“Instruments such as these truly need to be used,” Teal confirms. “Musicians call it ‘playing in.’”

The Smithsonian Institute, which has one of the most spectacular collections of musical instruments in the world, adheres to that philosophy with its most valuable pieces—notably four Stradivari instruments appraised collectively at \$50 million and donated in 1998 by Herbert Axelrod. The self-taught ichthyologist, who made a fortune publishing handbooks on pets, gifted the Smithsonian with two Stradivari violins, a Stradivari viola and a Stradivari cello. Axelrod also donat-

ed a set of Amati instruments and, subsequently, the Smithsonian renovated a gallery in the American History Museum dedicated to displaying these remarkable and beautiful objects. But they are not held forever in repose. Many of the instruments are used in master classes and chamber concerts along the Washington, D.C., mall, as many as 20 per year. The Institute’s quartet, known first as the Smithson, then the Party of Four, is now the Axelrod Quartet.

“I can’t wait to put a bow across it; it is such a lovely instrument,” says Teal of Blair’s Amati. “There is certainly a period of becoming familiar with an instrument such as this, and getting to know its characteristics. One would have to practice on it for a couple of months. But I believe there will be an ease of play one doesn’t find in a new instrument. New instruments in the violin world are considered a little dangerous, unknown and unproven. But, after 300 years, you know what you’ve got. What we have with the Amati is a very exciting prospect not only for the school, but for the entire music-loving community.” ▼