



An Important English Viola by Daniel Parker, London 1714

This viola is an exceptional instrument in many ways. In itself it is a work of great craftsmanship and strong character, a beautifully functional instrument of striking appearance and fine preservation. Historically it is equally fascinating, given that it is by one of the greatest English makers, and bears a very rare original and dated label of 1714. Added to that, it has an intriguing provenance in London's musical world over several centuries.

Daniel Parker is probably best known as the maker of the 1717 'Kreisler' violin; a violin fondly played by the great maestro who also owned Strads, Guarneris and a Carlo Bergonzi. Such celebrity endorsement carries a lot of weight.

Parker himself seems to have led an undistinguished life- at least, there is very little in the archival records to identify him, but his great significance is in being the first English maker to recognise the excellence of the Stradivari model, and in fact, probably the first maker throughout Europe to work closely on his patterns. Most work in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century was based on Amati or Brescian forms. Parker probably first encountered Stradivari's work through Gaspare Visconti, a Cremonese violinist who knew Stradivari personally. In 1703 Visconti came to England, and published pieces for the violin through the London shops of John Walsh and John Hare, for whom Parker also worked; several of his violins bear Hare's label. It is very probable that Visconti brought with him to London a Stradivari of the 'Long Pattern', which is clearly the starting point for his subsequent violins.

Parker also made several violas, in many forms. English makers of this period seem to have made a relatively large number of violas to meet a growing demand, on a variety of original and sometimes eccentric forms. This viola is distinguished by its elegant Stradivari model, but one that Parker created from the Long Pattern violin form he was



familiar with, rather than from a known Stradivari instrument. The outline is a cleverly scaled-up violin, but in fact has no close relationship to actual Stradivari viola models. It has been shortened in the upper bouts to give a length of 410mm to conform with actual Stradivari proportions; another similar example by Parker has a back length of 429.5mm and very similar width measurements. In other terms, it is well-preserved and carries a fine pale-golden varnish of great quality. The wood is also of excellent quality, with beautifully flamed maple on the back and ribs, although the scroll is of rather wild-figured maple, probably cut close to the root of the tree. The front is of one piece. The spruce has alternating bands of close and broader grain which make it hard to discern a matching pattern, but it is an odd feature of English violas of this period in particular that makers often seem to have chosen single pieces for the fronts. The 'F' holes are particularly interesting- their extended form comes from Parker's own imagination, and owe little to Stradivari- in fact contrasting with the comparatively short soundholes that are a feature of Stradivari's violas- undoubtedly because he had no actual pattern to follow.

According to the W.E.Hill & Sons history of the instrument, it was once owned by James Hamilton Clarke, known to them as a 'leading amateur'. However, contemporary accounts list him as leader of the Dublin Philharmonic in 1862, and subsequently an organist and conductor in Oxford, Kensington and Covent Garden, and a prolific composer. He was also an associate of Sir Arthur Sullivan, and a member of an ensemble engagingly known as 'The Wandering Minstrels', led by Seymour Egerton. The Minstrels had been in existence since the 1860s, and their name pre-dates Gilbert and Sullivan's famous song 'A Wandering Minstrel I' from 'The Mikado', which was first performed in 1885. It is tempting to say that the orchestra inspired the song, and the possibly ironic line 'a thing of shreds and tatters', for Seymour Egerton was in fact the 4th Earl of Wilton, and the Wandering Minstrels consisted in the main of aristocratic amateurs and others drawn from London bankers and stockbrokers who rehearsed in the Sloane Street home of Lord Gerald Fitzgerald.



What is fascinating about all this is that Clarke would have played this Daniel Parker viola in what was, despite its disingenuous title, possibly one of the richest troves of fine Cremonese instruments ever assembled. Egerton himself owned the wonderful 'Wilton' del Gesu of 1742, later owned by Sir Yehudi Menuhin, as well as the 1736 'Muntz' Stradivari violin, and one of the most beautiful Amati violas, the 1615 Antonio and Hieronymus now known as 'the Stauffer'. Frederick Lehmann, a businessman and Liberal M.P., played the 1744 'Ole Bull' del Gesu. Other members included Rose Fuller, from a distinguished family of politicians and businessmen, who played the 1714 'Sinsheimer' Stradivari and Alexander Davis Cooper, a painter, who owned a Gasparo da Salo viola. Also in the close circle of these London Minstrels were banking families who owned dozens of distinguished Italian instruments, the Heaths, Barings, Rivaz and Cazenoves.

The long Pattern Stradivari which inspired Daniel Parker in the early eighteenth century was amongst the first wave of Italian masterpieces that by the mid-nineteenth century had found keen buyers among the rich and powerful dilettantes of Victorian London. That his viola would sit comfortably among them would doubtless have pleased him.

— John Dilworth

This viola has remained in the same English family for nearly a century.



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Ernest Yonge, Esq.,
19 Shirehall Lane,
N. W. 4.

Dear Mr. Yonge,

The Daniel Parker viola which I understand your pupil is trying, is an instrument of quite exceptional merit, and by a maker of whom we think all the world, as he was the first contemporary of Stradivari to make copies of the great maker's instruments. They were of the long pattern and my own violin, which I have had for years, was made by him.

This particular viola I used to see when I was a boy, in the possession of one of our leading amateurs, Mr. James Clarke, who took part in chamber music and was one of the members of 'The Wandering Minstrels', a society conducted by Lord Fitzgerald and led by The Hon. Seymour Egerton. Alas! this Society, through deaths, came to an end some 40 years ago, but most of the members came to my Father and I can assure you that some of them played extremely well. In its last days, I think Sir Edward Thesiger was the Leader. I might add that we only know of two Violas made by Daniel Parker.

Yours sincerely,

Arthur F. Hill