

A Broken Cremonese Violin in Wiltshire, circa 1720.

Ben Hebbert finds a historical gem that gives an excellent indication of the worth of Cremonese violins during the 18th century.

The earliest publication of the following ballad was by J. Roberts of London in 1720 (when Stradivari was still in his golden period) and records an accident that befell a Cremonese violin belonging to Lady Weymouth at Longleat House. Much of what we know about ownership of Cremonese instruments, and the economics of the violin market in general in England during the 18th century comes from literary fragments such as this one. Perhaps what is more important than the existence of the ballad, was its reception in London. It was republished repeatedly as a part of the popular song repertoire. I have found it in the following works, but this is not to suggest that it doesn't appear in others: Walthoe's *The Hive* (1733), Hazard's *The Vocal Miscellany* (1734 and 1738), Boreman's *A Complete Collection of Old and New English and Scotch Songs* (1736), Osborn's *The Nightingale* (1738 and 1742) and Sir Solomon Gundy's *The Muse's Vagaries* (1745).

Therefore we know that the intrinsic values of Cremonese violins that were owned by the aristocracy were well understood by England's ballad-singing merchants and gentry. In fact, the lifespan of this poem is roughly the same as that of William Corbett (b. 1680 – d.1748), whose collection of great Italian violins was gifted to Gresham College in the City of London upon his death. Cremonese violins had been all the rage in London since the late 17th century, causing the

writer on music, Roger North, to comment at the beginning of the 18th century that 'the best utensil of Apollo, the violin, is so universally courted, and sought after to be had of the best sort, that some say England hath dispeopled Italy of violins'.

Part of the reason why Cremonese violins had relatively modest values in England throughout the 18th century (by the standards of 19th-century writers such as Sandys and Forster), and the reasons why they were so little copied during this time, may have been because of the sheer abundance of them.

The value of the fated Cremona violin, is emphasised in the outrage of the ballad's writer. Throughout the 18th century these instruments continued to be seen as works of a cultural and emotional significance. In addition to Corbett's collection, Joshua Reynolds collected old viols, whilst the painter and Oxford don, John Malchair (b.1730- d.1812) was leader of the Oxford Music Room Band until 1792 when an orange thrown at the orchestra during an undergraduate disturbance broke his Cremona violin. Mourning the loss of his treasured instrument, he retreated from public performance.

One final clarification, that the bow is described as 'Ebon' which was a distinctly different word from 'Ebony', and simply means that it was dark, so this doesn't reveal anything that we do not already know. Apart from this, the ballad speaks for itself.

BALLAD

Upon a Gentleman's sitting upon the Lady W ____'s
Cremona Fiddle.

To the Tune of King John, and the Abbot of Canterbury.

YE Lads and ye Lasses that live at *Longleat*,
Where They say there's no End of good Drink and good
Meat;
Where the Poor fill their Bellies, the Rich receive Honour,
So great and so good is the Lord of the Mannor:

*Sing down, derry
down, &c.*

Ye Nymphs and ye Swains that inhabit the Place,
Give Ear to my Song, of a Fiddle's hard Case;
For it is of a Fiddle, a sweet Fiddle, I Sing:
A softer and sweeter did never wear String.

Derry down.

Melpomene, lend me the Aid of thy Art,
Whilst I the sad Fate of this Fiddle impart;
For never had Fiddle a Fortune so bad:
Which shows the best Things the worst Fortune have had.

Derry down.

This Fiddle of Fiddles, when it came to be try'd,
Was as sweet as a Lark, and as soft as a Bride;
This Fiddle to see, and its Musick to hear,
Gave Delight to the Eye, while it ravisht the Ear.

Derry down.

But first I must sing of this Fiddle's Country,
'Twas born and 'twas bred in fair *Italy*;
In a Town where a Marshal of *France* had a Hap
(*Fortune de la Guerre*) to be caught in a Trap.

Derry down.

And now having sung of this Fiddle's high Birth,
I sho'd sing of the Fingers, which made so much Mirth:
But Fingers so strait, so swift, and so small,
Shou'd be sung by a Poet, or not sung at all.

Derry down.

Tho I am, God wot, but a poor Country Swain,
And cannot indite in so lofty a Strain;
So all I can say, is, to tell you once more,
Such Hands and such Fingers were ne'er seen before.

Derry down.



Having sung of the Fingers, and Fiddle, I trow,
You'll hold it but meet, I shou'd sing of the Bow:
The Bow it was Ebon, whose Virtue was such,
It wounded your Heart, if your Ear it did touch.

Derry down.

Cupid sain wou'd have chang'd with this Bow for a-while,
To which the Coy Nymph thus reply'd with a Smile;
My Bow is far better than yours: I'll appeal:
Yours only can kill, mine can both kill and heal.

Derry Down.

The Fiddle and Bow, and its Musick together,
Would make heavy Hearts as light as a Feather:
But alas! When I shall its Catastrophe sing,
Your Heart it will bless, and your Hands you will ring.

Derry down.

The Fiddle was laid on a soft easy Chair,
Taking all for its Friends, it sweet Musick did hear;
When strait there came in a huge Masculine Bum,
I wish the De'el had it, to make him a Drum.

Derry down.

Now Woe to the Bum that this Fiddle demolish'd,
That has all our Musick and Pastime abolish'd:
May it never want Birch to be switch'd and be slash'd;
May it ever be itching, and never be scratched.

Derry down.

May it never break Wind in the Cholick so grievous,
A Pennance too small, for a Crime so mischievous;
Ne'er find a soft Cushion, its Anguish to ease,
While all it too little my Wrath to appease.

Derry down.

Of other Bum Scapes, may it still bear the Blame,
Ne'er shew its bare Face without Sorrow or Shame;
May it ne'er mount Horseback, without Loss of Leather,
Which brings me almost to the End of my Tether.

Derry down.

And now, least some Critick of deep Penetration,
Shou'd attack our poor Ballad, with grave Annotation;
The Fop must be told, without speaking in Riddle,
He must first make a better, or kiss my Bum-Fiddle.

Derry down.

FINIS.