

## On Strads

I have never owned a Strad. Partially this is because I cannot afford one. Even if I could afford one, I probably wouldn't buy it.

This is not just sour grapes.

Any musical instrument, including a great violin, is essentially only transportation. Transportation for musical ideas, but transportation nonetheless. As such, one could compare the purchase of a violin with that of any other vehicle – for example, a car. Such a transaction involves reconciling various requirements – use, power, luxury, reliability, cost, and, of course, brand name. All of these requirements are subject to individual foibles. That is to say – the purchase of an automobile that is far more powerful than can ever be used, or far more economical than is congruent with safety and comfort, is not necessarily a rational decision. This may be even more so for someone who simply has to own a \_\_\_\_\_, and damn the insurance and repairs.

Violins can be discussed in much the same terms. “Use” implies how (solo/chamber music versus orchestral) and by whom. “Power” can mean the ability of a violin to “project,” or to be heard in a concert hall under adverse conditions – usually defined as a concert. “Luxury” can be thought of as beauty of tone (leather versus cloth seats), ease of playing, etc. “Reliability” and “cost” are obvious, as is “Brand name” and its concomitant recognition factor with snob appeal or reverse-snob appeal.

Perhaps even more with violins than with cars, rationality has little to do with ownership. It is as if somehow the notes would always be correct, the rhythm always precise, if only one had the ideal violin. Sad to say such a violin has never been invented, although the pre-programmed synthesizer boys are working hard at it!

Rationally, what is wanted in a violin is an instrument with a robust sound that is fairly uniform across all strings and throughout the total range of pitches; that can be heard at the back of a concert hall without sounding as if its guts are being ripped out; that responds reasonably well; that is in reasonably good physical shape (not too many repairs); that can survive major climate changes due to travel; that has a tone one can bear to listen to (assuming the instrument is played properly); and that won't cost both arms and a leg.

Thought of in these terms, Strads do no better than many other violins of less stellar name; but equal quality. Indeed, when it comes to “tone,” I personally find Strads in general to be too smooth, too polished, too plush, usually having a “tone” without enough angles in it. (I admit to having a general prejudice against smoo, poo, and plu!)

Unquestionably, Strads can be very pretty to look at, can have a lovely sound, and certainly provide ownership cachet. Despite their admitted quality, in utilitarian terms Strads are vastly overpriced and, in my opinion, are not worth the sums people seem to be willing to pay for them.

Of course, if one were to be offered to me (for free), I probably wouldn't refuse.

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