



Dave with 1742 *Lord Wilton* Guarneri del Gesù (2004)

PREFACE

I spent more than 40 years assembling my stringed instrument collection. My objective was always to gather the best instruments obtainable, not the most. There have certainly been larger collections but, in my opinion and that of many experts, there have been few as fine. I have been called the “greatest collector in the world” by Money Magazine and other publications have spoken of the collection as being the best in the past 100 years. This may even have been true.

That said, I have long admired and coveted the stringed instrument collections of the truly great collectors of the past: people like Richard Bennett, Baron Johann Knoop, and Count Cozio di Salabue, three of the greatest. I have often wondered about these gentlemen. Why did they become collectors? What were their personalities like? What happened in their lives? How I'd love to have them answer in their own words. Unfortunately, that's not in the cards; those collectors have been dead for a hundred years or more.

But I'm not.

I hope this book will help explain why I became a violin collector — clearly a form of ecstatic madness. I started forming the collection in 1981, but my fascination with violins, playing violins, and violinists goes back much farther, back to my childhood. It has been the musical journey of a lifetime and the great violins, violas and cellos have served as my milestones. Along the way I've had many interesting experiences and met some remarkable people. I hope to take you along on that journey.

Although this book contains detailed, high-resolution photos of the instruments, it is not intended to be a typical coffee-table violin art book. Most fiddle books are ordered by instrument maker and year made. By contrast, this book is chronologically ordered by the date on which I acquired each instrument. That way, the tale can be told as I lived it, starting with my early attraction to violins and evolving, fiddle by fiddle, into full-blown obsession. With each new instrument, I have learned a bit about its history, its owners, and the musicians who played it. And, of course, each acquisition has taught me a little more about the business of violin dealing. Every instrument has a distinct personality and a unique story to tell. It's been quite a trip and I'm pleased to be able to share it with you.

But there is another compelling reason I decided to write this book. My collection may be the very last private collection to contain so many great instruments. I believe that it would now be exceedingly difficult for a private individual to assemble a collection like mine. This may be true even if a prospective collector were as rich as Bill Gates:

- ♦ The greatest instruments are mostly *not* for sale and won't be in the foreseeable future. Over the past 40 years very many of the great ones have passed into the hands of museums, foundations, orchestras, financial institutions, or governments. Such owners will probably keep them indefinitely. Others are held by families that have owned them for generations and are most unlikely to sell them.
- ♦ Instruments the caliber of those I collected are often cherished and owned for life, entering the market only upon the death of the current owner. That's precisely how I acquired the great *Lord Wilton del Gesù*: from Lord Yehudi Menuhin's estate. The violin would never have been available in Menuhin's lifetime.
- ♦ The values of Strads and del Gesù, the gold standards of violin collecting, have ballooned to the point that very few private individuals can afford them. Sadly, only musicians with private means — say, a rich spouse — can afford them these days.

You will find that my approach is neither reverent or scholarly. This account is intended to be lighthearted and, I hope, occasionally amusing. I'm incapable of deadly seriousness either in my writing or my life. So, a bit of humor has inevitably crept into this narrative.

But that said, I have nothing but the most profound respect for these great instruments. They are, in fact, irreplaceable, fragile and infinitely valuable expressions of creativity, art, and human genius. Violins like *La Pucelle* or the *Lord Wilton*, are among the great treasures of humankind. I truly believe they are in no way inferior to the *Mona Lisa* or *Pietà*.

Now, on with my story.