



**The 1690 'Tuscan' Stradivari violin  
in the Accademia di Santa Cecilia**  
Ed. Andrea Zanrè

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It is tempting to describe this new series of books (Volume 1 was devoted to a c.1625 Girolamo Amati viola) as the last word in technical publishing on their specific subjects, but just a glance at the contents makes you realise there will never be a last word. This volume on the 1690 'Tuscan' Stradivari violin in the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Rome, contains all the remarkable progress in scientific analysis that has been made in recent years. It can be in no doubt that this progress will continue and increase and I am sure that, in just a few years' time, there will be even more research techniques to study and learn from. The first hologram cannot be far away. But what this book does most effectively is assemble the best expertise and information currently available and present it as clearly as possible. And in this aim it succeeds entirely.

As the sole remaining violin of the Medici Quintet, a project originally commissioned as a gift to Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici, the 'Tuscan' sits alongside the other surviving masterpieces from that group, the contralto and tenor violas, and the cello, all of the same year. The significantly later 1718 'Medici' violin would seem to have been a replacement for a lost second violin from the original set, but the exact circumstances still remain an enigma, which is discussed within this book. All the 1690 instruments share the most beautifully figured wood in the back, and are in a

remarkable state of preservation. Although the violin, like the contralto viola, has been 'modernised', the Medici instruments together provide a rich seam for investigation and a valuable insight into how these great instruments were originally conceived.

The dendrochronology, CT scanning, microtomography, thickness mapping, UV photography, and now even ink analysis all lend weight to historical research and, in the end, our own aesthetic appreciation and regard for these wonderful objects.

Even in the light of all this technology, Charles Beare's foreword is as insightful as anything here. His empathetic understanding of the instrument and its maker is the perfect demonstration of how these new tools expand and deepen our empirical knowledge rather than contradict or reduce it.

The book is beautifully illustrated with documents, contemporary paintings, and biographies of the many historical figures associated with the violin and its history, related instruments, and also the forms and patterns on which the 'Tuscan' was made. These, too, have now been subjected to close scientific analysis, and the interpretation of the handwriting and chronology of the various inscriptions are very valuable.

The photographs of the instrument are majestic, and enthralling in the high-definition close-ups, both internal and external. The full-size views seem to be rendered with good accuracy according to the extensive tables of measurement provided.

As is almost expected these days, the book comes with a DVD containing the photography, which also lets us hear the violin in the hands of Fabio Biondi.

I was about to say that the level of information within this book is exhaustive, but that word maybe has the wrong connotations. The material that can be gleaned from this and future examinations of the 'Tuscan' Stradivari is far from exhausted, and the careful study of it is not tiring, but its very opposite; an inspiration, in fact. It is the closest any of us will get to looking over the maestro's shoulder on a Cremonese morning in 1690.

JOHN DILWORTH