Missing Violin's Case: The Finder Fiddles While Losers Sue

By Daniel Pearl

LOS ANGELES -- David Margetts still doesn't know if he left the borrowed Stradivarius on the roof of his car and drove off, or if it was stolen from the unlocked vehicle while he bought groceries.

That was in August 1967. Mr. Margetts, then a second violinist with a string quartet at the University of California at Los Angeles, sent notices to pawn shops and violin stores and took out classified ads. He spent the next 27 years worrying that the "Duke of Alcantara" Stradivarius, made in 1732, was gone forever.

It wasn't. Officials of UCLA, to which the instrument had been donated, say the same violin reappeared this January. But the tale doesn't end there. University officials have discovered that once somebody is smitten with the love of a Stradivarius, taking it away is like wresting a baby from its mother's arms.

Antonio Stradivari of Cremona, Italy, made about 1,200 violins, half of which still survive. After his death in 1737, factories churned out hundreds of thousands of copies. And every day, people bring violins with Stradivarius labels to appraisers, thinking they have bought the genuine article for a song. To break the bad news to such would-be millionaires, Los Angeles violin dealer Robert Cauer shows them a 1909 Sears Roebuck catalog advertising a Stradivarius copy for $1.95.

But Joseph Grubaugh, a violin dealer in Petaluma, Calif., says that when a violin teacher showed him a student's instrument bearing a Stradivarius label one day in January, he thought he was looking at the real thing. The slight ruggedness of the scroll, the spontaneity of the "purfling" and the "ropiness" of the Bosnian maple backside suggested that only the Italian master could have made the instrument.

He opened his copy of the Iconography of Antonio Stradivari and found a photograph of a violin with similar scratch marks on the back. It was the Duke of Alcantara. A bigger shock came a week later when the violin teacher picked up the repaired fiddle. Mr. Grubaugh flipped through a violin registry and saw the instrument listed as stolen from UCLA.

The student was amateur violinist Teresa Salvato, who says she got the violin as part of a divorce settlement last year. She says her husband received the violin around 1979 from his aunt, who helped run a music store and kept the double-violin case in a closet for years before her death. (The case also contained another violin that had been reported as missing at the same time.) Where the aunt got the violin case isn't known, Ms. Salvato says, but one piece of family lore had her picking it up beside a freeway on-ramp after mistaking the canvas-covered case for a baby.
Ms. Salvato contacted UCLA, but over the next 10 months declined the university's pleas to surrender the violin. Also, Ms. Salvato didn't appreciate the unannounced visit to her home in May by two campus police officers who, she says, threatened to arrest her and told neighbors she was a theft suspect. When they reappeared last week to serve civil court papers, Ms. Salvato wouldn't leave her locked car. She now is staying in a hotel.

And the Alcantara is in hiding. UCLA lawyers tried to get an injunction Friday in Superior Court in Los Angeles to force Ms. Salvato to disclose the location. Instead, university officials settled for Ms. Salvato's offer to bring the violin today to a museum, where it will stay unplayed while the court decides who owns it.

All the fuss is over a violin that by one estimate is valued at $800,000 -- a quarter of what the best Strads fetch. Antonio Stradivari would have been 88 years old when he built the Alcantara, and his sons Omobono and Francesco probably cut the F-holes. Experts who have seen the violin say its varnish was later touched up clumsily.

Besides, the violin wasn't played by anybody famous, unless one counts the concertmaster of the Detroit Symphony. The original owner was an obscure Spanish nobleman described in archives only as an "aide-de-camp of King Don Carlos, assassinated in Lisbon," according to Charles Beare, a Stradivarius expert and dealer in London.

Still, even a mediocre Stradivarius can be inspirational. Violinist W. Thomas Marrocco, who played the Alcantara in the 1960s, wrote a novel whose main character was the violin. Of the Alcantara, he says: "It's sweet, it's mellow, it's strong, it responds to every notion one has."

Violinists can have sticky fingers with such instruments. One New York violinist waited until he was on his deathbed in 1985 to reveal that the instrument he played for years was a Stradivarius stolen from Carnegie Hall nearly a half-century earlier. And David Sarser is losing hope of playing another Bach partita on his 1735 "ex-Zimbalist" Stradivarius, which disappeared three decades ago. Mr. Sarser says the violin has been photographed in Japan, but nobody will tell him who has it. "I have no desire to play any other instrument," he says. "It became part of me, and I became part of it."

Ms. Salvato played her mystery violin for the first time in January. It was "heavenly," she says, "smooth and gorgeous." It even helped her play in tune. "There are things I can't do on the violin, but I can execute them on that violin," she said.

During a recent telephone conversation with Robert Portillo, a musical curator for UCLA, Ms. Salvato asked if less-accomplished musicians might be allowed to play the violin. And she wondered "if there is any possible legal way I could keep it."

There isn't, says Carla Shapreau, a violin maker and lawyer retained by the university. If the Duke of Alcantara was stolen, "You can't get good title from a thief," and if it was found, the finder would have had to try to locate the owner.
But Ms. Salvato notes in a court filing that she wasn't the finder, and that several lawyers have told her she might have a claim to the violin. Attorney Allen Hyman, who represented her in Friday's hearing, said later that the violin could have been stolen centuries before UCLA ever got it.

"Can they trace it back to the Duke?" he asked with a grin. "Maybe we have to get in touch with the Duke's relatives."

Ms. Salvato insists she only wants what is right for the instrument. The university "lost it once," she says. "They're really not careful."

Mr. Portillo -- who complains that Ms. Salvato is taking the university "for a ride" -- says UCLA will be extremely mindful of the instrument if it is returned. One faculty member who is likely to play it is Alexander Treger, concertmaster of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, who already plays an orchestra-owned 1711 Stradivarius. On tour, Mr. Treger says, "I don't leave the violin even if I have to go to the bathroom."