



Made in Italy: Strings Attached: Four Seasons of an Italian Violin

Thomas Walter Kelley

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A prized violin becomes akin to a living, breathing object within a musician's family in the wrenching, informative memoir Made in Italy.

Thomas Walter Kelley's memoir *Made in Italy* recounts his and his wife's astonishing time with a Cremonese violin.

In May of 2000, Kelley and his wife Cheri invested in an eighteenth-century Italian violin, a Guadagnini—or so it seemed. They later found out that their violin was, in fact, a Ceruti. Structured like Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, the book discusses the violin's possible history, its path into the United States, its identity crisis, and the couple's procurement of it. Throughout, romantic Italian and musical history is filtered through memories of Kelley's vacations and inconclusive research into the Ceruti's possible historical path.

The intricacies of violin craftsmanship and the couple's personal connections to their violin are covered in flashbacks that are interspersed with historical descriptions about the violin's general milieu. There's a thrilling story about a Stradivari that was stolen and lost for over three decades before resurfacing, for example. Historical tidbits, such as that Vivaldi provided impoverished girls with the opportunity to sing and gain a reputation, and that Niccolò Paganini's virtuosity was attributed to both a deal with the devil and his Marfan's syndrome, wend in among picturesque descriptions of Venice; some such information is tangential to the story of the Ceruti, though.

Information about violins like the Stradivari, known for its bright, sweet voice, and the Guarini, whose tones are deeper and darker, drives home the significance of the instruments and their differences, as does an explanation about how the position of a violin's "sound post" determines its sound. But the connection between Cheri, a musician, and her instrument is celebrated above all, with the book calling the Ceruti her mind's voice. Regardless of the instrument's true origin, it came to seem like a living, breathing object within the family, and the prospect of letting it go became wrenching.

Commentary on how most musicians cannot afford to buy quality instruments, requiring instrument benefactors, infuses the story with rhetorical weight beyond the central violin. "You never truly own one of these violins," the book asserts. Instead, "you simply pass through its life." A somber tone is also applied to the book's microhistory of Jewish violinists during World War II.

With its insights into a nation's musical history, the memoir *Made in Italy* uses the procurement of a beautiful, rare violin as a vehicle to explore a bygone world devoted to music.

ALEENA ORTIZ (August 11, 2024)

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