Lev's Violin

Helena Attlee *Particular Books £20*

Rating: ★★★★★

Helena Attlee was at a concert in a small Welsh town when she suddenly felt overwhelmed by the beautiful sound of a violin solo. It was a sound 'powerful enough to open pores and unbuckle joints', but when she spoke to the violinist she was staggered to discover that his instrument was, in his own words, 'absolutely worthless'.

How could anything so exquisitely beautiful have so little value?

Seeking to answer that question, Attlee embarked on an amazing and somewhat quixotic journey that took her from the Italian city of Cremona, known to music experts as the birthplace of the violin, all the way to Russia, where this particular instrument had once been owned by a musician called Lev.

The story begins in the 16th Century, when a visionary called Antonio Amati created the first violins, radically changing music for ever. When, a century later, the most famous instrument-maker of them all, Antonio Stradivari, opened shop in Cremona, the city's reputation for unrivalled workmanship reached a peak.

Attlee's quest to find the origin of Lev's violin takes her down a lot of blind alleys, but one of the joys of her book is the glimpses it affords of forgotten historical byways and of a colourful, sometimes roguish cast of characters.

My favourite of these is an Italian peddlar called Luigi Tarisio who, despite being of humble birth, amassed the 19th Century's most magnificent collection of violins. His ability to identify and evaluate any instrument prompted one eminent London dealer to declare that 'he smells a fiddle as the devil smells a lost soul'.

When Tarisio died in Milan, he was discovered with two violins clutched to his breast and the modern equivalent of a million pounds stuffed in his mattress.

This is a beguiling and truly original book. It would perhaps benefit from some colour illustrations, but Attlee has such a wonderful way with words that as a reader you almost imagine you can see, as well as hear, Lev's violin.

Simon Griffith