

REVIEW

Lev's Violin by Helena Attlee traces an instrument's history in luminous prose

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A charming book reconstructs the European wanderings over three centuries, from Cremona to the Black Sea, of a battered, beautiful violin

By [Ivan Hewett](#), CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC 4 April 2021 • 3:00pm



‘People make things, but things are very often the making of people’: a modern violin workshop in Cremona CREDIT: Rainer Binder/ullstein bild via Getty Images

There’s something about a great violin made by the legendary craftsmen of Cremona – Amati, Guarneri, Stradivari – that stills all criticism. You can argue about the music played on the violin, but about the violin itself, the beauty of its curves, the “purfling” inlay around the edge, the perfect proportions and above all the sound, there can be no argument. A great violin is like Keats’s Grecian urn, a “still unravished bride of quietness”.

Add to that the stirring story of how a little town in Italy bred those three greatest dynasties of violin makers, and then add the riches-to-rags-and-then-riches-again story of how their violins became hugely valuable commodities, to be bought anonymously by oligarchs at auctions and then locked in vaults, and you have all the ingredients of a bestseller. Which is why a new book about Stradivari et al tends to come along every decade or so.

Lev’s Violin adds a welcome new twist to the story, which begins in the unlikeliest place: a folk festival in Wales, where the author, the travel writer Helen Attlee, happened to hear a violin played by someone called Greg, who bought it from a bloke called Lev. She’s riveted by its sound, and loves its shape. “Its seams were almost flush with its sides,” she tells us, “as if music lapping at its outline for centuries had eroded them like a fragile coastline,” and it had “dark scars and scratches as expressive as the lines on an old face”.

Lev was told his violin was from Cremona and also that it was worthless, but Attlee was already in love with it anyway, and devoted much of the next four years of her life tracking down its origins. The mysterious Lev, whom we eventually get to meet, bought it from a gypsy in Rostov-on-Don in 1980. But how could a Cremonese violin have made its way to a Black Sea port, and into the hands of a folk fiddler?

The sheer unlikeliness of that journey would make most people smell a rat, particularly since (as Attlee admits) the violin world is rife with frauds. People will believe any myth told about a violin that's a bit chipped and worn and historic-looking. My great-aunt had a fire-singed violin she was convinced was rescued from the Great Fire of London, on zero evidence. But that's no barrier to Attlee. Being given an excuse to retread old stamping grounds in Cremona, Venice, Florence and little towns in Lombardy and the Veneto was irresistible, and a jaunt to the Black Sea to complete the story was the icing on the cake. Plus she understands the way that any object made with tender care acquires something like a soul through being loved and handled, and will mould its successive owners in turn. "Although people make things, things are very often the making of people," she says. So even if the violin turns out not to be Cremonese, it will retain its magic; but (she slyly hints) the power of that magic is surely a sign that it really is Cremonese.

Having thus pinioned the reader on tenterhooks, Attlee sets out to trace a possible path for Lev's violin, a long journey undertaken partly in person and partly by sifting through miscellaneous scholarship. She delves into trade routes in Europe, the ancient arts of forestry in the Dolomites where the best wood for violins comes from, and the burgeoning of Italy as Europe's musical centre, exporting its styles, composers, performers and violins all round the world, including Russia. She roams around Italy, talking to violin makers, dealers, historians, folk-song collectors. Like all good travellers, she's not afraid to beard people and won't take no for an answer. Along the way she drops in bits of local colour that have the tang of authenticity. Anyone who has travelled in Italy will recognise the truth of her observation that those vast churches establish their own micro-climate, wrapping you in a coolness that never changes, winter or summer.

Later the tone darkens, as Attlee traces the effect on Cremonese violins of the massive displacements of people brought on by war. "Sometimes they were among the swag of looting armies, sometimes among the forlorn heaps of possessions piled on the railway stations of concentration camps." In the final chapters the sun comes out again, but it's now the sun of Rostov-on-Don, where she meets the couple at whose wedding Lev played 40 years earlier. Attlee tells the story in easy, luminous prose, infused with a deep understanding for the way human value accrues mysteriously in things, and in the act of making them. Priceless or not, any violin, including Lev's, is supremely valuable to whoever loves it.

Lev's Violin is published by Particular at £20. To order your copy for £16.99 call 0844 871 1514 or visit the [Telegraph Bookshop](#)