

# The Scroll

The Membership Magazine of The Violin Society of America

Volume 6 No. 1  
Spring 2021

## Inside This Issue:

The 'Blagrove'  
Omobono  
Stradivari

A Visit to the  
Vichy Violin  
Auction



# A Southern Girl's Guide to a Violin Auction

By Anna Huthmaker

This past year was a whirlwind of ups and downs for violin makers and dealers. Like most VSA members, our violin shop has done our best to make lemonade out of the lemons that COVID has handed us. However, the most disappointing part of a year spent in pandemic craziness was having to miss the violin auction in Vichy, France. For many years, our family has made the yearly pilgrimage to the South of France to soak up the culture, meet wonderful buyers from the violin world, and of course, bid on instruments and bows.

For much of the past, my family had gone, and I had stayed home to run the shop. In 2019, however, with my parents nearing retirement, they decided that it was my turn to go. Alone. When I realized that I would be in charge of not only a sizable budget, but also the decision of what to bid on, I have to say that I was a bit overwhelmed. Truly, I was a LOT overwhelmed. So, I called my brother (who speaks French) and said, "Free trip to France if you translate for me!" He cheerfully agreed and off we went...

After a whirlwind of planes, automobiles, and jetlag, we arrived at our favorite hotel. Hotel Chambord is popular with many of the auction attendees and the place to 'see and be seen'. We shouldered our way between the dealers chatting and smoking around the front door and entered the tiny lobby. Small, tightly knit groups of men looked up as we walked in, everyone wondering the same thing, 'Is that someone important?' They immediately decide that I am not important and return to their conversations. I smile to myself. Sexism is alive and well, but that is none of my concern. I am here for the bows. And the wine.



*One of the beautiful auction offerings.  
All photos provided by the author.*



*Proud author with her auction paddle.*

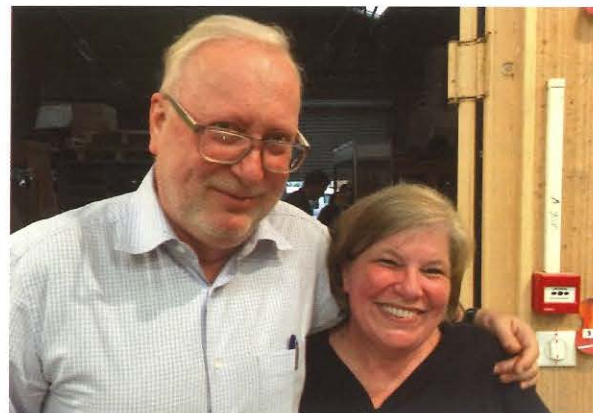
The next morning, after my breakfast of croissants and café au lait, I stepped out of the hotel, ready for a lovely walk to the auction house. Immediately a man jumps in front of me and says in a heavy accent, "Panormo? Piccate? I have them here!" He points to the trunk of his car and I immediately say, "Sorry... no cash." It is



my answer for all the 'rogue dealers' that are here to profit off the auction without actually taking part in it. During the auction week, a whole lot of wheeling and dealing takes place... in car trunks, hotel rooms and coffee shops. In the past, it was all cash based, so saying you had 'no cash' took care of them. Alas, this guy was more street smart than I! He immediately replied with "Venmo!!" I laughed, having been outsmarted by technology. I shook my head and smiled as I continued to the auction house. I was excited to see the auction's owner and licensed experts – Messrs. Jean-Jacques Rampal, Jean-Francois Raffin, Guy Laurent, and Etienne Laurent. They have known my family for years. For us, they feel like old friends. With double kisses, they greeted me like an old friend as well, and immediately made me feel welcome.



Jonathan Marolle, Jean-Jacques Rampal,  
Yannick LeCanu



Jean-Francois Raffin and author

When I arrived, I registered for my paddle and entered the auction room proper. Imagine the fine art auctions you have seen in movies... thick beautiful carpet, brocade wallpaper and velvet covered chairs full of finely coifed, expensively attired bidders.

This is not that auction.

The Vichy Enchères auction house is predominantly a large, cavernous room with a concrete floor, plastic chairs and a mishmash of antique tables and glass display cases strewn about. The place is a violin dealers dream. The walls are covered with hanging violins and violas, the tables are covered with 'celli lined up on their sides and there is a square in the middle of the room of glass display cases with the *really* good stuff. Oh, and along one wall is my *raison d'être*... a long, long line of tables covered with bows.

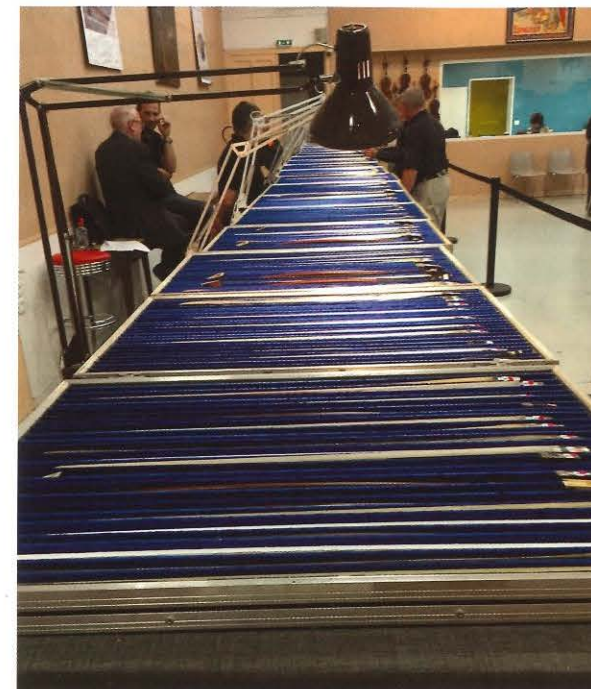


Bidders study the finer instruments.



'Celli lined up, ready for bids.

In our shop, I am known as the Bow Queen. Bows are my love, and what knowledge I have centers around them. This trip was specifically for purchasing bows and it was time to get down to work. One of the things my parents had taught me about Vichy is that you need to look at everything three times, and I had a plan. The first day is for an over-all view of everything. The morning of the second day is to double check for any hidden repairs/damage that you missed the day before. Trust me, you always miss stuff! And in the remainder of your viewing time, a third look for making final decisions.



Bows, bows, and more bows...



Anna and Charles ('wonderful brother')

Well, the morning of the first day had come and it was time to get down to work. I entered the room and see wall to wall men. You see, the Vichy auction is a man's world. Heavily. There are some couples there, owners of shops around the world. But very, very few women fly solo. And that works beautifully to my advantage because, as one of the few women, you become somewhat invisible. No one sees you as a threat and you can put your head down and get to work. And it is serious work. Imagine a bow box that holds 24 bows. Now imagine twenty of them side by side down this long line of tables. NOW imagine all the dealers trying to look at those bows at the same time. What you see before you is what I call the Wall of Testosterone. One of my favorite things about the Vichy auction is that people literally come from all over the world. You are surrounded by different languages, accents, and colognes. But that also means different cultural ideas of personal space. People from other countries don't seem to require as much space as Americans do. And this is particularly obvious at the Vichy auction because there is not much space to begin with. So, I wiggle my way between two men at the beginning of the bows and take a deep breath, knowing that I will have to get used to spending the next three days literally pressed up against strangers. And not a one of them will offer to buy me dinner!

I started at the beginning of the line of bows and my wonderful brother, Charles, stood behind me taking notes. I would say the Lot number, study it carefully and mutter things quietly... "Ouchard pere... beautiful head. C.N. Bazin... terrible warp. LaFleur, replacement button and lovely Pernambuco," etc. Many of these things are written in the auction guide that the house provides.



Monsieur Raffin does an amazing job of detailing these things so that there are no surprises. There is just the little inconvenience of it all being in French. I also have a cheat sheet with the English translation of words like “abime” (damage), “bloques” (frozen screw) and “ecrou” (eyelet). But I still have to lay eyes on every bow.



*Dealers, musicians, and collectors studying the wares*

The first day of viewing is a long one but ends with one of the most fun events. In the evening, there is what we call the “Cheap Auction”. I do not know what the official name is, but it is a small, cramped, dog-eat-dog auction that is a lot of fun. This is for the instruments and bows deemed not good enough for the regular auction and is held outside in the garage. Bundles of bows, multiple violins grouped together, and double basses literally being held together by duct tape. The bidding is fast (in French) and aggressive, and you MUST pay attention. If you are on your game, you can get some great bargains! I snatch a sweet little silver-mounted German violin bow, while my brother grabs a few TOC French violins. Before we know it, the Cheap Auction is done, and we head out for a late dinner. And some French wine.

The second day begins with more viewing time, along with my appointment to see the best bows. They display these in a private room with eight chairs around a long table. Each chair sits in front of its own bow box full of truly lovely bows. Unlike the main room, it is quiet with only the sound of pens scratching as we take notes on the various offerings. I am not sure if I will be bidding on one of these or not....it all depends on how the over-all sale goes, and if I can work it into my budget. But this is not only an exercise in viewing, but in learning. There are not many places you can go to see this many incredible bows in one place, and to really study them. So, for me, this is golden.



*Author in the private room*



*A beauty...*

Later in the day, the viewing ends and they kick us all out to set up for the auction proper. After a lunch of crepes, we gather around the metal garage door that fronts the auction house. When they open the doors, there is a race for the back row of chairs. This is where everyone wants to be. You can see who is bidding against you, while your own bids remain somewhat private. We grab our seats and sit back for the four-plus hours of serious bidding. The room has been transformed into

a square of sorts. All the lots have been taken down from the walls and the bow boxes closed. If you have not studied them at this point, you are out of luck. The right side of the room is a line of tables where staff sit on laptops and phones, dealing with the online and phone bids from around the world. The left side of the room is fenced off with long tables where everything goes once it has been auctioned off. Later, that is where we will go to collect our prizes.

And the front is where the auctioneer takes charge of the bidding. Flanked by the other experts, he immediately launches into the lots. This year Etienne Laurent is our auctioneer, and French numbers flow elegantly from his mouth as the matrix board works hard to keep up. Before you know it, the hammer has dropped on the first item. Time is not wasted. There are over 1,000 items to be auctioned off and with few exceptions, the action does not pause as they auction off violin after bow after viola after cello. It is amazing to see 100K euro instruments handled with the same quick efficiency as the 700 euro bows. Bidding is silent and subtle, and often I cannot even tell who is bidding. I just watch Etienne as his head swings back and forth between one side of the room or another. At times, it gets interesting, with the numbers rising higher and bidders fighting it out. We hold our breath as we wait on a phone bid to go higher or drop out. And once or twice the hammer falls to the sound of applause. This is an experienced group of bidders and if they are impressed enough to clap, you know something special just happened. Several years ago, my parents were in Vichy when the record-breaking Tourte violin bow went for a staggering 576K euro (including fees). And yes, there was applause.



I had my eye on about 40 bows, but they were interspersed throughout the auction. As a result, I had quick periods of excitement as I hopefully bid on a bow, separated by lulls where the sound of French numbers rolled through my brain. You really do want to stay alert. Sometimes, lots would come and go with only 1-2 bids before the hammer falls, and if you are flexible, and paying attention, you can grab unexpected deals. One thing I do have to guard against is auction fever. First there is the whole thing about the numbers being in Euros. If I let myself forget, I could easily find myself on the other end of an unpleasant surprise regarding currency conversion and the mandatory auction fees. Also, it is quite easy to get swept away. I would see a bow that was predicted to go for 600-800 euro and the bidding would stall at 300. I would think “Yes!! I am grabbing that!!” Fortunately, though, I would look down at the copious notes that I took during all THREE of my viewings of the bow and see the words “NO WAY!” written next to it.

Late in the afternoon of the third day, I hit the top of my budget and I know that I am finished. I have won 21 lots, along with my bow from the first night, and I am ecstatic. While the auction



goes on, I make my way up to the line for closing out your purchases. This is where I stand in line and pray to God that the credit card companies that assured me that they would approve large purchases in a foreign country do actually approve them. There is nothing worse than calling American Express from the back of an auction and trying to convince them that you are, in fact, you! Today, however, all went smoothly and after paying, I made my way over to the side of the room and gathered my plunder.

Then came the fun part. I had brought along a giant bow box, surrounded by all manner of packing materials, and a sturdy cardboard box. I went out into the garage, sat down on the cold, concrete floor and proceeded to go to town with scissors, foam, bubble wrap and packing tape. I had planned for DHL to come pick up the box the next day, but I was tasked with making sure it was appropriately packed for the trip.

I finished in time to hear Etienne auction off the last dozen lots, and after the hammer fell for the final time, the room burst into applause. We had all worked long hours studying and bidding on hundreds of instruments and bows and now it was time to party. The wonderful staff of Vichy Encheres rolled out long tables of hors d'oeuvres, cheese, champagne, and yes, wine. Now that we aren't all concentrating on our bidding, and competing for the same items, we come together as friends. It doesn't matter if you are a world-famous expert, a private collector from Japan, or a Southern girl from the United States, we all drink wine, share stories, and laugh together.



*A Bow Queen is prepared for all eventualities*

Later, a small group of us gathered around Susan, my favorite Vichy staff member, as she regaled us with stories of the different auctions they have. We asked how String Instrument Auction attendees were different from Jewelry, Furniture and Fine Book Auction attendees and she said violin folks were lots more fun. Looking around the room, I didn't doubt her a bit. And I cannot wait for next year's auction!

For more information on the Vichy auction, go to <https://vichy-encheres.com/>

To read about the record breaking Tourte bow action, go to <https://www.thestradd.com/lutherie/tourte-bow-demolishes-price-records-in-french-auction/7333.article>



*Monsieur Raffin and the wonderful staff of Vichy Encheres*

*Anna Huthmaker literally came into this world to the sounds of Brahms when her mother went into labor while playing in a symphony concert. She has since spent her entire life immersed in music. With a Bachelor's degree in Violoncello performance and a Master's Degree in Double Bass performance, she spent decades playing professionally and teaching. In addition to performing, soon after college her father, Roland, introduced her to the world of lutherie. Many years of studying bow restoration resulted in her pursuing a career with her family violin shop, Huthmaker Fine Violins.*



*Auction friends celebrate another successful trip to Vichy. From left to right: Susan Boiron, Felicity and Brian Ward-Smith from West Country Violins, Charles Huthmaker, unknown, author.*

*During this time, Anna's life has been divided into two loves: music and being of service. In 2010, Anna was invited to join Luthiers Sans Frontières-UK to go to Ecuador and Haiti to teach bow repair. Delighted to find a way to marry both of her loves, she began working with the different LSF organizations before joining with violin maker, Ute Zahn, to co-found Luthiers without Borders, USA in 2014. Since its inception, Anna has traveled with LSF-USA to developing countries where she teaches musical instrument repair to students in support of local music programs.*



## Order Your Copy Today!

**The British Bow is a sumptuous coffee table book that revisits the British Bow study exhibit from the 2016 VSA Convention that was curated by Bruce Babbitt and Philip Kass. Hardbound, 144 pages of beautiful color photos.**

**\$100 U.S. member price for standard edition, \$220 U.S. for the leather bound, numbered deluxe edition (quantity limited).**

**\$17 shipping and handling within the U.S; \$27 shipping and handling to Canada; \$37 shipping and handling outside the U.S. and Canada.**

**Order at [www.vsaweb.org](http://www.vsaweb.org)**

