



# From the Maker's Bench

## Look Homeward, Angel

The story of the recovery of a stolen violin of G.B. Guadagnini

by Laurence Anderson

*"Look homeward, angel and  
melt with ruth (pity)."*

John Milton

A 1759 G.B. Guadagnini violin owned by a former member of the Minnesota Orchestra was missing for nearly two years before it surfaced last November on the auction block at Christie's in London. John R. Waddle, a violin maker in St. Paul, played a crucial role in finding the violin when he recognized the missing instrument in the Christie's auction catalog which had arrived earlier in the month. Waddle immediately alerted the authorities, who have since exposed a case of betrayal and deceit that has resulted in one conviction and several indictments against family and friends of the owner.

The story begins in December 1996 when the Guadagnini violin and an 1896 Enrico Rocca violin were stolen from Nicolo Bonelli, an 84-year-old retired musician. Bonelli now suffers from dementia and lives in a Minneapolis nursing home. Caregivers at the nursing home became suspicious of the relationship between Bonelli and a long-time friend who seemed to be the only one taking care of Bonelli prior to his admission. The nursing home alerted local authorities who appointed a conservator to look into Bonelli's finances. The conservator brought the two violins then in Bonelli's possession to Waddle who informed him that neither of the violins were Italian nor of much value. That prompted a long investigation with dead ends and strange twists.

Bonelli had purchased the Parma period Guadagnini violin from Emil Hermann over 50 years ago. It was for him a perfect match. He played it throughout his entire career. He never went anywhere without it, developing that special attachment that many musicians have for their instruments. But by December 1996 he was destitute. Most of his life savings

had been stolen by this long-time friend who has since been convicted of four counts of theft by swindle. Authorities wanted to find out now if the "friend" had also stolen the violins.

In search warrants filed with the Ramsey county court in 1997, the "friend" stated he had given the violins to Bonelli's sister, Amelita Bonelli, who initially denied that she had received the violins, then later admitted that she had in fact received the Guadagnini but had



given it to a neighbor for safekeeping.

On June 10, 1997 authorities questioned the neighbor who said she had received the Guadagnini from Ms. Bonelli and had sold it for \$200 at a flea market. However, interviewed a week later, she changed her story. On June 19, 1997, she claimed that she had left the violin on the floor at a Barnes & Noble bookstore in a mall in a Minneapolis suburb. According to the warrant, she said that

she had done this because she "knew that the authorities were looking for the violin and [...] got scared." She stated that she thought that someone would find it and turn it in.

Then in October 1997, two women brought the 1896 Rocca to Waddle's shop. One of the women claimed that she recently received it from her lawyer who wanted to do her a favor. The violin had an Enrico Rocca label and a label, in an inconspicuous place in the upper bout, that read: "Reconstructed and revarnished for my friend Nicolo Bonelli, by Martin Beilke in 1969." The two women left abruptly with the violin after Waddle told them that the estate of Bonelli was under investigation. One of the women was later identified as the wife of the convicted friend.

The search for the violins was at a dead end until Waddle recognized the Guadagnini in the Christie's auction catalog in November 1997. Waddle called authorities, who came to his shop immediately with the photographs and papers of the violin. The Chief investigator was a tall man in a trench coat, taciturn and serious. He listened without comment as Waddle matched the photograph in the Christie's catalog to the photographs and papers in Bonelli's possession. Waddle began with the back. He pointed out first to authorities that the positioning pins were in the identical position, slightly off center. He continued by pointing out a small crack on the upper left corner, a tiny blemish in the wood in the center of the back and finally the identical wear pattern. Waddle had no question it was the same violin. By the time he had finished pointing out features of the top, the stern investigators were smiling.

The Ramsey County Attorney's office immediately called Colin Reeve, director of security at Christie's, who provided authorities with a letter indicating that the Guadagnini had been brought to Christie's for sale by a Kenneth Talbot.

When interviewed by investigators on November 14, 1997, Talbot stated that he inherited the violin from his grandfather. He then acknowledged that he had received the Guadagnini from his mother, the neighbor of Amelita Bonelli in whose care she had placed the violins.

A Ramsey County District judge ordered the conservator to fly to London, to sell the violin and to give the proceeds to the financially struggling Bonelli. However without the original papers, the violin could not be sold. The conservator had to return without money or the violin.

After a lengthy investigation, authorities charged several people with theft. According to the complaint, one of the defendants, Amelita Bonelli, obtained the Guadagnini and the Rocca but handed them over to her neighbor because she did not "want the government to sell the violins and use the proceeds to support her brother." In September 1996, Bonelli's new conservator became aware of the violins and asked the defendant Amelita Bonelli to give him all the violins of her brother in her possession. The defendant gave authorities two instruments of little value. The neighbor began to arrange to sell the Guadagnini, while she was misleading authorities by stating that she sold it in a flea market and later that she left it in a bookstore. She then allegedly took the Guadagnini to a violinmaker in

Elk River, Minnesota, who told her it was an extremely valuable old Italian instrument. She then called an accountant in Illinois to ask for advice on how to sell a valuable violin. The accountant gave her the telephone numbers for Christie's and Sotheby's. In May of 1997, she gave the violin to her son and told him to fly to London to deliver it to Christie's for auction.

In March 1998, Waddle found an anonymous buyer for the Guadagnini in Minneapolis. It has now returned home in the care of a musician who loves music as much as Nicolo Bonelli does. He plans to keep the violin and pass it down to his children. The Rocca violin, a Tubbs bow and several Beilke bows unfortunately still remain missing.

"Aside from simply wanting to see the right thing done concerning the violin, I had a great curiosity about it and wanted to get a chance to see it. When it finally came back to Minnesota, I got my wish," writes John Waddle. "The back is much more beautiful than the picture shows it to be. The handsome wood is not as flashy as some, but well chosen for beauty and tone. The medium curl and medullary rays are prominent over the entire back, accentuated by the rich golden ground, the yellow undercoat, and the transparent orange brown varnish over that. The corners are well formed and rather than flaring up like most makers

do, they actually diminish in thickness. The edges are well formed with well defined channels in the c-bouts where the edges are not worn as much as the upper and lower bouts. The sides, which are a healthy 33 mm high at the lower block and 31 mm at the upper block, match the wood of the back. The top is spruce of medium grain with the f-holes having the typical oval shaped lower lobes and the notch showing the bridge placement lower than the center of the f-hole as was Guadagnini's habit at the time. The scroll is strikingly beautiful and expertly cut. The wood is deeply flamed maple and the peg box and scroll retain a great deal of the same varnish that so well shows off the back. The center ridge of the comb on the back of the peg box is higher than the outer edges in typical Guadagnini fashion. Overall, the violin leaves me with the impression of a master in command of his craft."

In July 1998, the neighbor pleaded guilty to one of the counts against her; charges against the others have been dropped.

*Laurence Anderson makes and restores instruments at David Folland Violins, Northfield, MN. This winter, the article will be appearing in Strings Magazine, which has given permission for this additional publication. †*