

Charles Beare: 1937–2025

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One of the world's most renowned violin experts died on 26 April this year. Anne Inglis looks back at his life, while friends and colleagues share their memories



Photo courtesy Beare Violins Ltd

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Charles Beare's knowledge was unparalleled in the understanding of violins, their restoration and sensitive preservation. He disseminated his learning through an integrated workshop employing the highest level of restorers, as well as in seminal publications and a generosity in sharing what he knew.

His name was a byword for excellence in the identification of instruments, and probity in the trade. He was able to continue the long-established family firm, a force for good in encouraging restoration that preserved rather than altered the state of the original instrument. From the beginning, Beare had a huge respect for fiddles, bows and their makers, and this, with his eidetic memory, allowed him instant recall for comparison and identification.



Photo courtesy Beare Violins Ltd

His early life benefited first from a stint in the army doing National Service, then training at Mittenwald, and afterwards in the workshop of Rembert Wurlitzer in New York, where he sat at the bench with Simone Fernando Sacconi, the two legends of lasting influence in Beare's working life. At Wurlitzer's he saw 120 Stradivaris and 50 instruments by Guarneri 'del Gesù', plus an exceptional additional list of fine instruments and bows. In his obituary of Sacconi for *The Strad*, Beare recalled the attitude to restoration of his mentor: 'Good, in his eyes, was a repair that was completely unnoticeable, even when looked for: anything less was less than good. Very good was the same repair if it still could not be seen ten years later.'



Photo courtesy Beare Violins Ltd

With his father William Beare

Sacconi's achievements in restoration were matched by his highly prized bridges, soundposts and adjustments. When Beare returned to London to work in the family firm, he brought these ideas of excellence, and combined them with the team building he had learnt in the army and at Wurlitzer's.

'Back in the UK, Charles realised we had talented people in the shop,' says Charles's elder son Peter Beare, 'and wanted to recreate that Wurlitzer atmosphere. He reckoned that the workshop was the most important part. Grandpa Bill [William Beare] knew the importance of leadership, and the two were combined in a wish to expand and modernise.'



Photo courtesy Beare Violins Ltd

Wurlitzer's staff c.1961: (*standing, l-r*): Mario d'Alessandro, Charles Beare, John Roskowski, Simone Fernando Sacconi, Luis Bellini, Dario D'Attili. (*seated*) Hans Nebel, René Morel, Vahakn Nigogosian

Many restorers who worked for Beare became his right-hand people in a balance of recognition: the workshop wouldn't work without the dealing, and vice versa. There was always a spare workbench kept for visitors, many of whom would return home taking the Beare ethos with them. 'This allowed further sharing of knowledge in countries where there were good instruments but perhaps less knowledge or experience of restoration,' says Peter Beare. 'The aim was to help to raise the level for looking after those instruments. His motivation for recognition of instruments was partly driven by respect for their makers, however rustic their instruments may have been, and a desire to ensure they were correctly named for the sake of those makers.'

In his younger days Beare enjoyed hours while on holiday studying and drawing passing ships from the cliffs above Dover.. It was this eye that he was able to apply to violins, and he developed the most extraordinary memory bank

of instrument details. But his ultimate aim was to enable musicians to perform on their instruments functioning at their very best, and in the process became friends with some of the world's most prominent players, such as Jacqueline du Pré, Itzhak Perlman (for whom a lift was installed in Broadwick Street so he could reach Beare's office), Pinchas Zukerman and Isaac Stern.



Photo courtesy Beare Violins Ltd

On a fishing trip with the Wurlitzer's team: (*from left*) Dario D'Attili, Simone Fernando Sacconi, Vahagn Nigogosian, Charles Beare, Mario D'Alessandro

Players such as Nathan Milstein and, more recently, Nicola Loud were included in feedback for Beare's set-ups. 'He had an affinity for setting up, with his understanding of violins and their inner workings,' says Loud. 'He was able to match the right violin with the right person, and cared about the outcome. I spent many happy hours in the shop helping to bring out the best in a violin. He wanted the physics to work alongside his wish to balance the sound.'

John Dilworth, who has analysed many instruments for *The Strad*, remembers that Beare would present an instrument for the magazine, not because he was trying to sell it but because he thought it would be interesting. 'It

all sprang from being passionate about fiddles and music,' he says. 'He was driven to help, showed the right inclination, and wanted us all to know as much as we could.'



Photo courtesy Beare Violins Ltd

Beare (*centre*) with fellow judges at the Newark School's 1978 instrument making competition

Bow maker Tim Baker remembers Beare on his visits to the Newark School of Violin Making, supplying measurements and showing instruments. 'Who made this plane?' he would ask, picking up a beautiful little example lying on a workbench. In this way Beare pointed Baker to bow making. 'He was always the best employer in the world, and enabled everyone to do their absolute best. I developed a new way of bow restoring based on the work of the violin department. He was known as the world expert on violins, but his knowledge on bows was huge. He was especially excited about early bows, where a bow had come from, and the likelihood of origin. He had a good sense of wood from the same tree.' Dendrochronology was accepted by Beare as a fascinating tool in the process of identification, and he worked with the late John Topham as the science became more developed.



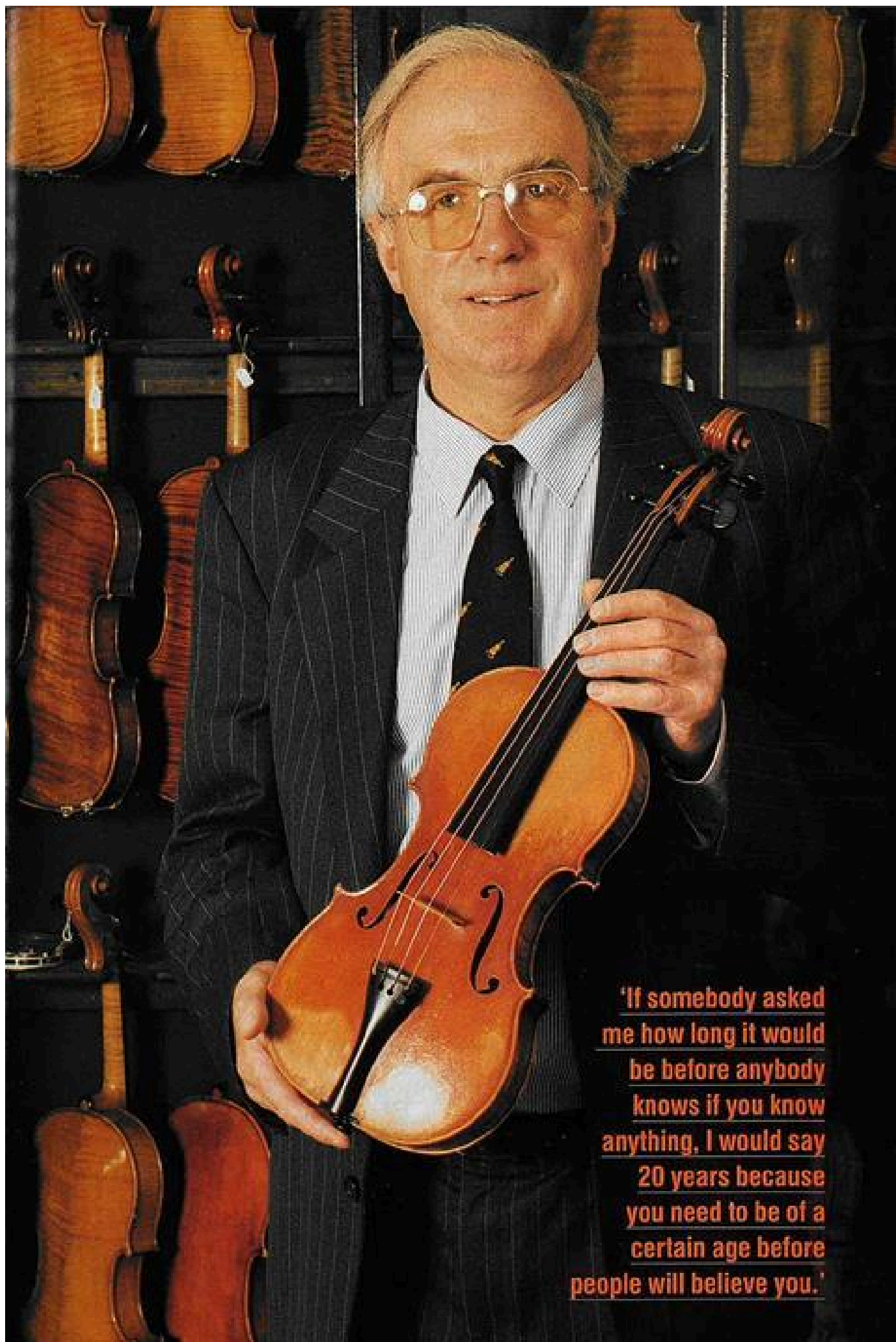
Photo courtesy Beare Violins Ltd

Surrounded by Stradivaris at the 1987 Cremona exhibition

His unique generosity extended to loaning instruments and helping charities, such as Buskaid in Soweto. Cello specialist Jo Hughes-Chamberlain, who worked in the shop for 17 years, recalls Beare helping a homeless man with a violin minus two of its strings; he also needed a new bridge and bow. All were provided. It was all in a day's work when Rostropovich might wander in; there was no buzzer to the shop in those days, she recalls.

He became a widely sought ambassador for the trade

He developed into a widely sought ambassador for the trade with his eloquent, articulate delivery. He openly shared information to enable research for the BVMA publication *The British Violin*. His own specialist understanding of Stradivari was shown in the legacy exhibitions and catalogues of the pivotal Stradivari exhibition in Cremona in 1987 to celebrate the maker's 250th anniversary, and in the more recent gathering of Strads in 2013 at the Ashmolean. He dedicated many years to Venetian makers after picking up the project in 1966 following the death of the instigator, his friend Paul Rosenbaum. His research is to be published posthumously.



'If somebody asked
me how long it would
be before anybody
knows if you know
anything, I would say
20 years because
you need to be of a
certain age before
people will believe you.'



Profiled in *The Strad* in 1997

In 1998 Beare created a new venture in partnership with another London dealership. The original family firm was renamed Beare Violins Ltd, while the new company took on the name of J&A Beare. He and his son Peter resigned as directors of J&A Beare in 2012 and they, with Beare's other son Freddie, re-established the Beare business and ethos in Kent, where it thrives in the fifth generation of the family enterprise at Beare Violins Ltd.

Charles Beare, 22 May 1937–26 April 2025, was a former president of the Entente Internationale des Maîtres Luthiers et Archetiers d'Art, an honorary fellow of London's Royal Academy of Music and a frequent lecturer for the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers and the Violin Society of America. He was made an honorary citizen of Cremona after the Stradivari exhibition there, and in 2004 he received an OBE for services to the music industry.

Read: [London-based violin dealer J&A Beare acquires W.E. Hill & Sons](#)

Read: [Concert review: Beare's All-Stradivari Gala Concert](#)

Musicians, colleagues and friends share their reminiscences of meeting, knowing and learning from Charles Beare



Photo: Cheryl Mazak

Pinchas Zukerman, violinist

My first meeting with Charles was in around 1968 or 1969 on Wardour Street. I probably went to the shop there with Jackie du Pré, because she was playing a lot at that time on the 'Davidov' Stradivari. From the beginning, it felt like we were blood relations – it was like meeting a brother. Charles will always remain, for me, the most extraordinary person in his love for people.

I used to go over to his house in Richmond, where he lived at the time, and we'd kick a football around. He would always be able to go round me with the ball; I thought I was good, but he was really good. I said, 'What the hell is this? You're never supposed to be that good!' And he said, 'Well, I must have had a bad youth.' And I said, 'So did I, but not in football.'

If it were not for him, I wouldn't have the instruments I have today. But before that, we went travelling around in 1969 and 1970 looking all over the place for an instrument for me. And we finally found one at Hill's – an Andrea Guarneri, which I bought with his help.

He was the most knowledgeable person about instruments. Not only did he know the instrument and what went on inside it over the centuries, but he also knew who had it last, and who had it before that, and why, and who bought what when. I don't think I've met anyone who comes close to his knowledge, but also his kindness. He was the most caring human being, and the love he had for the music was enormous. Jackie and I would go to the shop and we would spend time working and playing, and he would love to hear the music that we were bringing out of the instruments.

I remember him telling me he was going to Venice to look for the secret of the Venetian makers' varnish. And one time he came back and he said, 'I think I've got the secret of the varnish.' And I said, 'Really?' And he said, 'Well, maybe half of it!'



Jan Špidlen, luthier

The first time I met Charles was in Prague, when my father Přemysl Špidlen was giving a lecture as part of a conference day. I must have been 14 or 15 years old. Lots of important makers were there, and so was Charles. I was 22 when I got a job at J&A Beare in 1989. I shared a flat with Charles's son Peter; we are about the same age and were both into sports, so we understood each other very well. At that time in the workshop on Broadwick Street, as well as Peter, my colleagues included Michael Byrd, Andrew Fairfax, Reiner Schumann, Christoph Götting, Peter Gibson and the bow maker Tim Baker.

I was surprised by how much Charles trusted me. I was just a young guy, the son of his good friend, but someone he didn't know well before. But he still allowed me to go alone into the safe. First he showed me all the instruments in there – and there were some real 'jewels' inside. And later he gave me the keys to the safe, so I could go there alone, and I was able to take a fine Guarneri that I could copy in my free time. He trusted me so much, and I couldn't imagine myself doing that with a young apprentice.

Charles was interested in my work, and to see how my Guarneri copy was progressing and how it looked. When important clients came to the shop, such as Pinchas Zukerman, Charles made a point of coming to me and making introductions. He cared that I knew these musicians because he knew it would be good for my career. When Nigel Kennedy came in, he was the first to play my Guarneri copy. Charles was so generous, warm, open and trusting.



Andrew Fairfax, luthier

Charles was one of the advisors to the Newark School when I was studying there. He used to visit the school, look at everyone's work and bring a nice violin to show us. It was a highlight of our year. He was always very supportive of the school, and of new making. I started working for him in 1982, a year or so after leaving college.

Charles always kept a spare bench at the workshop in Broadwick Street, which could be filled for a few weeks or months, or sometimes longer. Young violin makers from other shops would fill that space and learn the J&A Beare techniques, set-up and expertise. And then a lot of them went back to their shops or even set up their own businesses. This created a camaraderie between us, and at auction time everyone would come back and pile into the workshop, and we'd all spend time looking at violins. It was a very sharing, warm and open environment, which was quite special at a time when many in the trade kept things secret and were terribly worried that people were going to share the information they had. Charles was just the opposite. He was always extremely generous with his time, but also with his knowledge. There was something to learn from him in every conversation.

The other unusual thing is that he was always willing to reassess his old opinions. A lot of experts would say, 'No, this is what I decided it is, and so that's what it is.' He could see an instrument 10 or 15 years later and say, 'Hmm, I'm not sure about that now, because I've seen a couple of other instruments in between.'

'He was very open to others' opinions and to discussing them'

He was very open to others' opinions and to discussing them. If there was ever a vacancy in the workshop, Charles would always ask what we thought of the candidate and whether they would fit in. If it was a thumbs-down from us, he always went along with it. But I'm sure he already knew who would be a good fit.

Charles would refer to everyone in the workshop as colleagues, never as employees or staff. There was a general sense of inclusivity, generosity and, to a certain extent, fun. He used to come into the workshop with a violin before lunch, and say, 'I'm popping back after lunch, and I want you all to write down on a bit of paper what you think this violin is.' Especially if you'd just started working there, you'd be thinking, 'Oh heck!' But it was all a bit of fun, and he did it with a twinkle in his eye.

I think he would give 10p to whoever made the closest guess.



Jean-Jacques Rampal, luthier

Charles was good friends with Étienne Vatelot, whose workshop in Paris I started working at in the late 1970s. One day Charles visited the Vatelot shop and Étienne asked Charles if I could work in London for him in a few years' time. And Charles said yes, and so in 1981 I arrived in London to spend a year working for him. Charles was respected greatly for his expertise but also for the matchless quality of restoration in his workshop. The two most important things I learnt working there were restoration and expertise. I was only 25 then, but was curious to see a lot of good instruments, and when Charles saw how interested I was in the matter of expertise, he was incredibly generous to me. When he had time, he would show me great instruments and explain the evolution of the work of the great Italian makers.

He was a fine draughtsman, and I remember when he explained the evolution of Guadagnini's f-holes, he would draw a different f-hole outline for each of the five cities that Guadagnini worked in. And the drawings were perfect.

Charles always did his utmost to help me. He said, 'Jean-Jacques, you can take a photo of the instruments if you like, for your personal use.' Before this time, a lot of people didn't take photos of instruments and sometimes they had certificates without photos. But photos can be so helpful for recording details of instruments. And so I started to take photos when I was at Charles's workshop, and afterwards when I came back to the workshop in Paris, we decided to set up a photo studio because it was absolutely necessary to document the instruments.



Photo: J. Henry Fair

Ralph Kirshbaum, cellist

Charles helped me in ways that were life-changing. When I was looking for a fine instrument, there was a Montagnana at a dealer in New York that I fell in love with. I was allowed to borrow it and play some concerts on it, and I knew it was the cello for me. But I also needed someone to bolster my confidence about it, so the person I turned to was Charles. I called him from New York and we talked at length about the cello and he wanted to know

its provenance and the year it was made, and when I told him, he said, 'Ah, yes, I know that cello. What are they asking for it?' And I told him the price, and he said, 'Well, that's more than anyone has paid for a Montagnana, but frankly in six months that won't matter.' He encouraged me to do everything I could to purchase it, and that instrument has remained with me for over 50 years. But that would never have happened without his encouragement and generosity of spirit.

Within the year, I was going to make my London concerto debut with the Philharmonia Orchestra. I didn't have the Montagnana yet, and although the Guadagnini I had was a beautiful instrument, it wasn't really one to fill the Royal Festival Hall. Charles was a good friend of Jackie du Pré – who wasn't using the 'Davidov' Stradivari at that time – and he spoke on my behalf and she kindly allowed me to use it. So again, Charles was there at an important time, helping me in a wonderfully supportive way.

When Pierre Fournier passed away in 1986, I was thinking how best to honour him and had the idea of establishing an award in his name. Charles was the first person I turned to for counsel, about the idea itself and how to make it happen. He was enthusiastic from the outset, so much so that he gave some money towards the creation of the award. He was also very supportive of having the inaugural award concert at Wigmore Hall. I was immensely grateful for his support in that initiative.

Charles was someone who, at critical times in my life, was there for me, and that's something I'll never forget. And in terms of his integrity, never did I doubt it, and never did I hear any negative comments, even from other dealers, who can sometimes be quite negative about their competitors. No one had anything but good words to say about Charles.



Photo: Jason Bell

Yo-Yo Ma, cellist

Charles was always incredibly casual about showing me his valuable instruments and bows. He'd say, 'Want to try this?' I was looking for bows, and for years he said, 'Well, I don't think I have anything.' Then one day he passed me a bow and said, 'Try this.' And I didn't know what it was, but it had obviously just been rehired and had no rosin on it. So I tried it for a couple of seconds, and I said, 'OK, that looks interesting.' And he said, 'No, take it home, try it for a bit longer.' And I did and I fell in love with it, and it turned out to be a really great bow. And I said, 'Charlie, I've been asking you to find me a bow for years. Where was this?' And he said, 'I don't know, it was in a drawer, I kind of forgot it was there.' I thought that was unbelievable! Was it a British salesmanship technique, I wondered, or had he genuinely forgotten it in a drawer somewhere?

But what was never in question was his deep love of instruments. The experience of being both in London and New York and having seen thousands of instruments gave him an encyclopaedic knowledge of seemingly infinite numbers of details and characteristics. It gave him that depth of connoisseurship.



Photo courtesy Beare Violins Ltd

Charles Beare (*centre*) with Kim Kashkashian and Yo-Yo Ma at the 1987 Stradivari exhibition in Cremona. Behind is Beare's father-in-law, Patrick Hills

He would tell me stories about someone in Italy who owned a Strad, and how the table of the instrument was left in the sun and the wood shrank and it would not fit together. Things would be puzzles in his mind. He'd say things like, 'You can see this scroll doesn't belong because the colour doesn't match, but then someone put it on so that it's of the same maker, but maybe it's not originally from the same instrument.' I was fascinated by his forensic mind, of knowing not only how things were made but then what people did with the instruments afterwards.

He had the British aesthetic of never over-varnishing or polishing instruments in the way that in America sometimes people would polish things and make them look beautiful. For him, less was more, and the original patina would be more desirable. Those were things that I picked up and found really interesting, because people deal with antiques in different countries in different ways.

There are people like me who, through playing and not through any bad intent, have got a few bumps and scratches on our instruments. He loved seeing a pristine instrument that had never been sullied by a player's hands – not that he disliked players, but he knew they could be a menace to instruments! And he felt that some should remain unsullied, and that it would be great to keep some exemplars of beautifully untouched instruments. But I think he said that with a sense of humour also.



Photo: Benjamin Ealovega

James Ehnes, violinist

I got to know Charles well around the time of the Stradivarius exhibition at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum in 2013. He was so kind, funny and, for someone I had revered so much from afar, he was incredibly down to earth. He invited me to come down to Kent and visit him and his family and for someone in the violin world, this felt like getting an invitation from the king.

I have a keen interest in the history and construction of instruments and bows and how to identify them, and it was incredible to see the ways in which he was better than anyone else at that sort of thing. He had an amazing understanding and such a logical way of explaining it. There was never any mystery, and this is an industry where there can be a lot of people blowing smoke.

'He saw beauty in everything, be it a good meal, a fine walk or a lovely day.'

Quite apart from the violin business, Charles was an incredibly nice man to spend time with. We would go for country walks and I enjoyed being out in nature with him and hearing stories of his life and the ways in which society in England had changed over the years. He had a wonderful way of looking at life and saw beauty in everything, be it a good meal, a fine walk or a lovely day.



Photo courtesy Beare Violins Ltd

At Beare Violins Ltd

He furthered my knowledge and opened doors for me to see things that would not have been possible otherwise. He gave me sage advice and confidence with a lot of dealings. He loaned me instruments from time to time for special projects, which was wonderful. I found it to be such an education to see not just the finest of the finest, but any kind of instruments with him, and I took every opportunity to do so.

His combination of knowledge, experience, character and attitude was unique as a whole, and is something irreplaceable. But it always seemed to me that Charles was so generous about passing along his knowledge and his experience that it's not like this dies with him. There are things I know that I'll be able to pass on to people. And as a

player, I can only imagine the things his sons or his co-workers can pass on. A huge part of his legacy is that we've all been able to further our own understanding through him.



Photo: Estonian Foundation of Musical Instruments

Hieronymus Köstler, luthier

I spent four years working for Charles, from 1978 to 1982. I had introduced myself to him, and I was a lucky boy to get the job! It was a fantastic workshop environment, working alongside such people as Christoph Götting, Maurice Bouette, Peter Gibson, Michael Fischer and John Dilworth. The atmosphere was very open and friendly, and Charles was always generous with his expertise, explaining the special things to look out for on instruments. He had a photographic memory for all the details about an instrument, but he also knew all the background, all the stories about it.

‘Working for Charles, I learnt the knowledge that I live on today’

Charles opened up the violin trade completely. Before, it was a very closed way of working; people were very guarded about their knowledge, and about passing that on to employees. Working for him, I learnt the knowledge that I live on today. And after I left, we had a good and friendly relationship for a long time, and it was always a pleasure to go back to the workshop when I visited London.

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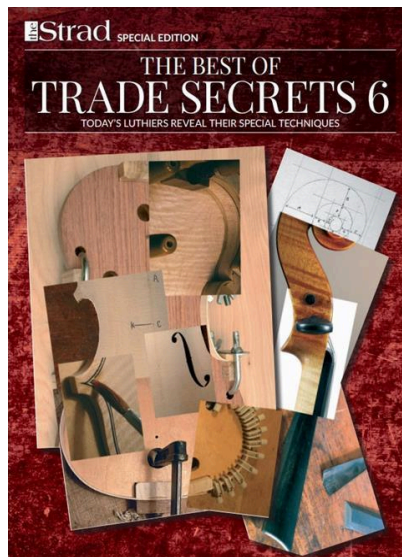
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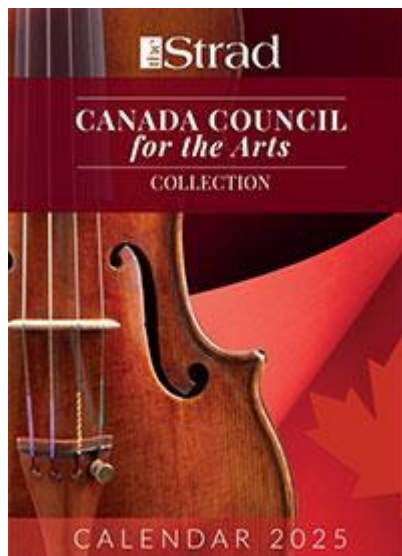
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