

# *Antonio Stradivari*

HIS LIFE & WORK  
(1644-1737)

W. Henry Hill,  
Arthur F. Hill &  
Alfred E. Hill

x (1644-1737)

# Antonio Stradivari

HIS LIFE & WORK (1644-1737)

W. Henry Hill, Arthur F. Hill & Alfred E. Hill

Leading appraisers of fine musical instruments agree that in the art of making violins, no one has ever gone beyond the achievement of Antonio Stradivari. The incomparable visual beauty of his instruments, and the infinite variety and magnificence of tone of which they are capable, have by this time passed into the realm of legend. Collectors have paid many thousands of dollars for one of Stradivari's violins. It is strange, but true, that only one book really delves into the life and art of this famous Italian craftsman. That is the book published in 1902 by the three Hill brothers of the London violin-making firm. Expert violin-makers and critics of superior violin craftsmanship, these men had unique opportunities to examine and compare almost all of the great examples of Italian violin-making. This, coupled with a pertinacity in research born of a deep-seated interest in unearthing and making available to the public all existing data on Stradivari, enabled the Hills to produce a book that contains just about everything known about him and his work.

The larger divisions of the book concern the ancestry of Stradivari; his violins, violas and violoncellos; his aims in relation to tone; his materials; his varnish; his construction; his labels; the number of instruments he made; the growth of their reputation. Some of the topics discussed under these main headings are: Stradivari's apprenticeship to Amati; comparison of his work with that of Amati; the tone of the pre-1684 Stradivari violin; changes between 1684 and 1690; distinguishing characteristics of many existing violins, violas and cellos, their specific location, etc.; erroneous views concerning Stradivari's materials; his preference for the wood of certain trees in given years; the mystery of the ingredients of Stradivari's varnish; the effect of varnish on tone; the measurements of Stradivari's instruments; his method of printing the labels; the figures and monograms; the time spent by Stradivari in making a violin; the years of greatest production; the largest number dating from one year; estimate of the total number made; an estimate of the actual sum he charged for an instrument; the introduction of Stradivari instruments into France and England; the first revelation of their supreme merit; and many other interesting topics.

Musicologists, violinists, makers of instruments, historians of culture, and those who count themselves simply as music lovers will find this to be an extremely interesting and informative account.

Unabridged, unaltered republication of original (1902) edition. New introduction by Sydney Beck, Head of Rare Book and Manuscript Collections, Music Division, New York Public Library. Analytical index by Rembert Wurlitzer. Appendices: census returns on the Stradivari family; additional data on his life; tables giving complete dimensions of 79 instruments by Stradivari, Amati, and others. 68 illustrations. 30 full-page plates, 4 in color. xxvi + 315pp. 5¾ x 8½. Paperbound.

## A DOVER EDITION DESIGNED FOR YEARS OF USE!

We have made every effort to make this the best book possible. Our paper is opaque with minimal show-through; it will not discolor or become brittle with age. Pages are sewn in signatures, in the method traditionally used for the best books, and will not drop out, as often happens with paperbacks held together with glue. Books open flat for easy reference. The binding will not crack or split. This is a permanent book.

ISBN 0-486

BELWIN  
MILLS



## Introductory Note.

---



THE life of Gio. Paolo Maggini, published in 1892, though complete in itself, was but one of a projected series of lives of great violin makers. To make this series complete, many lives, those of the Amati especially, must be written ; the history and work of many schools must be examined.

But, in considering the subject, certain men stand out so strongly as marking periods, that it seemed it would be useful to begin with works setting forth, broadly speaking :

- (1) The beginning of violins ;
- (2) The early development of violins ;
- (3) The perfecting of violins ;—

a kind of trilogy, in fact, in which the leading parts are played by Gasparo da Salò, Gio. Paolo Maggini, and Antonio Stradivari.

For various reasons the " Life of Maggini " was first completed ; but the " Life of Gasparo " is well advanced, and will be published before long. It has been judged wise to make the scope of this work wider than that of either of the other lives, and the necessary research and reading have involved much time and labour.

The name of Antonio Stradivari, whose life forms the third part of the trilogy, is so well known, not only to

violin and music lovers, but to people generally, that there is no need to try to claim interest for it by much speaking. But, as I have had the pleasure of close and prolonged examination of the collections and notes of Mr. Alfred Hill and his brothers in connection with this life, I am glad to have the opportunity of saying a few words about the book they have written.

It is possible to overrate expert knowledge ; it is equally possible to underrate it. " Everything of something, and something of everything," is almost a counsel of perfection.

This book is frankly the work of violin experts. Outside counsel has been sought, it is true, and has been generously acknowledged ; but this does not alter the fact that this " Life of Stradivari " is essentially by men, all of them peculiarly fitted, by hereditary natural aptitude, by long expert training, and by deep love of music and of musical instruments, to deal with the problems of Stradivari's history and of his immortal services to music through musical instruments, in ways new and striking, suggestive and exhaustive.

The illustrations deserve a word of special notice. To their selection and reproduction much thought and care have been given, so that they form, in themselves, a valuable contribution to the history of musical instruments ; while the strange beauty of violins, which has delighted so many, has never been so well represented.

The study of this work cannot fail, I think, to be valuable, not only to makers of violins, but to musicians ; while to the happily ever-growing number of those who use stringed instruments, it will prove a trustworthy source of information and pleasure. It is a work which can never be out of date.

MARGARET L. HUGGINS.

## CHAPTER I.

### The Ancestry of Antonio Stradivari.



WE propose to touch but lightly on the ancestry of Stradivari, as researches on this subject have been published by Fétis, Lombardini, Hart, and others, and have now been supplemented by Signor Mandelli. All these writers agree that the family name, spelt in different ways, was borne by more or less notable citizens of Cremona as far back as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Signor Mandelli gives various documents in proof of this, the earliest one being dated May 13th, 1188, from which we learn that "the Priest Alberto, Canon and Chief Warden of the Cathedral of Cremona, lets to Giovanni Stradivarto and heirs two pieces of allodial land," etc., etc.

With regard to the derivation of the name, Mr. E. J. Payne says, "It is the plural form of Stradivare, a Lombard variety of Stradiere, a toll-man or douanier, a feudal official who was posted on the strada or high road for the purpose of exacting dues from passengers." \*

---

\* Art. 'Stradivari,' Grove's "Dictionary of Music."

Mandelli, on the authority of Professor Astegiano,\* writes, "The form of the name 'de Stradaverta' as used in 1298 is derived from 'Strada averta' of the Cremonese dialect, in Italian 'Strada aperta.'" The earliest documentary evidence forthcoming concerning the direct ancestry of the violin-maker is furnished by Signor Mandelli, who quotes an extract from the Marriage Register of the Cathedral of Cremona, under date April 10th, 1600, recording the marriage of Signor Giulio Cesare Stradivari, of the parish of S. Michele Vecchio, to the Signora Doralice Milani, a widow, of the parish of the cathedral (*Parrocchia del Duomo*). To them was born in 1602 a son, christened Alessandro on January 15th at the Church of S. Michele Vecchio.

From the Register of Marriages of the Parish of S. Prospero, Signor Mandelli obtained the record, under date August 30th, 1622, of the marriage of Signor Alessandro, son of Giulio Cesare Stradivari, to Signora Anna, daughter of Leonardo Moroni.

From this union were born, as recorded in the baptismal register of the above-named parish, Giuseppe Giulio Cesare, March, 1623; Carlo Felice, September, 1626; Giovanni Battista, October, 1628. Then comes a complete blank in the records, and we are left to speculate as to whether any other children were born between 1628 and the year 1644, the date of the birth of Antonio, the subject of our enquiries. Repeated researches, made at different periods in the registers throughout the thirty-seven parishes of Cremona, have failed to yield further information. Signor Mandelli says:—

---

\* A Piedmontese, who compiled the catalogue of the ancient rolls of the community of Cremona up to the year 1300, printed in two volumes at Turin in 1899.

"Supposing that Antonio was christened—which seems fairly certain, seeing that we have proof of the fact in the case of his elder brothers—I felt hopeful of finding some mention of the fact in the registers and documents of one or other of the parish churches of Cremona; and as no further entry of either birth or death of any member of the family of Alessandro Stradivari is to be found in the records of S. Michele Vecchio, I concluded that they had removed elsewhere. Aware of the fact of Antonio Stradivari's marriage in 1667, I turned my attention to the record of the same in the Marriage Register—the extract from which I transcribe later on—and I enquired for the marriage documents, to which the birth certificates of the married couple ought necessarily to have been added; but the papers '*Stradivari Feraboschi*' have disappeared. I then went to the cathedral, where the registers and documents of the suppressed parish of S. Donato, which was the parish from which Stradivari married his second wife in 1699, are kept; and here again, strange to relate, I found the registration of the marriage, but neither documents nor birth certificates of man or wife."

Signor Mandelli is decidedly of opinion that these papers have, for some unaccountable reason, been either purloined or carelessly destroyed. He adds: "Bearing in mind the first marriage certificate, in which Stradivari is described as residing in the parish of S. Cecilia, I went to the Bishop's Palace, where the registers are kept, and perused them from beginning to end without finding mention of the name of Stradivari. I then examined the Census Book of that epoch, but with the same result."

"I now turned my attention to the registers of all the other parishes, and availed myself of every known channel likely to furnish any information, but with the same negative

result attained by those who had previously searched them."

In the years 1628 and 1629 Cremona was visited by a terrible famine, which was followed in 1630 by the scourge of plague, the ravages of which caused many of the inhabitants to flee, even the bishops and magistrates, so that the population, in consequence of the deaths and exodus which ensued, was reduced to a third of its number.\*

In the Census Book of the Parish of S. Vincenzo the parish priest confirms the deplorable state of the city, and under date 1628 he adds the following remark: "Many citizens have left Cremona to live quietly in other towns, and many have quite recently gone to the war."

Again in the Census Book, under date January, 1630, he records that the inhabitants of his parish have decreased in forty-four years from over one thousand to less than five hundred; some have gone to the war, others have died, and many have gone in search of a country where they can live by the fruits of their labour and not die from starvation.

In April of the same year he once more reverts to the subject, and states that "rich people have by this time been reduced to such a state of poverty, caused partly by the quartering of soldiers in their houses and partly by the heavy taxes imposed, etc., that were it not for the shame of it they would go about begging." He also says that all the inhabitants, rich and poor, who were able to leave the city were doing so.

Additional testimony as to the sufferings of the people is supplied by the parish priest of S. Michele Vecchio, in entries made by him in the Marriage Registers. After mentioning the war and famine which preceded the plague,

---

\* Robolotti, "History of Cremona."



he says: "This year, 1630, God our Lord has sent the scourge of plague all over Lombardy; at Cremona it made its appearance in the early days of January, began to spread at the commencement of April, and raged to such an extent during the months of June, July, and August that the town was deserted and had the appearance of a wilderness." Here, then, is evidence which justifies us in assuming that Alessandro Stradivari was amongst those who fled from the city—most probably accompanied by his wife and children—apparently never again to return, otherwise their names would have been met with at some later date in the registers of births, deaths, or marriages, or in the census returns.

Signor Mandelli thus explains the non-existence of any record of the birth of Antonio in the city of Cremona. His parents had left their home under stress of calamity; some of those dear to them may even have fallen victims to the plague\* previous to their departure, and for one reason or another they determined to stay where they had found a haven of refuge.

Nothing daunted by failure, Signor Mandelli now turned his attention to the villages and other places in the province of Cremona, for it seemed quite rational to suppose that Antonio's parents may have settled down but a few miles from the city. He accordingly begged and prevailed upon the Bishop of Cremona to issue a circular, addressed to all the parish priests of the diocese, asking that research be made in the registers and census returns of every parish, including those suppressed since 1788, from the year 1628 until 1670, concerning the family of Stradivari.

The result was again disappointing: some of the parishes

---

\* Hieronymus Amati, his wife and two daughters, were amongst the victims who died from the plague during 1630. Maggini also fell a victim at Brescia in 1632.

had no old registers to consult; others had been searched, but without success.

In conclusion, we think the above evidence points to the fact of Antonio Stradivari not having been born in Cremona; he may have come into the world in some neighbouring village, but in all probability his parents had gone some distance away. Be this so or not, the fact remains that henceforth Alessandro, his wife and children, with the sole exception of Antonio, occupy no place in the family history.

Nothing whatever is known concerning the early career of Antonio. Did his parents bring him back to Cremona in order to apprentice him to Nicolò Amati? What were the reasons that induced them to make him a violin-maker? As far as we can learn, no earlier member or connection of his family had adopted this calling. These questions, we fear, can never be answered. The first documentary intimation even of Antonio's existence in Cremona, as yet met with, is furnished by the label inserted in one of his violins, and dated 1666.\* Then comes the announcement of his marriage in the next year. He married Francesca, the daughter of Francesco Feraboschi, and widow of Giovanni Giacomo Capra, who committed suicide with an arquebus on the Piazza S. Agata (now Piazza Garibaldi), in April, 1664. The following is the extract from the Marriage Register of the Parish of S. Agata: "On the 4th of July, 1667, having three times published the banns on feast days, the first on June 26th [wrongly written July in the register], which was a Sunday, the second on the 29th, the feast day of St. Peter, the third on Sunday, the 3rd of July, announcing the marriage which Signor Antonio Stradivari, of the Parish of S. Cecilia,

---

\* See Chapter II.

intended to contract with Signora Francesca Ferabosca,\* of my parish ; I hereby beg to declare that, no impediment of any kind having arisen, I, the Reverend Pietro Guallo,

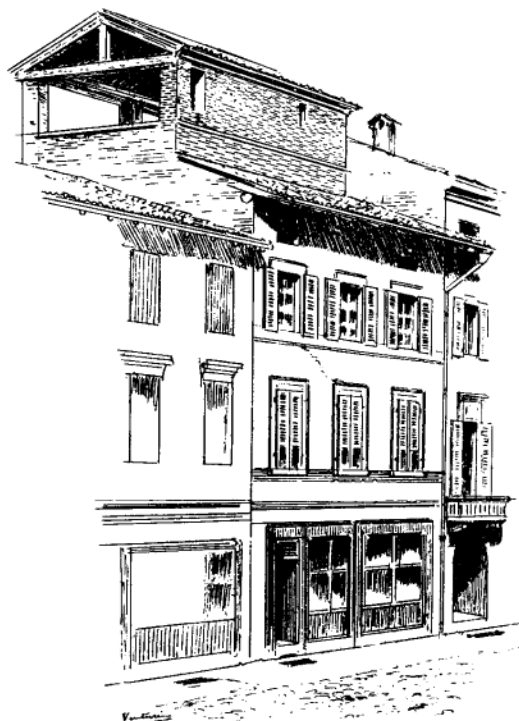


Fig. 1.—THE HOUSE OF STRADIVARI.

Parish Priest of the Collegiate and renowned Church of S. Agata in Cremona, have united them to-day, here, in my church, in the holy bond of matrimony, in the presence of the

\* We have retained the different spellings of this name as found in the original documents.

two hereafter-mentioned witnesses, namely, Signor Francesco Feraboscho, of the Parish of S. Agata, and of Signor ——" [remains unfilled].

On his marriage Stradivari appears to have left the parish of S. Cecilia, and taken a house known as the Casa del Pescatore in the parish of his bride. The census returns for the year 1668 describe it as being occupied by Signor Stradivari, aged 28, Signora Francesca (his wife), aged 26, and Giulia Maria (his daughter), aged 3 months. The year previously the house was occupied by a certain Francesco Mazzini, his wife and two sons. Here Stradivari seems to have lived until 1680, in which year he purchased the house now known as No. 1, Piazza Roma, formerly No. 2, Piazza San Domenico (fig. 1). His family had, in the meantime, increased to five, one infant son having died.\* The house was bought from the Cremonese family of Picenardi for 7,000 imperial lire† (approximately equivalent to £840); the contract of sale, first made known by Signor Lombardini,‡ is preserved in the Notarial Archives. From this deed, which is in Latin, we learn that Stradivari paid 2,000 lire of the purchase money in cash, and agreed to pay the remaining 4,990 lire

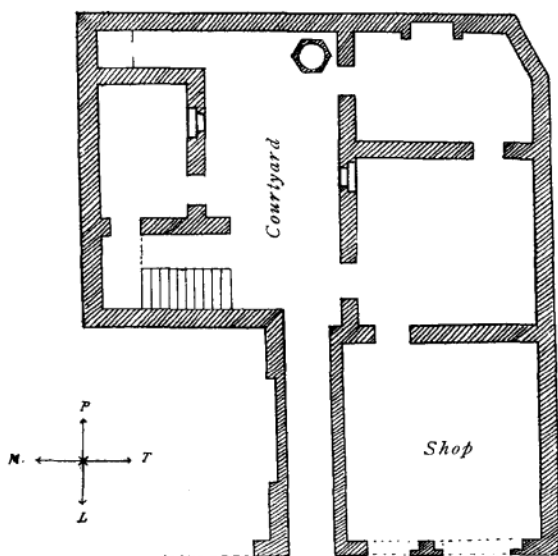
---

\* See Appendix. We give the later census returns taken from the books of the parish of S. Agata, in which reference is made to Stradivari, as collated by Signor Mandelli, in an appendix. We may, however, here say that the contradictory statements therein found as to the master's age are so conflicting that we deem them to be of no value. We understand from Signor Mandelli that these census papers were filled up by the priest of the parish, and not by the occupant of the house. The evidence on which we rely for the acceptance of the year 1644 as that of the master's birth is given in Chapter II.

† The "Lira Imperiale" was, at the period of the above transaction, of the approximate value of tenpence; its purchasing value would be about three times that of to-day. (See footnote, Chap. XI., p. 248.)

‡ Lombardini's "Antonio Stradivari e la celebre Scuola Cremonese" (Cremona, Dalla Noce, 1872, 8vo).

within four years: the other ten lire were commuted by the vendors in consideration of Stradivari paying the yearly tithe of six imperial sols to the canons of the Cathedral. We find, too, that the master's name is entered "Antonio Stradivari, of the *late* Alessandro"; thus showing that the



*Piazza S. Domenico*

(now *Piazza Roma*)

Fig. 2.—GROUND PLAN OF THE HOUSE OF STRADIVARI.

latter—who, as we have seen, was born in 1602—was then dead, and that he was really the father of Antonio. Signor Mandelli, who has spared no pains to glean details, however small, concerning Stradivari, tells us that the house, as purchased in 1680, consisted of a somewhat narrow structure of three floors—that is, the ground floor, two storeys above

and a kind of loft and attic, also large cellars underground (fig. 2). The rooms were distributed as follows: four on the

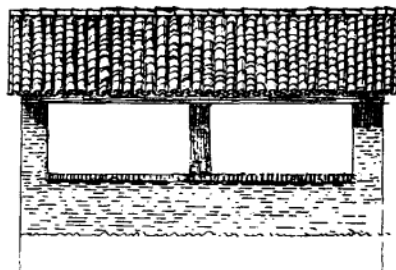


Fig. 3.—THE ATTIC.

ground floor — viz. the shop (which is specially mentioned in the deed of purchase), parlour, kitchen, and a store-room at the other end of the court-yard; on the first floor four rooms also, three on the second, and the loft and attic above (figs. 3, 4); while

on the roof was formed a flat terrace, called in the Cremonese dialect *seccadour*, to indicate that part of the house which is used for drying linen or fruits. Tradition says that the master worked here—in the loft and attic—during the favourable season, and also hung out his newly varnished instruments to dry. This tradition was corroborated to some extent by finding, fixed to the wooden beams of the loft, strips of parchment, nailed down and so arranged as to form a kind of tool-rack to hold the worker's small tools; and also by the discovery some years ago of a trap-door (cupboard, we presume) containing shreds and bits of maple and pine. It was in this house that Stradivari remained until his death. It was here during upwards of fifty years that the passer-by may have seen him



Fig. 4.—THE LOFT.



silently shaping those works which are now so eagerly sought throughout the world. Noble, musician, priest, and friend came to this modest dwelling either to admire his skill or to ask him to make an instrument as he alone could do. From the time that the mortal remains of the man, who lent such interest to the spot, were carried across the piazza to their resting-place in the Church of S. Domenico, the house remained practically unchanged until 1888,\* when it was acquired by the proprietor of the neighbouring café, who, in the course of the next year, had carried out considerable structural alterations (fig. 5). The ground floor is now a billiard-room. One day during this partial demolition of the house Signor Soresini, the son-in-law of the owner, happened to be looking at what was going on, when he observed that several of the masons had broken up some boards for the purpose of making a fire to warm their frugal meal. At first he paid no attention to the circumstance, but presently asked to

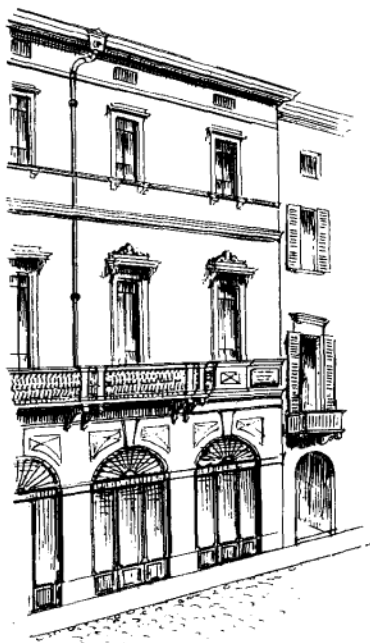


Fig. 5.—STRADIVARI'S HOUSE AS AT PRESENT.

\* One of the writers visited Cremona in 1884, and very naturally evinced considerable interest on inspecting Stradivari's house; he was not a little amused by the servant, who showed him over the different rooms, gravely taking a heavy tile from the roof and offering it as a souvenir.

life. In the year 1698 he had to mourn the loss of his wife, Francesca Ferabosca, who died on May 20th; the record in the Register of the Parish of S. Matteo reads as follows: "Francesca Feraboscha, wife of Sig. Antonio Stradivari, recommended to God, and fortified by the Sacraments of Penance, Holy Eucharist, and Extreme Unction, died at the age of about sixty years. Her body was carried into the Church of S. Domenico."

A later entry, under date May 25th, says: "Given

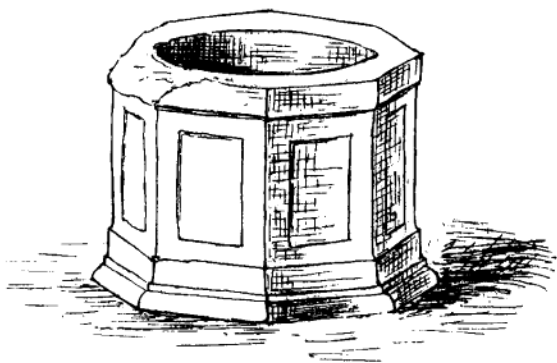


Fig. 7.—THE STONE BREASTWORK OF THE WELL.

burial to Francesca Stradivari Ferabosca in the tomb in the choir."

In addition to the above extracts Signor Mandelli was fortunate enough to find in the "Records of Funerals ordered by the Ecclesiastical and Civil Magistrates," preserved in the Town Archives, the bill of the expenses incurred at the funeral of Signora Feraboschi Stradivari. This very interesting document we give herewith:—

*May the 25th, 1698.*

Funeral of Signora Francesca Ferabosca Stradivari, of the Parish of S. Matteo, buried in S. Domenico, at 23 o'clock [11 a.m.].

	Lire	Soldi
Fourth part of the fee to Revd. Parish Priest . . . . .	12	10
Mass . . . . .	3	0
Fourteen Priests and one Choir-boy . . . . .	7	0
Thirty-six Dominican Fathers . . . . .	18	0
Sixteen Franciscan Fathers . . . . .	8	0
Thirty-one Fathers of S. Angelo . . . . .	15	10
Twenty-seven Fathers of S. Luca . . . . .	13	10
Twenty-one Fathers of S. Salvatore . . . . .	10	10
Nineteen Fathers of S. Francesco . . . . .	9	10
Orphans with Hat . . . . .	12	0
Beggars with Hat . . . . .	12	0
Twelve Torch-bearers . . . . .	3	0
Four Torch-bearers of the Confraternity of the Rosary . . . . .	2	0
Velvet and Gold Pall of the Cathedral . . . . .	8	10
Bier in Church . . . . .	1	0
Big Bell . . . . .	9	0
Bell of S. Matteo . . . . .	1	10
Bell of S. Domenico . . . . .	2	0
Little Bells of the Cathedral . . . . .	1	10
Four Black Draperies in the Church . . . . .	1	12
Sixteen Black Draperies at the House . . . . .	6	8
Grave-diggers with Capes . . . . .	12	0
Fee to the Ecclesiastical Magistrate . . . . .	8	0
Fee to the Town Magistrate . . . . .	8	0
Total . . . . .	182	0*

Stradivari writes at the foot of the bill (fig. 8):—

*Tramitto Lire 8 in tutto della presente lista  
Ari.<sup>to</sup> Stradivari*

Fig. 8.†

\* Approximately equivalent to £22 10s.

† "Deducted altogether 8 lire from the present bill.—"ANT<sup>o</sup> STRADIVARI."