



# Stradivari's Genius: Five Violins, One Cello, and Three Centuries of Enduring Perfection

*Toby Faber*

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“’Tis God gives skill, but not without men’s hands: He could not make Antonio Stradivari’s violins without Antonio.”  
–George Eliot

Antonio Stradivari (1644—1737) was a perfectionist whose single-minded pursuit of excellence changed the world of music. In the course of his long career in the northern Italian city of Cremona, he created more than a thousand stringed instruments; approximately six hundred survive. In this fascinating book, Toby Faber traces the rich, multilayered stories of six of these peerless instruments—five violins and a cello—and the one towering artist who brought them into being.


Blending history, biography, meticulous detective work, and an abiding passion for music, Faber embarks on an absorbing journey as he follows some of the most prized instruments of all time. Mysteries and unanswered questions proliferate from the outset—starting with the enigma of Antonio Stradivari himself. What made this apparently unsophisticated craftsman so special? Why were his techniques not maintained by his successors? How is it that even two and a half centuries after his death, no one has succeeded in matching the purity, depth, and delicacy of a Stradivarius?

In Faber’s illuminating narrative, each of the six fabled instruments becomes a character in its own right—a living entity cherished by artists, bought and sold by princes and plutocrats, coveted, collected, hidden, lost, copied, and occasionally played by a musician whose skill matches its maker’s.

Here is the fabulous Viotti, named for the virtuoso who enchanted all Paris in the 1780s, only to fall foul of the French Revolution. Paganini supposedly made a pact with the devil to transform the art of the violin—and by the end of his life he owned eleven Strads. Then there’s the Davidov cello, fashioned in 1712 and lovingly handed down through a succession of celebrated artists until, in the 1980s, it passed into the capable hands of Yo-Yo Ma.

From the salons of Vienna to the concert halls of New York, from the breakthroughs of Beethoven’s last quartets to the first phonographic recordings, Faber unfolds a narrative magnificent in its range and brilliant in its detail. “A great violin is alive,” said Yehudi Menuhin of his own Stradivarius. In the pages of this book, Faber invites us to share the life, the passion, the intrigue, and the incomparable beauty of the world’s most marvelous stringed instruments.

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