

Mr Black's Violins

Brian Harvey reviews Andrew Hooker's splendid slip-cased tome

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If you were inspecting the shelves of a modern bookshop which, perhaps unusually, stocked volumes on historical musical instruments, and you were to spot this large (33cm by 25cm), handsome, slip-cased tome, what might be your expectations? You might be swayed by glossy books on classical stringed instruments employing modern photographic techniques, often produced to accompany an exhibition, permanent or otherwise, with limited attempts at the makers' biographies (their lives already being well explored). In any case, you would probably

expect the fine quality images of the instruments to be inspiring and the accompanying text to be informative and useful, because you are unlikely to get closer to possessing one of the beauties featured within.

In *Mr Black's Violins*, Andrew Hooker (formerly a specialist at Sotheby's) is our author and guide. He opens the book with a short biography of the central character, Gerald Segelman. From the scant evidence available, Mr Segelman appeared to be a courteous man. He was also clearly an obsessive collector of, now, virtually priceless violin-family

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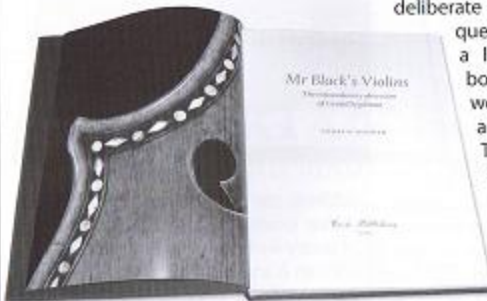
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instruments. He was not known to be interested in listening to music, or in playing his spectacular acquisitions (surely one of life's special and most self-indulgent pleasures). Neither did Segelman lend his priceless instruments to professional players - Erich Gruenberg being a fortunate exception. He did occasionally lend to exhibitions but always under a pseudonym (this trait of guarding the hoard reminiscent of Wagner's depiction of the fanatical custodianship of the Rheingold by the dragon Fafner). Segelman had no wife or children but a faithful secretary, housekeeper and partner in Vera Farnsworth, who appeared to tolerate rather than join his collecting activities. There appears to have been a long-standing and mutual dependency between them.



Andrew Hooker adds some interesting reflections on why people collect artefacts, and violins in particular. He employs a critical eye to good effect in describing, warts and all, those instruments which once belonged to Gerald Segelman's extraordinary and fluctuating collection. Segelman often

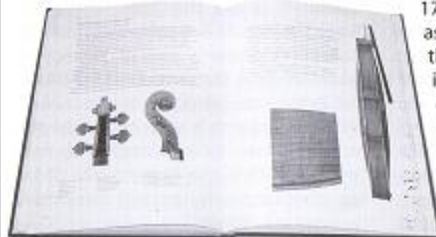
operated under the pseudonym "Mr Black", hence the book's title. Initially collecting under a veil of secrecy to guard against classification as a dealer for income tax purposes, secrecy seems to have become a way of life for this eccentric man. (It is instructive to note that, in 1978-9, the highest rate of tax on combined earnings and investment income was 98%.)

Whatever "Mr Black's" reasons for hiding his purchases, it certainly led to a great deal of confusion. On his death in 1995, it caused lengthy civil litigation, here and abroad. There is some irony in the fact that the leading executor and trustee for the Segelman estate was a London solicitor named Mr Timothy White. This book barely refers to the damaging litigation after Mr Segelman's death, presumably as a matter of deliberate policy, but this raises some

questions. One is the fate of a large number of bows: 41 bows by Tubbs, 25 by Voirin, a wonderful example of a gold and tortoiseshell-mounted Tourte and, possibly, four dozen by W. E. Hill & Sons. The author has valiantly created a list, acknowledged to be incomplete, of at least 234 unidentified bows (p.211).

Many "seem to have been quickly dispersed after his death and became untraceable" explains the author (p.18). Accordingly, no bows are illustrated in this book. Those interested in the civil court battles, all settled confidentially, should consult Andrew Hooker's bibliography which includes Alix Kirsta's article, "Fiddles", Guardian Weekend, August 2002.





"Mr Black" undoubtedly had a good nose for a stringed instrument and had the money (mainly, it seems, from the development of a cinema chain in the inter-war years) to indulge in collecting them from 1942 onwards. The reader has to put his somewhat bizarre behaviour to one side and admire his collection. He did not appear to believe in systematic restoration, or so one infers, from the number of, usually, minor faults to which Andrew Hooker draws attention. Segelman bought and sold from different sources and it cannot be assumed that a particular instrument was owned by him at his death, only that it once was his. The urge to make a profit seems to have often been paramount, resulting in a brisk turnover in his collection. Meanwhile he loved to show his recognition skills in front of his small circle of expert dealer friends.

Rather pathetically, Mr Segelman lived out his final days in a squalid urban flat with nutrition courtesy of "meals on wheels", few suspecting the wealth of stringed instruments and bows in his possession. Those instruments with which he would not part, such as the spectacular "Rode" inlaid Stradivari

1722, were kept in such unlikely places as under his bed. Rumour suggested that the sagging bedsprings impacted on the Rode's wooden case and damaged the precious contents within – though this appears to have been exaggerated. His own attempts at violin-making are described by Hooker as "rather dreadful". Samples are illustrated in black and white, grainy photos.

Comments by Woodcock, in his book on contemporary makers, about the "wonderful tonal results" of these night-school products (indexed under Black, M., London) are clearly overblown.

Moving from the ridiculous to the



sublime, the book illustrates in glorious colour examples (front, back and sides) of pretty well every major Italian maker – from an A and H Amati violin of 1590 to a Rocca violin of 1843, three by Vuillaume, a handsome John Betts and a Johannes Cuypers (c.1790). Andrew Hooker's notes include measurements, prices paid and provenances, correct or suspect. The amount of research involved in producing this book must have been formidable owing to the chaotic state of the Segelman estate, which included scribbled notes on the collection and

their hiding places, in code! There is no evidence of insurance against fire, theft and accidental damage or of any inventory. Most readers will not be too bothered by the comparative weakness of the links between the violin and its owner/collector. If they can afford it, they will wish to buy this splendidly produced and edited tome. It will probably turn out to have been a good investment.

Postscript: I should like to add a few personal thoughts arising out of Andrew Hooker's remarks about the untraceable bows from the Segelman collection. I was mildly shocked by these revelations. The supply of good bows, by the best makers and made with materials no longer readily available, is limited. The untraceable bows from the Segelman collection, which are probably now abroad, represent a sad loss

to British players. I believe that outstanding examples of violins or bows – whether Italian, French, English or otherwise – should be available for use and study in this country, provided they are already domiciled here. Where instruments are held by a charitable trust, trustees are obliged to get a fair and reasonable price for any asset sold. The only way to overcome this sort of problem is to raise funds for the purchase of the artefact to remain in this country, in a similar way to fine art. These remarks apply in greater force still to such icons as the beautiful inlaid Rode Stradivari.

Professor Brian Harvey is author of (amongst other works) *Violin Fraud* (OUP 1992; 2nd edn. with Carla Shapreau, 1997) and *The Violin Family and its Makers in the British Isles* (OUP 1995; 2nd imp. 2004).

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