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# Rock me, Stradivarius: the secret of my £200m violins

The star virtuoso Janine Jansen got her hands on a dozen precious Stradivari violins for a new film, she tells Richard Morrison



Janine Jansen played 12 of the celebrated violins for a film and album  
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Richard Morrison | Tuesday August 31 2021, 12.01am, The Times

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It was a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity", the Dutch violinist Janine Jansen says. Audiences for a new film, *Janine Jansen: Falling for Stradivari* – which opens in cinemas this week – may well agree. It's one of the most revelatory classical music documentaries I have seen for years.

The title is misleading. Jansen "fell" for Antonio Stradivari, the greatest violin maker in history, many years ago. She has been playing his instruments for two decades, and for the past two years has been lent one created at the height of his "golden period" – the 1715 Shumsky (all the best violins have nicknames, often honouring the virtuosos most associated with them).

However, with Europe paralysed by the pandemic, Jansen accepted a unique challenge. For a few days only, Steven Smith, the managing director of the venerable London instrument dealer J&A Beare, managed to assemble 12 top-notch violins made by Stradivari. Many were sold or restored by Beare at some time in their 300-year lives, but they are now owned by foundations and collectors spread across the US, Europe and the Far East. Jansen was invited to make a recording and film in which she would play them all in succession, accompanied on the piano by the Royal Opera's music director, Antonio Pappano.



The 300-year-old violins came from foundations and collectors from the US, Europe and the Far East  
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The logistics were extraordinary, especially with the world in lockdown. Smith had to negotiate delicately with 12 different owners, then arrange for each fiddle – valued at well over £200 million in total – to be escorted safely to London. You don't send a Strad by parcel post. Behind the scenes, lawyers had to work through a mountain of customs regulations and insurance requirements.

The violins arrived, and Jansen and Pappano began rehearsing. Then disaster struck. Jansen got Covid, badly. She had to stop everything for three weeks. Smith desperately negotiated extensions to the loans.

"There was no alternative," says Gerry Fox, who directed the film. "Steven had done the equivalent of assembling a dream cast for a blockbuster movie. Everyone knew we would never get these instruments together in one place again. But it was touch and go. The 1718 San Lorenzo violin was needed for a concert, so it was the first to be recorded and on its way to Heathrow the same day."

As the film shows, the stress for Jansen, still drained from Covid, was immense. "It was tough coming back," she admits. "Recording takes so much energy and emotion anyway. When you are playing you forget about the exhaustion, but when you stop it hits you. However, I had to do it. Getting all those Strads together was an incredible effort. I couldn't let them down."



Jansen has been playing Stradivari violins for two decades  
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Her illness meant she had even less time to get to know the 12 fiddles. "Not more than a couple of hours on each," she says, "during which Tony [Pappano] and I had to work out what music would best suit which instrument."

Like speed dating? Jansen laughs. "With some Strads, yes, it was like when you meet certain people for the first time. You immediately click and it feels as if you've known them for ever. With others it was much more tricky. You feel at the start that you are only scratching the surface of what they have.

"You see that in the film, I think – me constantly adjusting to each instrument's sound and personality. It wasn't easy. After playing one I would come to the next and feel I was choking it, killing the sound because I hadn't yet found a way of letting it breathe, of giving it the freedom to speak with its natural voice."

Non-musicians might be surprised to learn that 12 similar-looking instruments, made by the same man in the same little workshop, could have such different characters, to the extent that a virtuoso such as Jansen would have to adjust her technique to suit each one. "Of course you need to control the instrument," she says, "but with a Strad you find to some extent that it also controls you. Often when we started with the next violin the sound would be so odd that the engineers began adjusting the microphones. Then after I had played for about 20 minutes, everyone would say, 'Oh my God, the instrument has changed so much; it has woken up!' It wasn't the instrument changing, it was my understanding of it."



Jansen performs with the NHK Symphony Orchestra, Tokyo in 2017  
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Jansen wasn't just dealing with the instruments' characters. She was also acutely aware of their histories. Among the 12 were Strads owned by some of the greatest violinists the world has known, including Fritz Kreisler, Nathan Milstein and Ida Haendel, all seen in archive footage in the film. "Crazy though this sounds, I sensed that the souls of these legendary violinists were still in their instruments," Jansen says. "I felt as if I was bringing their sounds back to life."

Would she like to be back in the era when top violinists could actually afford to own a Strad? "Mmm, wouldn't that be nice?" Jansen says with a laugh. "Those days are over for. For me, wouldn't that be nice?" Jansen says with a laugh. "Those days are over for. For me, wouldn't that be nice?"

It's not entirely generosity that prompts such loans. "At Beare's we have just made a study of Strad prices going back two centuries," Smith says. "For the first 150 years they increased in value by about 3 to 5 per cent a year, but for the past 50 years their value has shot up. We are nearer a 10 per cent annual increase now. So patrons who buy a Strad and lend it to a top player don't just get the thrill of interacting with great musicians, they also get a great investment."

Stradivari was phenomenally productive over a long period. He made his first instrument when he was about 14, in 1658, and his last just before he died at the age of 93, in 1737. It's estimated that he created about 1,200 instruments (predominantly violins, but also violas, cellos and guitars), but only about 650 have survived. And some of those have gone Awol. "Rostropovich [the great Russian cellist who died in 2007] had a wonderful Strad cello," Smith says, "but we don't quite know where it is now."

If I had £5 million to spare, would that buy me a Strad? "Probably, just," Smith replies. "Maybe one of his early violins or a composite [an instrument not completely crafted by Stradivari]. You would need about £30 million to buy one of those really wonderful Strads that come on the market every 15 or 20 years."

The Tyrrell, the Titian, the Milstein: there are plenty of those featured in the film. If Jansen could take one home with her, which would she choose? "The Alard, made in 1715, the same year as the Shumsky I play," she replies. "It's gorgeous. It has hardly been played professionally – and never recorded before, I think – but from the first note it spoke so closely to me, and every minute it gave me more and more. I don't know about taking it home, but I would love to have it for a few more days."

Finally, the eternal question. What was Stradivari's secret? Why do his instruments excel even when compared to those of his brilliant Cremona contemporaries? And why has nobody made violins quite as good since? Some experts think it was the local wood, the varnish, the tiny differences in carving. "I just say Stradivari was the greatest craftsman who ever lived," Smith says. "He was experimenting with form and materials right through his life, and he was completely devoted to his craft in a way that is perhaps difficult for anybody to be today."

And Jansen's view? "I don't know what his secrets were," she says, "and perhaps one shouldn't even want to know."

**Janine Jansen: Falling for Stradivari is in cinemas from Sept 2 ([fallingforstradivari.com](http://fallingforstradivari.com)) and on Sky Arts on Sept 23. The recording *12 Stradivari* is out on Sept 10 on Decca**