



■ SUITE FOR VIOLINS Rare instruments on display at William Moennig & Son, where the author met his match.

FIDDLE SHTICK

A DREAMER IN SEARCH OF A RARE VIOLIN FINDS HIS PRIZE IN PHILADELPHIA BY ARTHUR LUBOW

■ Friedrich von Schiller wrote, "Keep true to the dreams of thy youth." And I suppose if the maxim weren't true, you wouldn't see quite as many sparkling-new, frozen-in-time Porsche 911 Carerras driven by older gents, their bald spots glowing in the sun. The art of the fantasy is to keep it looking factory fresh. No one wants a pre-owned dream, not at that price.

In my daily polished, middle-aged dreams, I didn't need a fancy car. (I'm more of an off-road guy.) I didn't need a trophy wife. (I've had one since I was 25.) In my dreams, I was a concert violinist who would someday own a rare, pedigreed instrument. But reality doesn't always cooperate; nowadays, a Stradivarius or a Guarnerius can run upwards of \$3.5 million. Most of the brilliant—and broke—young virtuoso shave to rely on the kindness of syndicates: Uber-luxury-goods group LVMH loans out its mint-condition 1727 Strad to worthy young artists. Sony does, too. One particularly enterprising American artist even persuaded a group of investors to purchase and loan him the instrument of his dreams—a Guarneri del Ges.

Alas, instruments such as these were out of my league. I was fated to search for a thoroughbred violin that had been overlooked like some bandy-legged Seabiscuit. I searched the vaults of all the dealers in New York. I took a shapely Italian home for a week. No sparks. Then a friend at the New York Philharmonic recommended William Moennig & Son Ltd. in Philadelphia.

Moennig is one of the most distinguished makers and appraisers of rare instruments in the world. Founded in 1909, the family business is in its fourth generation—William Moennig III and IV preside, with partners Philip Kass and Richard Donovan at their sides. It's located just off Rittenhouse Square, in a brick Federal-period town house with white shutters and railings inlaid with black fiddles. Other shops put you in a stark

cubicle to meet your stringed soul mate, but the experts at Moennig send you into a large wood-paneled room purpled with autographs of famous clients: Henryk Szeryng, Gregor Piatigorsky, Ivan Galamian, Sarah Chang. Yehudi Menuhin described it as "a sanctuary of beauty and craftsmanship."

Kass monitors the courtship between player and instrument. His sales pitch is perfect: He listens. I wanted a fiddle with classic purity, looks, a bell-like sound, a pedigree. And an imperfection, so the violin wouldn't be too stuck-up and impossible to live with. And so I could afford it. With all this factored into his matching service of a mind, Kass brought out a violin from the Parisian shop of mastermaker Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume—circa 1840, a copy of an instrument by seventeenth-century master Giovanni Paolo Maggini. I fell for it. Kass knew I would.

J. B. Vuillaume was one of the most celebrated luthiers of his time. Paganini was his client. By the 1830s, the great Cremonese makers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were thought to be such masters that players of the day (not unlike our classic 911 Carrera fans) never wanted the model changed; they wanted reproductions of the great violins. Vuillaume and his staff meticulously copied the most majestic Italian fiddles that passed through their shop for repair. Many of the copies were masterworks in their own right. This violin was one of them, with its elaborate floral inlay at both ends of its golden, curvaceous back. And it was loyal. I was impressed that its relationship with the previous owner was no fling; it had been a fifty-year marriage that began the moment they met.

Still, with all the fiddle's attributes, it was a few millimeters oversized—just enough to deter serious admirers from buying it at a higher price. This was the little flaw that made our relationship possible. I brought it home to get better acquainted. And that was that.

Later that year, I returned to Moennig & Son to buy a bow that could do my violin justice. The one I selected was made in Vuillaume's shop, too. I imagined the bow, a century and a half ago in Paris, hanging so lonely at the other end of the studio. It had its eye on my violin way back then, and now, with empires, great wars and a thousand remembrances past, these two had survived and were thus reunited. A dream come true.