

## ***Stradivariazioni* (2011)**

**Tema (con amici)**

**I. Le Rossignol (The Nightingale)**

**II. Firebird**

**III. Le Messie (The Messiah)**

**IV. Red Diamond**

**V. Alard (Epilogue)**

*Stradivariazioni* was commissioned by Martin Riseley and Diedre Irons for their 2011 national tour of New Zealand and supported by a grant from Chamber Music New Zealand. The composition is a theme and variations with each variation cast in the form of character piece. Actually, instead of a single theme there are three themes or “ciphers” presented in the “Tema (con amici)” [Theme (with friends)]. A musical cipher translates letters of the alphabet into musical notes that can then be represented as melodies (or even harmonies). The B-A-C-H cipher (B natural, A natural, C natural and B-flat in German usage) first used by Bach himself and by numerous composers throughout history is perhaps the most famous. In *Stradivariazioni* the three ciphers are derived from the surnames of those who inspired the piece: (Antonio) STRADIVARI, (Martin) RISELEY and (Diedre) IRONS. Throughout the ensuing movements these ciphers are subjected to various manipulations and combinations. Though not always immediately recognizable, they give the various movements a sense of coherence and intimate relationship of each to the other.

The individual variations themselves bear names of actual Stradivarius violins still in existence today and I have tried to capture musically in each movement some essence or aspect either of the violin itself (the color of the varnish, individual details of scrollwork, sound quality) or a resonance with the given name or its history. In “Le Rossignol” I responded by evoking the nightingale’s song emanating from within the shadows of a nighttime forest. “The Firebird” references directly, while simultaneously distorting, particular musical elements from Stravinsky’s ballet of the same name. “Le Messie” presented a particular challenge because of its curious history. In 1827 the heirs of the great violin collector Count Salabue sold a Stradivarius violin of 1716 to another notable nineteenth-century collector named Luigi Tarisio. Tarisio was so enamored of this violin that he boasted about its special qualities to his Parisian dealers and acquaintances but steadfastly refused to bring it with him to Paris from his home in Italy to let anyone see or play it. This state of affairs so exasperated the great violinist Jean-Delphin Alard that he unwittingly gave the violin its current name when he blurted out one evening in frustration, “Ah ça votre violin est donc comme le Messie; on l’attend toujours, et il ne paraît jamais.” [Ah, that violin of yours is like the Messiah; one endlessly waits for Him, and yet He never appears.] In this variation then, I explore the themes of waiting and desire (particularly through the use of unresolved dominant-seventh chords, which in classical harmony create strong expectations for resolution, but in this movement never resolve to their expected tonics). And if you think you detect some audible echoes of Wagner’s *Tristan Prelude* (another piece – perhaps the *most* famous one – that deals with musical desire by thwarting resolution of dominant-seventh chords to their tonics) you would not be mistaken. The “Messie” violin was eventually donated to the Ashmolean museum at Oxford where it currently resides inside a glass case, a stipulation of its donation being that it shall never be played. Given its overprotected history it is also one of the best preserved Stradivarius violins in existence.

The “Red Diamond” violin, which gets its name from its radiant ruby-colored varnish, is the subject of the fourth variation and has an even more colourful and dramatic history behind it. The story was recounted by Neil A. Grauer in 1995 in his article “Heavenly Strings”:

On Jan. 16, 1953, as a violent rainstorm pelted Los Angeles, Sascha Jacobsen, concertmaster of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, was driving along the coastal highway to Pacific Palisades, the Red Diamond in its case beside him. His car stalled near Santa Monica and water from an overflowing stream began to surround the vehicle and fill it up. Seeking to escape the flood, Jacobsen grasped his violin case, stepped from the car into the rising waters and struggled through the torrent to higher ground. The Red Diamond was swept from his arms and out to sea as he barely made his way to safety. He watched, helpless, as the violin case floated away.

The next day, a prominent Los Angeles attorney, Frederick H. Sturdy, was walking along the beach of the Bel Air country club and spotted a violin case stuck in the sand. Inside the case he found slime, sand, water--and the pieces of a violin. By amazing coincidence, Sturdy was a friend of Alfred Wallenstein, music director of the Philharmonic. When he learned the following day of Jacobsen's disaster and the loss of the Red Diamond, Sturdy immediately contacted Wallenstein. Identified as the lost Strad, the salt water-logged and sand-encrusted violin parts were entrusted to Hans Weisshaar, an outstanding luthier. Over the next nine months, Weisshaar painstakingly restored the violin, returning it to its "former glory...both in tone and appearance," Jacobsen later wrote in appreciation. He told friends the Red Diamond sounded "better than ever."<sup>1</sup>

The “Red Diamond” variation is thus something of a musical depiction of the dramatic storm and flood resulting in the temporary loss of the 1732 Stradivarius violin.

The concluding movement of the set, is named after and evokes the 1715 “Alard” violin (owned at one time by violinist Jean-Delphin Alard). The “Alard” has been called the *ne plus ultra* of Stradivarius violins. According to the Hill brothers, who published a book on the life and work of Stradivarius in 1902, it is unique among its siblings for its “combination in one violin of absolute beauty of quality [i.e., tone], great volume and perfect articulation.”<sup>2</sup> All of these qualities are called into play in the final variation, in which the original “Theme” (and its attendant ciphers) is reprised most directly in a rhapsodic epilogue.

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<sup>1</sup> Grauer, Neil. “Heavenly Strings,” in *Cigar Aficionado*. Posted 1 December, 1995. [http://www.cigaraficionado.com/webfeatures/show/id/Heavenly-Strings-\\_1581](http://www.cigaraficionado.com/webfeatures/show/id/Heavenly-Strings-_1581) (accessed 23 May, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> *Antonio Stradivari: His Life & Work (1644-1737)*, W. Henry, Arthur F. & Alfred E. Hill, William E. Hill & Sons, London, 1902.