

# MASTER OF THE STRINGS

In the very exclusive world of elite violins, Roman Goronok is a major figure—and one of the key players in keeping the centuries-old instruments in circulation. // *By Josh Sims*

**ROMAN GORONOK MIGHT AS** well call himself an art dealer. “These are works of art,” he insists, “or rather a combination of artwork and tool of the trade. There’s no difference between a very fine da Vinci or Rembrandt and one of these. In terms of their part in an artistic tradition, in terms of their monumental achievement in what and how that tradition was expressed, you can say the same of these as of any painting. More so, perhaps, because as much as a da Vinci may be beautiful to the eye, one of these speaks to more senses than that.”

When Goronok tells people that he’s a violin broker, they are fascinated if a little confused. After all, as he admits, the difference between two inexpensive violins is minimal. But the kind of instrument he deals in is of a different

echelon altogether, priced in many millions. They’re the kind of violins that have, over the last three centuries, been passed between the very best players like holy relics. “And once a musician bonds with one of these instruments, it becomes part of them, more important than their children,” he only half jokes. “Seriously, musicians of this caliber keep their violin next to them in bed.”

Another difference is that the rarefied world of instruments doesn’t have quite the name recognition on a public scale as do painters. Goronok deals in violins made by the likes of Andrea Amati, Francesco Ruggieri, Giuseppe Guarneri, and the more famed Antonio Stradivari in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. These are violins of a craftsmanship and tone that

**AT HOME WITH MUSIC**  
Roman Goronok, who also brokers cellos and violas along with his first love, violins.

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likely will never be seen again. And they're increasingly rare. "Say Stradivari made 900 violins in his lifetime. Over the last 300 years a third have been lost or destroyed and a third are in museums or private collections, which leaves only 300 that may one day be available," says Goronok, Russian-born but based in London, the son of a professor of violin and of a violin maker. "There's no new supply. And you can't put a price on a unique sound."

**AS SUCH, THESE VIOLINS** are both extremely valuable—all the more so depending on condition, of course, but also provenance, maker, ownership history—and, what's more, never decrease in value. As a result, his clients include not only conductors and professional musicians, those looking to fill a specific gap in their collection, but also those looking to put their money into a seriously blue-chip investment— and, thankfully, not to then secret the instrument away in some vault, though that does happen on occasion.

"I'm pleased to say that most buyers who come to me have the education to appreciate why these violins shouldn't be hidden away, which is reassuring," says Goronok, who also deals in violas and cellos. But given the number of violins in an orchestra, and the extent of the classical music repertoire written for the violin, he finds that the smallest of his wares are inevitably where the market is at.

"After all, they are such extraordinary objects; they deserve to be played," he adds. "Most of my job is in finding them, in keeping track of them—of, as someone once said of the art world, knowing which painting is on whose wall. I have my little black book, so I know where these violins are, who's using them, which players may be near the end of their careers and so looking to release their instrument back into circulation."

The job isn't quite as simple as playing matchmaker, of course. It also involves

authenticating the instruments, though Goronok says, "That's not as scary as it may seem. Other people have sold and brokered these instruments for centuries, working out what is what, and for the last century at least that's been well documented too." These days there's also carbon dating and dendrochronology—the counting of rings through wood to determine its age—to assuage any last doubts. There are fakes, but in a market this small, passing one off is extremely difficult.

What pleases Goronok most about his work is that it not only brings musician and instrument together but also allows investors to act, in effect, as sponsors of the arts by loaning their violin out to the kind of virtuoso player, or young player of immense potential, for which it was in some sense always destined. His dream is to find evermore enthusiastic clients who can help to make this happen.

"Because," as Goronok notes, "if you want to be a racing driver, it's no good practicing on a tractor. If you've achieved a certain level of self-expression with your instrument, you need an instrument fine enough to allow you to develop your voice without limits. Obviously, such instruments are not easy to get access to."

**LENDING OUT SUCH** a fine instrument might sound like foolishness, given cases like that of an absent-minded British violinist, who in 2019 left his almost \$340,000 (£250,000) violin—made by David Tecchler in 1709—on the train. "It was," the musician reported, "like having my arm cut off." Fortunately, Goronok reassures, most musicians are consequently overcareful with their antique charge, and these sonic sculptures are highly insurable: so well-known are the individual pieces among the elite violinist circuit that if they are stolen, they are virtually unsellable on the black market, which takes away a huge part of the risk for insurers.

Inevitably, some violins have a special place even among these finest of instruments.



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A DEDICATED LIFE  
His family's musical background instilled a love of violins in Goronok.

Is, for example, the oft-cited reputation of a Stradivarius justified? Goronok explains that because the violin maker had such a long career—he lived to 93, notably late for the 18th century—he also had the opportunity to be a great experimenter, thus not only shaping the classical music canon but also making some of its more progressive compositions possible. Like Picasso, he says, Stradivari had the violin-making equivalent of his Blue Period, or of Cubism.

"A Strad," Goronok says, with the familiarity that only someone as close to violins like this could pull off, "can play very quietly, or it can scream, and since much of the [classical] music we hear today is romantic, for full orchestra, it has to be pretty loud. That's the difference between a good violin and a very, very, very fine violin—the good one just won't have the power, it won't have the colors either."

Goronok speaks with more than the knowledge that comes from, as he puts it, being surrounded by violin music from his earliest memories, or that comes from his working life. He, too, was a professional violinist as a young man, until a motorcycle accident in his twenties ended the likely prospects of becoming a top player.

"I can't imagine a life without music, and playing the violin is still the deepest form of

meditation I know," he says. "But if you can't play [to the standard I'd hoped for] then you have to find a way of being useful to the art. I wasn't a violin maker: You have to be an excellent carpenter and that wasn't me. And I wasn't interested in managing musicians. But I found brokering violins, and it's very satisfying to be told by a musician that a certain violin is what they'd been looking for their entire life, or to know that in helping to keep an instrument alive it means that certain pieces of music can still be played as they were first conceived. If the likes of Beethoven is worth giving sound to, then you have to have the right instrument to perform it on."

But the relative rarity of the masterpieces he works with makes him wonder if he may be among the last of his already rather unusual breed. "Statistically, assuming I work for another 30 years or so, I'm likely to be among the last people who will get to handle these instruments on the open market," Goronok says. "By the end of my career, it's likely that most of these instruments will be in museums or private collections. This doesn't mean they won't be played, thankfully, but you won't be able to buy one. Until then, I want to keep on doing whatever I can to help those who have the means to help the world of classical music." [romangoronok.com](http://romangoronok.com)

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