



Harp Maker Tells of Arms Smuggler, Prince of Wales, Toscanini

July 5 (Bloomberg) -- It's not every day you hear about a bizarre method of arms smuggling in the same breath as a charming tale about the Prince of Wales. It's all part of the story of an instrument crafted by a leading harp manufacturer, Victor Salvi.

This afternoon at the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod in Wales, the Victor Salvi Foundation is presenting a unique harp to the prince. It is decorated with symbols chosen by him to reflect his royal title. The carved, painted and gilded decorations include the Welsh dragon, daffodils and the Prince of Wales's feathers, as well as double spoons to signify lasting love.

The harp will be placed in the prince's London home, Clarence House, and played by the Royal Harpist, Jemima Phillips.

I saw the harp while it was being made in the Salvi factory in the small town of Piasco, near Turin, Italy. It was there I discovered the story behind the instrument, and learned about a musical prince, an American immigrant who made all his money in Europe, and a narrow escape from the wrath of Toscanini.

Salvi, a sprightly 86, comes from a family that emigrated to America in 1914. Following in the footsteps of his brother Alberto -- who in 1919 was called ``the Paganini of the Harp'' and grossed an amazing \$40,000 that year for his recitals -- Victor became a harpist. He joined the New York Philharmonic in the 1950s, and also began to learn how to repair harps.

‘Romantic Dreams’

After having an idea about improving the mechanism of the instrument, Salvi decided to go to Italy to start a factory in Genoa. ``There was a tradition of craftsmanship there which was better than America,’’ he says. ``And I had all sorts of romantic dreams. I rented a 15th-century villa with frescoes and vaulted ceilings. I lived in it and put the factory there as well. But I never intended to stay. I thought I would get the business going and return to America. But I didn't want to leave.’’

He moved the factory to Piasco in the late 1960s. It's now a hugely successful business employing 120 people. The wealthy Victor Salvi Foundation, presided over by Salvi's energetic wife Julia, runs the only harp museum in the world, and promotes workshops and concerts all over the globe.

The foundation became involved with Prince Charles, who plays the cello, when he re-established the ancient role of Royal Harpist in 2000. The Salvis decided to sponsor the position by providing instruments for the harpist to play wherever she traveled.

Victor Salvi then decided to create a harp specially for the Prince, who himself made many suggestions regarding the decorative symbols he thought would be appropriate. It took the factory's carvers and gilders more than six months to make.

Subtle Phrasing

While a top-of-the-range Salvi harp costs about 50,000 euros (\$64,000), Salvi says this one cost ``a lot more.’’ He says the tone is beautifully sweet, and perfect for both virtuoso work and subtle phrasing. It will be played at functions at Clarence House.

What do the Salvis hope to get out of the gift? Is there an element of self-promotion to it?

``It plays a part,’’ Julia Salvi says carefully. ``I'd like everyone to see how wonderful our instruments are. But it's also about the great thing the prince has done for harpists everywhere by recognizing the importance of the instrument.’’

The presentation at the Eisteddfod today is another high point in the company's already colorful history. Julia laughs when she tells me about a Japanese businessman who wanted to import their harps many years ago.

``He wasn't really interested in the harps though,’’ she says. ``He had worked out that the space under the sounding board was an ideal place to smuggle arms. But he was already under suspicion by the authorities, and they took the instruments apart and caught him.’’

Late for Toscanini

Salvi's personal story is fascinating. He recalls the first time he ever played for the conductor Toscanini at the New York Philharmonic, for example.

``The rehearsal was due to start at 10, but I woke up at 10," he says. ``The rehearsal was at Carnegie Hall, and luckily I lived on 57th Street, so I just ran down the road pulling on my clothes as I went. Fortunately, I didn't have any music to play at the beginning of the piece, and Toscanini was so short- sighted he didn't even see me come in."

As the new royal harp demonstrates, Salvi has made an enormous success of his Italian business. Does he have any tips? ``Always pay your bills," he says. ``And reinvest. I never took anything out, I was always putting it back in."

(Warwick Thompson is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

To contact the writer on this story:
Warwick Thompson at WarwickTho@aol.com.

Last Updated: July 5, 2006 09:17 EDT

