

STRINGS

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A Voyage of Discovery

Rachel Barton Pine found her perfect match with a late Guarneri violin

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Rachel Barton Pine

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Player Violinist Rachel Barton Pine recently released her 24th album, Mozart's Complete Violin Concertos and the Sinfonia Concertante, K364 (Avie). Beyond her career as a popular performer, Pine is an enthusiastic student of the violin, regularly attending the annual conference of the American String Teachers Association, taking notes and asking insightful questions. She also works to support young, low-income musicians through the Rachel Barton Pine Foundation.

Instrument 1742 "ex-Bazzini, ex-Soldat" Guarneri del Gesù violin with Thomastik-Infeld Vision Titanium Solo medium for the G, D, and A, and a Pirastro Gold E string.

"[The Visions] are warm and powerful like the Dominants I grew up with, but break in faster."

Condition "The Guarneri has a one-piece back and is in remarkably good health with much of its original varnish and no major repairs. I'm not a very visual person, so to me, an f-hole looks like an f-hole and a scroll looks like a scroll. But it's always a nice bonus when the color of the varnish blends well with my auburn hair, and this one does!"

Bow "For my modern bows, I use a Dominique Peccatte and a 2014 Isaac Salchow copy with a silver replacement tip due to new customs regulations! I also use a 1992 Daniel Latour Baroque bow."

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1742 "ex-Bazzini, ex-Soldat" Guarneri del Gesù.

Is this your primary instrument?

Yes, I don't play any other modern violins. Of course, I have some supplemental instruments, like my Baroque violin, viola d'amore, rebec, and so on.

How does it compare to your previous primary violin?

Prior to receiving the loan of the “ex-Bazzini, ex-Soldat” in 2002, I had long-term relationships with three other instruments. Beginning at age 17, I played a 1617 Antonio & Girolamo Amati (the 1617 “Lobkowitz”), a 1684 Stradivari (the “Lord Elphinstone, Veerman”), and a 1744 del Gesù (the “Lord Coke”). Prior to that, during my younger student years, I borrowed various modern instruments while receiving short-term loans of antique instruments for specific concerts and competitions. The “ex-Bazzini, ex-Soldat” is truly my voice. Since I started playing it, I’m not even curious to try other violins anymore!

What gift does this violin bring to your playing that cannot be found in any other instrument?

This violin can be sweet when it needs to, but it’s definitely an alto voice as opposed to the soprano sound of many other violins. The G string is deep and dark, almost like a viola or a great female blues singer, and even the very end of the E string has warmth and beauty without a hint of shrillness. There are no limits to how far I can push it and its variety of colors is infinite.



1742 “ex-Bazzini, ex-Soldat” Guarneri del Gesù.

How does it inspire you as a performer?

With the “ex-Bazzini, ex-Soldat” in my hands, I can never accept that sounding good is good enough. I’m always seeking more nuances and subtleties, because whatever I envision can be found in this instrument and I often stumble across colors I hadn’t even thought of yet. It’s truly a collaborative relationship.

What is its history?

In the first part of the 19th century, it was the primary concert instrument of the great Italian virtuoso Antonio Bazzini.

When I was an eight year old, first learning “The Round of the Goblins,” little did I know that one day I’d be partnered with the violin on which it was written! In 1897, Brahms selected it for a talented young woman who was part of his inner circle of chamber musicians, Marie Soldat. He even found an aristocratic family to purchase it for her. Soldat made a few acoustic recordings, and some people say that they can tell I’m playing the same violin. After she passed away, a collector bought her violin and it wasn’t heard for many years. (You can read more of this violin’s intriguing history on my website, rachelbartonpine.com.)

I enjoy playing Strads, but my preference has always been for del Gesùs. Of course, some of them are tough to play, but I’ve never had to struggle with this one. I also love its history. The Brahms Concerto has been one of my signature pieces since I was a teenager, and one of my professors, Werner Scholz in Berlin, was a student of a student of Brahms’ collaborator, Joachim. I love the fact that Brahms heard “my” violin in the hands of his protégé, Marie Soldat. It’s amazing to know something of an instrument’s history and realize that you’re the next chapter in its life. Hopefully, it will have lots more adventures long after I’m gone.

Do they resonate in your instrument? In your performance?

All repertoire sounds great on the “ex-Bazzini, ex-Soldat,” from Bach to the 21st century, but it’s particularly perfect for the music of Brahms. That must be why he chose it! It was especially meaningful to record the Brahms Violin Concerto and the “Brahms Lullaby” on it.

How did you come into possession of it?

In 2002, I was about to record the Brahms Violin Concerto with the Chicago Symphony. A friend said that he knew someone with a gorgeous del Gesù that had a connection to Brahms, and that he could arrange for me to use it for the recording sessions. I've been playing it ever since. I'm very excited that my generous, anonymous patron recently granted me lifetime use of it. As I mentioned, I've been playing on it since 2002, but it's a great privilege to know that this magnificent instrument will be my musical partner for the rest of my career.



1742 "ex-Bazzini, ex-Soldat" Guarneri del Gesù.

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Can you share the value?

Let's put it this way, I could buy a pretty nice modern instrument each year for what I pay in insurance on "my" del Gesù. But it's totally worth it!

Have you ever done anything that might have robbed your instrument of its “mojo” and what was the result?

Every once in a while, I try a different brand or variety of strings, and something is always immediately diminished. It's not a finicky instrument, and the adjustment tends to stay stable for long stretches of time. But it will definitely let you know when the nut needs to be filed, or the bridge adjusted, or the tailgut tweaked. I'm lucky to live in a city (Chicago) where there are luthiers qualified to work on this caliber of instrument.

What is the violin's personality?

It can express absolutely anything on the emotional spectrum. The possibilities are endless. But its primary voice is like a wonderful glass of red wine—full-bodied, rich, and complex.

What are its strengths and limitations?

Its strength is that it has no limitations! It also has the kind of volume that easily soars over an orchestra, even in hard-to-balance repertoire like the Brahms Concerto. There's an unusual effect to its breadth and depth of sound. People often ask if I'm amplified or say that it almost sounds stereophonic.

What are its likes and dislikes?

Well, for one thing, “my” del Gesù really likes the particular Peccatte I use, and now its Salchow copy also. Because the “ex-Bazzini, ex-Soldat” is so rich and powerful, most bows don't bring out the very last bit of its depth and tone. I had to try dozens and dozens before I found the perfect one that felt good in my hand and sounded great when paired with this del Gesù.

Have you given it a name?

I usually refer to it simply as “the ex-Soldat” because it's so cool that it was played by a historic woman soloist. My three-year-old daughter has a beautiful mid-1800s 1/16-sized violin that actually has a real sound, and she named it “Singy the Violin!”

When and how did you truly learn who your instrument is, the soul of the violin?

When I first put bow to string, it was a moment of love at first listen, and I hope it felt the same way about me! I felt like I knew its essential character right away because it matched mine. It's my dream violin—the instrument I always envisioned. But like any important relationship, no matter how long we've been together, we're continuing to discover new things about each other. The possibilities for nuance are endless, and it will definitely continue to inspire me for the rest of my life.

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