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## Nathan Meltzer and the gift of the “Ames, Totenberg” Stradivarius

Loaned the multi-million-dollar 1734 violin when he was still a student at Juilliard, the young musician tells us about being its custodian, and recording his debut album.

by Clive Paget on October 16, 2020



Rare violins usually have a tale to tell and the “Ames, Totenberg” Stradivari is no exception. The instrument, which hails from 1734, currently sports two names: that of George Ames, an English banker, shipping agent and violinist who was briefly its owner for seven years at the end of the 19th century, now coupled with that of Professor Roman Totenberg, a 20th-century virtuoso and teacher who bought it for \$15,000 (USD) in 1960 and died in 2012 at the age of 101. Perhaps its most notorious claim to fame, however, was its theft in 1980 from Totenberg’s office at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Lost for 35 years, it only re-emerged in 2015 when the thief’s former wife decided to hand it over to the FBI. At that point, Totenberg’s daughters decided the best idea was to have it restored. They would then sell it, though they were keen that it should go to a musician and not wind up admired but un-played in a private collection. Thanks to Rare Violins of New York, the instrument was sold for more than \$5 million (USD) to an anonymous buyer on condition it was lent to an aspiring young violinist.

Thus, in 2018, the “Ames Totenberg” was presented to the then 18-year-old Nathan Meltzer, a Juilliard student of Itzhak Perlman and Li Lin. Two years on, Meltzer has recorded his debut disc, *Nathan Melter: To Roman Totenberg*, featuring music that feels especially close to his own heart coupled with repertoire embraced by the late Professor Totenberg. *Limelight* caught up with him to talk about how he made his musical choices and how a historic violin is gradually rediscovering its voice.



**Nathan Meltzer with the Ames, Totenberg Stradivarius. Photograph © Jiyang Chen**

**When and how did you come to be the custodian of the Ames, Totenberg Stradivarius?**

I came to be the custodian of this wonderful violin in September of 2018. Apparently, the Totenberg family was interested in placing the instrument in the hands of a young violinist, and a consortium was established by Rare Violins of New York to make that happen. How they found me, I'll never know. But I received a call one day, visited the shop, played a few pieces, answered a few questions, and several hours later departed with a Strad! It was weeks before I believed it wasn't all a dream.

**Did you know of its particular history before it came to you and what have you learned about it since?**

I had of course heard about Professor Totenberg and knew the story about the tragic theft of his instrument. But since receiving the violin, I've met so many people across the world who had either studied or worked with him, and they all paint a picture of a wonderful, humorous, kind-hearted man. Part of the mystique is the succession of owners over a period of three centuries, and it's awe-inspiring to learn who had it before you.

**Does its “life story” affect how you feel about the violin or how you approach it as an instrument?**

I'm not sure I play the violin any differently because of its fascinating history, but there are certainly days where I take it out of its case and just look at and admire it for a few minutes. I'm so fortunate to be playing it, and I've learned so much about music from hearing it resonate these last few years. I'm very grateful for this experience, and I'm honoured that I'll have a small part in its life story.



**The Ames, Totenberg Stradivarius. Photograph © Otto Piron**

**What are its special qualities and how does it compare with other violins you've played?**

Well, the most obviously different thing about this instrument is its size. It's considerably larger than any violin I've played before. As someone with long arms, I find it incredibly comfortable. And maybe it has to do with its size, but it also has a wonderfully deep and dark sound, which I completely love!

**You talk about the instrument “opening up and finding its voice”. How has that happened and how has its sound developed since it came into your keeping?**

Violins really are living things, and if they haven't been played in a while, they behave differently. So, considering this violin was basically in hiding for decades, ultimately locked under a tarpaulin in a California basement, it wasn't a surprise that it needed some time for its voice to re-emerge. Then of course I've had to learn how to play it most effectively, so its transformation has been almost magical to witness.

**How did you decide on the program for your recording?**

The program for this CD was decided after several conversations with Professor Totenberg's students and daughters, who told me stories and shared famous recordings of their father, and my own research into the US Library of Congress and the archives of Boston University, which had decades of his concert programs. I learned that Professor Totenberg had performed Wienawski's *Polonaise* at the White House for the Roosevelts when he was 25 years old, and that he had spent much of his career championing the music of Karol Szymanowski. I was also introduced to his fantastic recording of Bartók's First Rhapsody and learned that Bach sonatas were always a staple of his recitals. So, all these were added to the recording program.

**Which pieces do you associate with your own taste, which with Professor Totenberg's, and where do you think the two of you share common musical passions?**

There's a lot of overlap, musically and philosophically. Like Professor Totenberg, I am interested in exploring the works of contemporary composers – but he had a long and wonderful life, and his contemporaries are my modern classics! Since this CD was something of an homage, I gave a lot of weight to pieces he favoured and composers he championed. While many of his favourites are also mine, I'd point to the Franck Sonata specifically as a shared love.

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**Nathan Meltzer's debut disc *Nathan Meltzer: To Roman Totenberg* is released today on the Champs Hill label**