

# This 'jealous mistress' Stradivarius violin was owned by an Indy 500 driver. Who's next?

[Domenica Bongiovanni](#) Updated 11:51 a.m. ET Sept. 13, 2018

A Stradivarius violin worth millions of dollars is the major prize that 40 of the world's best young violinists will compete to wrap their fingers around.

Whoever plays it next will join an eclectic cast, some of whom have reached the stratosphere of their craft and some of whom were just plain rich.

Made in 1683, the violin has lived with a Parisian nobleman and a millionaire driver who raced around Indianapolis Motor Speedway. It has ventured into bluegrass, and it was once deemed a "jealous mistress" by its most famous owner.

From the fiddle's deep ruddy brown body, it bestows grace on players who understand it and squawks on those who are too harsh. The instrument's strength lies in an unlimited palate of emotional intensities.

"If I was a painter and I was given a set of colors, and instead of being given five or six shades of blue, I was given a Stradivarius and I was given a hundred shades of blue. So imagine having that many shades in every color," said Glen Kwok, executive director of the [International Violin Competition of Indianapolis](#).

"Imagine how vivid your picture can become when you have that many gradations of colors to use. And playing on a violin is exactly the same."

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The gold medalist in the competition can use the Strad for four years, until a jury selects the next top six players after two weeks of intense performances in one of the world's most important violin contests. The competition is going on now and runs through Sept. 16.

Here is a look at some of the notable people who have held this particular famous instrument, known as the Martinelli-Gingold.

## Antonio Stradivari: the maker

The violin's maker had an entrepreneurial streak and liked to push boundaries, writes Toby Faber in the book ["Stradivari's Genius."](#)

To Faber's point: [Stradivari](#) married a woman whose brother had killed her first husband, a rich burgher. Their first child was born less than four months after they married — another eyebrow-raising situation in the Catholic church-dominated society of Cremona, Italy.

Over his 93 years of life, Stradivari handcrafted glorious-sounding fiddles that noble families, French and Spanish courts and those with extra cash snapped up quickly. About 650 instruments of Stradivari's, including around 550 violins, survive today, according to Christopher Reuning, who owns [Reuning & Son](#), a Boston-based dealer of fine instruments.

The Martinelli-Gingold — so named for its first known owner and its most famous, Indianapolis competition founder Josef Gingold — was born early in the maker's career, when he was 39. The top of the instrument is more arched and closer to the strings, which means it isn't as loud as his later models, said [Stephen Shipps](#), who is a professor of violin at the University of Michigan.

## Captain Martinelli: the veteran

Scholars don't know anything about the first 200 years of the Martinelli-Gingold's life, Reuning said. Enticing clues about its past are strewn across the internet, but he said many of them are fake.

"The problem with Stradivari provenances is that they were purposely obscured very often mostly by dealers or owners who were selling them and wanting to hide the profits or by people who were trying to create some more famous ownerships than (were) real," he said.

Reuning has confirmed that a French nobleman of Paris sold the Martinelli-Gingold Strad in the 1800s to an Italian army captain named Martinelli. Nothing else is known about the man whose moniker is forever associated with the instrument, he said.



Racecar driver Cliff Durant, who owned the Martinelli-Gingold Stradivarius at one time, is pictured here in 1926 at the Indianapolis 500. (Photo: Kirkpatrick photo/IMS)

## R. Cliff Durant: the 500-mile race driver

Among those who bought the violin before 1919 was R. Cliff Durant of Beverly Hills, Calif. Reuning's sources note that Durant was of "automobile fame."

The description matches up with the famous race-car driver and son of William Durant, who co-founded General Motors and Chevrolet. Cliff Durant was a multimillionaire heavily documented by Indianapolis newspapers when he drove in the 500-Mile Race at Indianapolis Motor Speedway in the 1910s and '20s.

Known as a risk-taker, Durant also owned an airplane that he kept in the same garage that housed his brokerage office. According to a May 1929 IndyStar story, "during his dull moments in his business offices (he) flies his

airplane and drives hundreds of practice laps on the track in his fast Normal, 1."



**Violinist and composer Fritz Kreisler (right) turned over his famous Lord Amherst Stradivarius violin to Jacques Gordon, head of the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. in 1946. Gordon owned the Martinelli Stradivarius a few decades before he acquired this one. (Photo: The Associated Press)**

## Jacques Gordon: the prodigy

Durant didn't keep the prized Strad for long. Before 1920 he sold it to [Jacques Gordon](#), the child-prodigy-turned-virtuoso concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony in the 1920s, Reuning said his records show.

Classical music fans knew the Russian-born Gordon for his spectacular concert-hall performances and for teaching at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. But his name reached the masses through an experiment similar to Joshua Bell serenading travelers in a baseball cap in 2007 at a Washington, D.C., metro station.

In 1930, Gordon dressed up as a beggar and played "Ave Maria" and other pieces on his then-\$40,000 Strad on a Chicago street, according to a story that was in newspapers across the U.S. He wanted to prove to friends that people attend concerts because they

love music, not just to position themselves among the upper echelons of society and associate with famous artists. Passers-by, most of whom didn't recognize Gordon, flung coins adding up to \$5.74 into his cup.

Was he playing the Martinelli-Gingold? Probably not. Reuning said Gordon sold the 1683 Strad in 1921 to the [Rudolph Wurlitzer Co.](#), the theater organ business that also dealt in fine instruments.



**Josef Gingold, the longest known owner of the Martinelli Stradivarius, is shown playing it here in 1988. (Photo: Indianapolis News file photo)**

## Josef Gingold: the perfect match

Before Anna Gingold died in 1937, she made her son a silk sack for the Strad she dreamed he would one day own, the violinist [told writer David Blum for a 1991 New Yorker profile](#). Josef was already a major talent, piecing together a living soloing and then playing Jerome Kern and Cole Porter on Broadway during the Great Depression.

Gingold bought his Strad in 1946 for \$11,700, Reuning said — [about \\$162,004](#) in 2018 dollars — and played it practically every day until his death in 1995 at age 85.

Curling his fingers around its delicate neck must have been thrilling for a violinist who learned to play by ear as a young boy in Brest Litovsk, Russia, and then fled Europe with his family when anti-Semitism mounted after World War I.

Years later, proof of his love for it showed when he fell down 18 concrete steps while clutching the fiddle in its case. Gingold broke his wrist but kept the Strad from harm, he told The New Yorker.

After his stint on Broadway, Gingold won his audition for the NBC Symphony under the baton of the renowned Arturo Toscanini. He went on to perform as concertmaster of the Detroit Symphony and then his most famous position before teaching at Indiana University: concertmaster of the Cleveland Orchestra, who could slyly handle its irascible legend, conductor [George Szell](#).

At IU, Gingold's students — Bloomington-born star Joshua Bell among them — adored him.





A young Joshua Bell, who has an internationally famous career, played with legendary violinist Josef Gingold for this undated photo. (Photo: Photo provided/Indiana University)

The violinist became known for the humanity in his sound, the way he dripped tender emotion into the length of every bow stroke. While the violin didn't project volume the same way Stradivari's later violins did, Gingold found a way to make sure his solos emerged above the orchestra's sound, Shipps said.

"The violin was completely connected to his personality. They were one," said Shipps, who studied with Gingold at IU from 1967 to 1977.

"Mine is a jealous mistress," Gingold told The New Yorker. "When I don't practice for a week, she looks back at me: 'You're scratching, you're hurting, you're playing out of tune!' "

## Tessa Lark: Classical, bluegrass and jazz

In 1999, the Indianapolis competition bought the violin and its companion Francois Xavier Tourte French bow in 1999 for \$1.6 million — half the price of what Reuning loosely estimates it could be worth now.

The contest gives the first right to use the Martinelli-Gingold to its gold medalists. But in 2014, [Jinjoo Cho](#), who is from South Korea, already had a fiddle she loved. So silver medalist [Tessa Lark](#) met the Martinelli-Gingold.



**Tessa Lark plays a 1683 Stradivarius violin on April 17, 2018. She was the Silver Medalist in the 9th Quadrennial International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, in 2014, and she was awarded the four-year usage of the violin. (Photo: Kelly Wilkinson/IndyStar)**

"I listened to (Gingold's) recordings growing up all the time with him playing this very instrument," said Lark, who is from Richmond, Kentucky. "So it was unreal that that sound was right there underneath my ear."

Not only did the prospect of caring for a centuries-old Cremonese instrument initially scare Lark, she had to lighten her bow weight so that the violin would sing instead of choke. But as time passed, she learned to coax



out its lyricism for her crossover bluegrass, jazz and classical sound.

"I grew up playing bluegrass," Lark said. "I think it's a real shame that fiddle players don't get to play Strads and fine Italian instruments as often. I actually just met one of my fiddle heroes only a few months ago, Michael Cleveland, one of the greatest fiddlers to have ever lived. (I) asked him if he'd ever played a Strad, and he said no, so I let him play this thing. I swear, it's the best it's ever sounded."

Lark will play another gorgeous violin to continue her career, which so far has taken her to Carnegie Hall and across the world as a soloist with symphonies. But she knew parting with the Martinelli-Gingold would be crushing.

"People ask me what I'm going to do after I give the violin away, and I kind of jokingly say I'm going to just crawl away and weep and binge on Netflix," Lark said in April.

"It's like a departure ... from another human being."



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### International Violin Competition of Indianapolis

- **When:** Aug. 31-Sept. 16.
- **Where:** Indiana History Center, 450 W. Ohio St.; Hilbert Circle Theatre, 45 Monument Circle and Scottish Rite Cathedral, 650 North Meridian St.
- **Cost:** \$15-\$40
- **Info:** [violin.org](http://violin.org)

### "Festival of the Violin": See the Stradivarius violin made in 1683

- **When:** The violin is on display through Sept. 13. The interactive exhibit on how violins are made runs through Nov. 11.
- **Where:** [Indiana State Museum](#), 650 W. Washington St.
- **Cost:** Included with museum admission.

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