

Take One...
The Messiah Violin
Teacher guidance notes

ASHMOLEAN

The Messiah Violin is on display in Gallery 39, Music and Tapestry.

A zoomable image of the violin is available on our website.

Visit www.ashmolean.org/education/



Starting Questions

The following questions may be useful as a starting point for thinking about the Messiah violin and developing speaking and listening skills with your class.

- What materials do you think this violin is made from?
- Why do you think this violin is in a museum?
- Where do you think it might come from?
- What kind of person do you think would have owned this violin?
- Who could have made it?
- Does the violin look like it has been played a lot or does it look brand new?
- How old do you think the violin could be?
- If I told you that nobody is allowed to play this violin do you feel about that?

These guidance notes are designed to help you use the Ashmolean's Messiah violin as a focus for cross-curricular teaching and learning. A visit to the Ashmolean Museum to see your chosen object offers your class the perfect 'learning outside the classroom' opportunity.



Inspired by the National Gallery's
Take One Picture programme

Background Information

The Object

The Messiah violin dates from Stradivari's 'golden period' of around 1700 - 1725. The violin owes its fame chiefly to its fresh appearance due to the fact that it was owned mainly by collectors and not professional players so it hasn't suffered from much wear and tear.

The violin is said to have acquired its strange nickname because one early owner kept it out of sight but often boasted about the marvellous instrument. This apparently prompted the violinist Delphin Alard to exclaim, 'Your violin is like the Messiah: it is always expected but never appears'.

Because the violin looks so new, some people have doubted that it was made by Stradivari at all. However, the spruce wood from which the front of the violin is made of has been tested by dendrochronologists and the results suggest that tree would have been cut down shortly after 1682. During testing it was also discovered that another violin made by Stradivari at around the same time was made with wood from the same tree. Scholars are now confident that the violin was made in his workshop.

The Messiah violin has changed hands many times. Interestingly, it has been owned more than once by the Hill family of instrument dealers. In 1888 W.E.Hill and sons bought the Messiah for a record sum of £2,000. It was then sold and repurchased by the Hills in 1904 and sold yet again in 1913 to a collector of Cremona instruments. In 1928 it was given back to the Hills who then presented it to the Ashmolean Museum in 1939. The gift included a condition that the violin must not be played.

The violin is the smallest member of the violin family. The first evidence of modern violins appeared in Italian art around 1508. Throughout the centuries, hundreds if not thousands of violin makers have created instruments, but only a few have contributed to its design and sound, including the Amati, Antonio Stradivari and the Guarneri families.

The Maker

Antonio Stradivari was born in 1644 in Cremona

Italy - a town that was already famous for its master violin makers. The new styles of violins and cellos that he developed were remarkable for their excellent tonal quality and became the basic design for many modern versions of the instruments.

Stradivari's violins are regarded as the finest ever made. He set a standard that remains unmatched today. His violins are still played by top musicians around the world.

His best violins and other instruments were made during what is considered his golden period from 1700-1725. Stradivari skillfully made more than a thousand violins during his lifetime, around 650 of which exist today. His most famous violins include the 1715 Lipinski and the 1716 Messiah.

According to Christie's auction reports, Antonio Stradivari's 1707 Hammer violin was sold in May 2006 for \$3,544,000, achieving a world record for any musical instrument sold at auction at that time.

Most recently however, that record was broken when the Lady Blunt violin was sold at auction in 2011 for £9,800,000.

The Strings



The violin, viola, cello and bass fiddle - which make up the strings of the orchestra - are very similar in construction, and all work in the same way. A wooden bridge carries the vibrations of the strings into the front of the instrument, and then the sound is resonated back outward by the smooth back panel. The wood greatly multiplies the volume which is further amplified by the sound holes on the front.

Ideas for creative planning across the KS1 and KS2 curriculum

You can use this object as the starting point for developing pupils' critical and creative thinking as well as their learning across the curriculum. You may want to consider possible 'lines of enquiry' as a first step in your cross-curricular planning. Choosing a line of enquiry may help you to build strong links between curriculum areas. After using strategies to help children engage with the object and using questions to facilitate dialogue about the object you can work with the children to develop lines of enquiry that will interest them.

Here are a few suggestions of possible 'lines of enquiry' using this object:

- Music in the 18th century
- Working with wood
- Making musical instruments
- Sound and music

Using one or more line of enquiry as your starting point consider how you can work in a number of curriculum areas to build strong and effective crosscurricular links.

Using 'Making Musical Instruments' as a line of enquiry

Here are a few ideas of how you can develop a range of learning opportunities to engage pupils with this line of enquiry. Each activity can link with the others to build on pupils' learning across the chosen theme.

Using *The Messiah Violin* as your context....

Stage a concert using a range of instruments including some made by the class

Listen to a variety of music and investigate the importance of vibration and rhythm

Explore the purposes for which instruments were made and played e.g. religious/military/leisure

Explore and make different kinds of instruments e.g. percussion

Invite an instrument maker into school or visit a workshop



Research the range of tools you might need to work with wood

Investigate how natural resources might influence instrument making in different parts of the world

Experiment with a range of materials that you could use to make simple stringed instruments

Explore pattern, symmetry and measurement

**MAKING
MUSICAL
INSTRUMENTS**



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Tips for introducing objects to a class

- Display an image of an object in the classroom for a number of days with a tape recorder or 'graffiti wall' for children to add comments or questions about the object. Once the pupils' comments and questions have been gathered a class discussion can follow on.
- Cover an object and allow the children to feel it. Can they work out what it is without seeing it?
- Show an object to the class for a minute or two. Remove the object and see what they can remember.
- Introduce an object to the whole class in a question and answer session designed to develop the pupils' speaking and listening skills as outlined on page one.
- Work in pairs sitting back to back. One child describes an object and the other draws.
- Collect as many pictures or examples of similar objects from different time periods and explore the similarities and differences. Then try to sort the objects according to age.

"Thank you for a wonderful and stimulating day at the Ashmolean. I came away buzzing full of ideas."

Feedback after a recent
Take One...INSET

Take One...Inspires

Take One... encourages teachers to use an object, painting or other resource imaginatively in the classroom, both as a stimulus for artwork, and for work in more unexpected curriculum areas. Work in many curriculum areas can be inspired by using a single object as a starting point.

The challenge is for teachers to use objects to develop culturally enriching, relevant and practical learning opportunities across the curriculum.



This photo shows a modern violin maker's workbench. Most of the tools and techniques have changed little since the time of Stradivarius.

Photo courtesy of William Castle, violin, viola and cello maker.

Please contact us or visit our website for more information about our programmes including training opportunities

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