

The \$6 Million Violin Theft

There are millions of violins around the world, but a select few are considered the absolute best of the best. These are the several hundred surviving Stradivarius violins produced 300 years ago, which violin aficionados have long considered incomparable. It is said that no other violins produced since can compete with the tonal quality of a genuine Stradivarius. When such a violin was stolen from its owner after a concert it touched off a storm and led to an unprecedented search for the perpetrators.



It was an extremely cold night on January 27, 2014. Lead violinist Frank Almond of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and three other musicians had just completed a concert performance at a college in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It had been a demanding job, playing a masterful piece composed by Olivier Messiaen, a renowned French composer. The work, named *Quartet for the End of Time*, was composed while Messiaen was interned as a prisoner of war in a Nazi concentration camp.

The audience was glued to their seats, listening intently, openmouthed in wonder. They were especially amazed by the incredible tones of the violin. Many of those present had never heard such beautiful violin notes in their lives. They were listening to a rare Stradivarius violin, an instrument worth millions on the market. When the musicians finished their performance the crowds remained riveted to their seats. They were so awestruck that they remained silent for a full 20 seconds before finally breaking into enthusiastic applause.

The concert was followed by a reception honoring the world famous musicians. At 10:15, Almond and the other musicians finally left the hall. They strode down a long corridor that ran parallel to the concert



Frank Almond plays on the 300-year-old Stradivarius violin.

hall. Almond stopped at the changing room to retrieve some of his belongings that he had left there earlier in the day. He packed everything up and headed for a side door that opened to a small parking lot. As he exited the building, Almond was accompanied by clarinetist Todd Levy. The other two musicians, a cellist and a pianist, had already left. They were scheduled to meet again in a restaurant.

The temperature outside was -6°F, well below Milwaukee's nighttime average of 13° for that time of year. The wind chill factor was -25°. Almond was wearing only a thin suit, so he had carefully chosen a parking spot just a few feet away from the door. Actually, Almond was less concerned about his personal health and more about the safety of his violin. He knew that it could suffer permanent damage from exposure to extreme temperatures.

Almond held the violin in its case, which was slung over his left shoulder. It was a cultural treasure of incredible worth and he did not want to part with it for a second.

As Almond stepped outside he noticed an idling minivan waiting near the door. He figured it to be waiting for someone. Then he noticed someone walking in his direction. The figure wore a heavy coat, but that was to be expected in such weather. The man wore a thick, grey fur hat that covered most of his face.

Almond turned around for a second to catch a glimpse of the person sitting in the driver's seat of the van. It was a woman who was also dressed in a heavy coat and wearing the same type of heavy fur hat. "Isn't that strange?" Almond wondered briefly. Assuming the man wanted to discuss the concert with him, Almond stopped. The figure suddenly opened his coat, pulled something out and pointed it at Almond. Almond saw sparks fly and then he felt tremendous pain all over his body as he collapsed to the ground.

The violin virtuoso had been attacked by a Taser gun, generally a non-fatal weapon. It subjects its victims to an electric shock



The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra.

that leaves them momentarily paralyzed (in rare cases it may trigger a heart attack). Being immobilized in that kind of weather while standing on icy pavement is certainly dangerous, however.

Fortunately, Almond was not seriously hurt, but he was stunned long enough for the violin to slip from his grasp. The attacker swiftly grabbed the priceless instrument from the ground and escaped with it.

Todd Levy had gone ahead to his own car, a Chevy Volt, when he suddenly heard a loud, muffled, "Eh! Eh! Eh!" At first Levy assumed it was some children or perhaps a drunkard. Then he heard Almond's voice calling out to him, "Todd! Todd! Todd! They grabbed the violin! They grabbed the violin!"

Levy ran over to Almond, who had pulled himself to his feet. He was still visibly shocked. Levy sat Almond in his car. The violinist trembled from the bitter cold... and anger. He was on the verge of hysterics. "This is my worst nightmare!" he repeated again and again.

The pair quickly called 911.

The first patrol car pulled up five minutes later. The officers were very sympathetic and helpful, but they had no idea what the

two musicians wanted. They wondered quietly what they were doing in a small parking lot on an overcast Monday night in -25° weather.

Levy did most of the talking since Almond was so shaken and outraged that he could not speak. Levy explained to the police that someone had just committed an extremely daring robbery, attacking Almond with a Taser gun and grabbing his Stradivarius from his hands. That's right, a genuine Stradivarius!

Almond and Levy tried everything they could think of to explain to the officers how urgent the situation was. They were talking about Milwaukee's theft of the century. Whoever had just grabbed the violin was probably already in the airport on his way out of the country in order to sell the instrument for a fortune.

Despite the fact that the musicians spoke to them clearly in English, the officers were frustratingly slow on the uptake. They shrugged their shoulders as they asked questions that ran more or less as follows:

"How do you spell the word Stradivarius?"