

#### ABOUT THIS DEPARTMENT

It's called *mojo*—that special magic that lies within the soul of an instrument.

Stewards of some of the world's most coveted stringed instruments describe the *soul* of their fiddles.



Anne Akiko Meyers and the ex-Napoleon/Molitor Stradivari violin

#### STUFF : WHAT'S IN THE CASE?

**Player** Anne Akiko Meyers, concert violinist whose latest album, 'Air: The Bach Album' (eOne), was released on Valentine's Day.

**Instruments** The 'ex-Napoleon/Molitor' Stradivari violin of 1697 and the 'Royal Spanish' Stradivari violin of 1730. Both are strung with Thomastik Peter Infeld strings. She uses bows made by François Xavier Tourte.

**Condition** Ex-Napoleon is blond and looks as if it was made yesterday. The Royal Spanish is darker, like the color of cognac.

*Editor's Note: Meyers maintains the view, presented by Herbert Goodkind in his landmark 'Violin Iconography of Antonio Stradivari 1644–1737,' that the 1697 Strad was owned by Napoleon Bonaparte. Some contemporary violin historians have been unable to confirm the link, preferring to call it the 'Molitor.'*

# THE 'AIR' IS FILLED WITH THE SOUNDS OF ANNE AKIKO MEYERS' TWO STRADS

One is a 'blond,' the other is the color of cognac

By Anne Akiko Meyers

#### Which is your primary go-to instrument?

The "Ex-Napoleon" is my primary.

#### How does it compare to your other Strad?

The Ex-Napoleon/Molitor has a very refined, pure, and beautiful sound, like a coloratura soprano. The "Royal Spanish" is also incredibly beautiful sounding, with a darker and huskier quality.

#### Can you compare the ex-Napoleon to another object?

It's like a Ferrari—super sleek with clean precision, which is especially good during string-crossing passages. Playing it, I get the feeling that I'm sitting inside a rocket that's about to lift off.

#### What gift does the ex-Napoleon/Molitor bring to your playing that cannot be found in any other instrument?

It brings incredible light and purity of sound into 2,800-seat halls easily. The sound is focused and projects, so no forcing of any kind is necessary. Also, knowing the provenance and history almost from the violin's birth is extraordinary.

#### How does it inspire you as a performer?

I love that it never seems to have an off day. It seems to adjust easily to any kind of hall or venue and makes playing everything from Bach, Mozart, and Prokofiev a delicious event.

#### What is its history?

Antonio Stradivari made it in 1697 and it belonged to Napoleon Bonaparte at one time. A legendary Parisian beauty and intellectual, Juliette Récamier, owned it and she hosted many musical and political parties in her salon in France. (She also owned another

Strad, known as the "Récamier," that eventually belonged to Mischa Elman.)

Napoleon eventually exiled [Récamier] from France for her political beliefs and she subsequently sold it to a general in Napoleon's army, Count Gabriel Jean-Joseph Molitor. The Molitor family owned the violin for over a hundred years. It passed through several hands in Europe before it landed at the Curtis Institute. The wonderful violinist Elmar Oliveira also owned it for five years.

#### Has it survived any disasters?

Two world wars, countless revolutions, and this world since 1697.

#### Have you thought about the people who have handled it before you?

Constantly. Knowing the sacrifices, hope, and dreams this violin has seen in the generations of people who owned it is truly incredible.



**Do they resonate in this instrument?  
In your performance?**

An antique is a beautiful thing because it stores so much history and knowing the history really gives soul to it.

**How did you come into possession of this instrument?**

I tried it by accident in New York, and instantly knew I was in big trouble.

**Do you own it?**

I purchased it for \$3.6 million dollars.

**What drew you to it?**

It's depth of sound, history, and the feeling that it had incredible potential to blossom into something extraordinary.

**What is the ex-Napoleon's personality?**

Moody, subdued, peaceful, violent, and proud, with its head held high.

**What are its strengths and limitations?**

The E string is extraordinary with its range and depth of clarity. I also love that most passages come out cleanly, without a lot of

"negotiation." I have had so many violins in my lifetime and this violin is deeply appreciated.

**What are its likes and dislikes?**

It loves to be heard in huge concert halls.

**'I tried it by accident and instantly knew I was in big trouble.'**

—Anne Akiko Meyers

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**Is your instrument female, male,  
or genderless?**

Female. I think most Stradivaris are. (Sorry, men!) They are magical, wise, and once you get the hang of them, like no other.

**Have you given it a name?**

Molly.

**When and how did you truly learn who this instrument is, the soul of the instrument?**

The violin has opened up and changed so much, since I originally played it, that it's mind-boggling. Just as we constantly change as human beings, these violins sing with certain players and fall into a coma with others. As this violin travels the world with an active touring schedule and different repertoire, I expect it to change even more.

**Have you ever done anything that might have robbed it of its "mojo" such as a repair or changing the strings? What was the result?**

I just added more "mojo" with [Thomastik] PI strings. It's always fun to experiment with different stings and bows! It's shocking how a bow can alter the sound. I have thought that if you play the same violin with 20 bows, you will have so many different sounds coming out of the violin. And that doesn't even include the player!

**If given the ability, what would this instrument say to you if the two of you sat down for tea?**

First, I would bow to her as she has traveled such long distances and hope that she feels like telling me a beautiful story while drinking her tea. Make that a hot toddy!