

## Phantom Violins

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It was a pretty ordinary workday when a seemingly ordinary email hit Deborah Shapiro's inbox.

Deborah Shapiro: I believe it said something like "I am researching the Partello bequest. Can you provide me with a copy of the materials?"

Lizzie Peabody: Deborah works at the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives. Fielding requests from curious members of the public is part of her job. So, off she goes in search of documents under the name "Partello." And this is what she pulled out. Oh, wow. This is a thick stack of papers.

Deborah Shapiro: Yeah. So, when there is a thick stack with all the same number on it. It's like, there's a lot going on here.

Lizzie Peabody: The pile starts with a note.

Deborah Shapiro: "May 11, 1915. 4 p.m."

Lizzie Peabody: A memo describing a phone call from a man named D. J. Partello to the Smithsonian, which was called the U.S. National Museum back then.

Deborah Shapiro: "Mr. D. J. Partello called on telephone and said he wanted to present to the U.S. National Museum a collection of violins of the [blank] to the [blank] centuries. It contained a number of violins made by Stradivarius." Signed, R. Rathbun, the assistant Secretary in charge of National Museum." I like that Rathbun left the blanks because he didn't actually remember what the centuries were.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The violins, actually a variety of stringed instruments, dated from the 16th to the 19th centuries. There were 26 of them, including four made by Antonio Stradivari, widely considered to be the greatest violin maker of all time. More on him later. So, Deborah figures, "Cool. Rich guy donates a bunch of violins. I'll have these papers scanned and sent by lunchtime." But as she starts scanning the documents, something stops her.

Deborah Shapiro: The first weird thing I noticed was the letter from the Department of Justice. So, there's, like, some legal action going on here.

Lizzie Peabody: Mmm. And pretty soon, she's not even scanning. She's just reading.

Deborah Shapiro: When I first realized that we were dealing with a fraudster situation was when I saw a stack of letters from, like, these musical luminaries.

Lizzie Peabody: Photocopied letters from Fritz Kreisler, Jan Kubelík, Leopold Stokowski, Jacques Thibaud. And if you don't recognize these names, I didn't either. All you really need to know is that they were master musicians and composers of the era. The Lizzos and Taylor Swifts of their day. And every single letter urged the Smithsonian to reject Partello's donation. Why? For the good of the violins.

Deborah Shapiro: "They might as well be buried in the ground as placed in the museum."

Lizzie Peabody: This is a letter from Belgian virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe.

Deborah Shapiro: "In my opinion, it is a crime against art and against the very names of the great makers from whose hands the instruments came."

Lizzie Peabody: "Crime against art."

Deborah Shapiro: That's pretty dramatic, but he was a dramatic dude.

Lizzie Peabody: You know, being a virtuoso and all.

Deborah Shapiro: And this one is all in Italian.

Lizzie Peabody: Because it's written by the celebrated conductor Arturo Toscanini.

[MUSIC]

Deborah Shapiro: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: Altogether, there are about a dozen letters. They call Partello's decision to donate his violins "perverse," a "musical outrage," an "irreparable loss."

Deborah Shapiro: "In a museum, they would be utterly lost to the musical world for all time, a deplorable fate to contemplate for such noble instruments." And they're all like that. They all follow, like, a very similar, like, almost sentence structure.

Lizzie Peabody: And to Deborah, this was a clue.

[MUSIC]

Deborah Shapiro: Yeah. I watch, like, a lot of reality TV, and it kind reminds me of, it reminds me of, like, when you watch, like, a lot of episodes in a row and they're all saying the same thing, and you know, like, the producers are telling them what to say.

Lizzie Peabody: Mmhmm.

Deborah Shapiro: That's what this is like.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, okay. So, it reads as though they were coached.

Deborah Shapiro: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Deborah says all of the letters echoed the longest letter of all, from D. J. Partello's own daughter, Adeline.

Deborah Shapiro: I think she wrote the scripts for everyone because she's such a great writer. The one that she herself wrote is nine pages long and all of it is just fantastic. So, I think it was all her.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: By honoring the dying wish of one old man, the Smithsonian landed itself at the center of a family feud: a tale of fame, deceit, and contested family fortune. So, this time on Sidedoor, we set out to find out what happened to the Partello violins and, on the way, land on an even bigger question, one that continues to strike a chord today. What does it mean to preserve a musical instrument? To encase it in glass, as perfect as the day it was finished? Or does an instrument have to be played and heard in order to live on? It's the tale of the Partello Violins, after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. We probably wouldn't be telling this story at all if Cliff Hall hadn't gone online and bought a secondhand violin on a whim. The violin was advertised as being about a hundred years old. That's the violin. And this is Cliff.

Cliff Hall: That's what you get for \$5 in 1902.

Lizzie Peabody: I feel like we're ready to go.

Cliff Hall: All right.

Lizzie Peabody: Why don't you just start by introducing yourself?

Cliff Hall: Okay. My name is Cliff Hall. I'm a violin teacher in elementary school, but I'm also a freelance journalist.

Lizzie Peabody: Cliff came to the studio carrying his violin in its wooden case, wearing a tweed jacket and matching cap. He looked like he could be a violin teacher from a hundred years ago.

Cliff Hall: I have the need for tweed.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Cliff ordered this second-hand violin online. And when it arrived at his house, he opened the case and inside was a pretty fine violin.

Cliff Hall: But more importantly, I saw this tattered, old, curious piece of paper.

Lizzie Peabody: The paper was covered in barely legible pencil marks. But Cliff could just make out the words: "My Violin Number 55."

Cliff Hall: So, whoever owned this violin had a lot of violins, because this was the 55th one. And I kept looking at it and I couldn't understand the handwriting. But I see all these numbers.

Lizzie Peabody: Cliff realized this bit of paper was, essentially, a homemade library card.

Cliff Hall: Every time this person took this violin out of the case, they wrote it down.

Lizzie Peabody: Whoa. Hold on. Could I see it?

Cliff Hall: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: It says, "1916: 4/3, 4/4, 4/5, 4/6, 4/7, 4/8, 4/9." Oh, he didn't take it out on April 10<sup>th</sup>, which, in the year 1916, was a Monday. Maybe he had work to do. Anyway, the dates continue on, spanning 41 years.

Cliff Hall: And that's what got my curiosity going. To me, that's, like, obsession.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But the thing about obsession is it can be contagious. Now, Cliff had to find out what kind of person would record every single time they played each of their at least 55 violins. Cliff took off his music teacher hat and put on his journalist hat, which was probably also made of tweed, and he started some serious sleuthing—violin dealerships, school records, ancestry websites—and, eventually, he learned that the violin in his hands had belonged to a man named Edward Abell.

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Cliff Hall: I was like, "Okay. Keep going. What else?" If you're this kind of person, there's a stroke of genius inside you. There's some heightened sense of wonder.

Lizzie Peabody: There's a story.

Cliff Hall: There's a story. And, boy, did I find it.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But the story he found is not actually the story of Edward Abell. It's the story of his brother, Arthur. The Abell brothers came from a farming family in Connecticut and they were about as different as could be, except that they both loved violins. Edward was the older brother. He was bookish and introverted, loved school. But after he graduated, he did the practical thing. Took a job with the electrical company, where he worked all his life. But he never stopped collecting violins and, like he did with Cliff's, carefully cataloging them.

Cliff Hall: Edward was about all about the scholarship side of it, whereas Arthur was more about the lifestyle side of it.

Lizzie Peabody: Arthur Abell was the younger brother. He was the performer, the party guy. The extravert to Edward's introvert. But the brothers shared a love of music. So, when Arthur dropped out of college, in 1890, it was his older brother Edward who paid for him to move to Germany, where he hoped to become a famous violinist. But once there...

Cliff Hall: He realizes pretty quickly he's not going to make it. Not good enough. Pretty good, but you have to be really, really good. But he ultimately decides, "I'm going to be a music journalist. I'm going to be a writer."

Lizzie Peabody: If he couldn't be a violinist, he'd get next to the violinists. He would become a celebrity journalist.

Lizzie Peabody: You know, it's hard to imagine from where we stand today that, like, professional violinists and composers would have been the celebrities of the day. You know, no offense to Yo Yo Ma.

Cliff Hall: This is the days before people had radios. So, everyone owned an instrument. Okay? That's how—. Dinner's over? Pull the violin out. Get the piano. Let's play some music.

[MUSIC]

Cliff Hall: And so, the celebrities were the people that did that really well. And so, Arthur was covering that electric scene.

Lizzie Peabody: Arthur got a writing gig as the Berlin correspondent for the New York's Musical Courier.

Cliff Hall: Correct. Yeah. And at that, he's enormously successful.

Lizzie Peabody: He starts hosting weekly parties at his house.

Cliff Hall: Fabulous salons. And because he's a writer, everyone wants to talk to you because they want to get their name in the press.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh.

Cliff Hall: So, he's meeting all the famous people of the time.

Lizzie Peabody: People like, oh, say, Fritz Kreisler.

Cliff Hall: And they take these elaborate pictures. Like, Instagram kind of before there was Instagram. He makes these elaborate scenes at these parties.

Lizzie Peabody: Wait. So, where are they posting these pictures?

Cliff Hall: In the Musical Courier.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, it was his personal Instagram.

Cliff Hall: It was his personal Instagram. And Arthur saw that wall socket and plugged right into it.

Lizzie Peabody: Cliff shows me one of these Insta-fabulous pictures, staged in Arthur's living room. There's, like, busts of sculptures in the background. There's women gazing off into the distance. Oh, I see Arthur.

Cliff Hall: With his violin.

Lizzie Peabody: He's got his violin up on his shoulder.

Cliff Hall: He's very serious.

Lizzie Peabody: He's looking right at the camera.

Cliff Hall: Right.

Lizzie Peabody: His frizzy hair stands up from his temples in a way that makes you wonder if this scene really was electric. It's very kind of theatrical and fun.

Cliff Hall: Very theatrical. Like a frieze.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Cliff Hall: Yeah. That's what that reminded me of.

Lizzie Peabody: Arthur was living his best life in Berlin. He had clout as a journalist. His reviews could make or break a show. He was brushing elbows with composers, musicians, conductors, and collectors. In the early 1900s, he meets one collector in particular: a man by the name of Dwight J. Partello. Partello was also an American living in Germany. And he had an impressive collection of violins, including a few made by the famous Italian luthier, Antonio Stradivari. Now, if you're like me, you might be thinking, "Okay. I have heard the name Stradivarius. I know these instruments are valuable and important. But why?"

Kenneth Slowik: So, there have been a number of different theories put forth.

Lizzie Peabody: For answers, I went to this guy.

Kenneth Slowik: So, I'm Kenneth Slowik. I've been at the Smithsonian since 1981. And I'm currently one of the curators of musical instruments.

Lizzie Peabody: Ken says Antonio Stradivari started making instruments around 1660, when he was still a child. And he worked well into his 90s, making violas, cellos, and even some guitars.

Kenneth Slowik: But the vast majority of what Stradivari was doing was making the violin and working on it and improving it and changing and always looking for something, something better.

Lizzie Peabody: And that made Stradivarius violins a little different from those that came before. And his instruments weren't actually a hit right away.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But then, something happened. Prior to the 1800s, most music was performed in intimate settings, like churches and royal living rooms. That's why it's called chamber music. It was literally played in a chamber or, as we say today, a room. But in the 19th century, music was expanding into larger concert halls, and musicians quickly learned that the Stradivarius violin carried better in larger spaces.

Kenneth Slowik: The geometry that Stradivari had employed was such that the body of his instrument was a little bit flatter and the sound was maybe more focused and began to work better in these bigger concert halls.

Lizzie Peabody: Stradivari made more than a thousand instruments over his lifetime. But by the 1900s, two hundred years after his death, only about half of them remained. So, there was a scarcity of these highly prized violins, which made them really valuable. And our friend D. J. Partello had four.

Kenneth Slowik: Partello was one of several people who were collecting and had a kind of a mania for it.

Lizzie Peabody: And back in Berlin, Arthur Abell had his keen journalist's eye on D. J. Partello's collection. He profiled it in a 1909 article for the Musical Courier. Arthur gushed...

Speaker 5: "Dwight J. Partello, a citizen of the United States, residing in Berlin, has, by far, the greatest and most valuable collection of old masterpieces of the luthier's art now in existence."

Lizzie Peabody: But Arthur Abell wasn't only smitten with Partello's violins. Because Partello also had a daughter, Adeline. And before you could say bada boom...

Cliff Hall: Bada bing. They're married.

Lizzie Peabody: Never mind the fact that Arthur Abell already had a wife and a ten-year-old child.

Cliff Hall: What happened? I don't know. It's all speculation. My speculation is he hooked his wagon to a brighter star.

Lizzie Peabody: The brighter star being D. J. Partello?

Cliff Hall: Right. Mmhmm. The man with the violins. He ended up marrying her, I think, to be to be part of the Partello magic.

Lizzie Peabody: I mean, this was the Arthur Abell hosting celebrity soirees.

Cliff Hall: If you're taking pictures of where you're staging people to look like they were coming off of Mount Olympus...

Lizzie Peabody: That is—. That does describe it pretty well.

Cliff Hall: ...then I don't think you're interested in, like, oh, taking the kids to soccer practice. I don't know what's going on here.

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[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, by now, it's 1915. Arthur Abell is married to Adeline Partello, heiress to the Partello violin collection. Her father, D. J. Partello, he moves back to Washington D.C. And as he nears the end of his life, he begins to think about his legacy.

[MUSIC]

Cliff Hall: "Okay. I've got this violin collection. What am I going to do with it?"

Lizzie Peabody: Partello decides, with World War I on the horizon, that he wants to leave his violin collection to his country.

Cliff Hall: So, where do you donate it if you want to donate it for the nation? To the nation's museum, to the Smithsonian.

Lizzie Peabody: Partello phones the Smithsonian, tells them that he intends to donate his entire collection. He makes the arrangements, updates his will. And five years later, in August of 1920, he dies. And only then do his heirs learn the violins would not be theirs.

Cliff Hall: And this shocked—*shocked*—the family. They had no idea this was coming. None. None.

Lizzie Peabody: What did they do?

Cliff Hall: Fly into action.

Lizzie Peabody: Coming up after the break: the battle for the Partello violins. Don't go away.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In 1920, the late D. J. Partello left his famous collection of 26 stringed instruments to the Smithsonian. And it was big news.

Cliff Hall: "Partello Donates His Instruments to the National Museum." It's a headline in the newspaper. It's a big deal. It's the first time it's ever happened in America.

Lizzie Peabody: Journalist Cliff Hall says this was the first instrument collection on record to be donated to an American museum. But not everyone thought it was a good idea. An op-ed appeared in the Kentucky Evening Post within a month after the announcement titled: "Prisoners for Life." And it basically said...

Cliff Hall: "This can't happen. These violins will never see the light of day. The instruments will fall apart, basically. They won't be loved. They will die. They'll be prisoners for life."

Lizzie Peabody: And who was this doomsayer in the paper? Good ole Arthur Abell, who would very much have liked to inherit those violins from his father-in-law. But his uncle-in-law, D. J. Partello's brother, was having none of Arthur's griping. He wrote his own op-ed in the New York Times, saying...

Cliff Hall: "No. This, this was his will. This is what he wanted. He talked to me many times about it. This is what he wanted for the greatness of the nation."

Lizzie Peabody: So, Arthur is like, "It's on." He ups the ante, pulls out his rolodex of musical celebrity friends, and launches a letter-writing campaign for the ages.

Deborah Shapiro: Okay. So, here is what I sent to Cliff.

Kenneth Slowik: That was a treasure trove. That's amazing.

Deborah Shapiro: This one.

Lizzie Peabody: Those are the letters archivist Deborah Shapiro sent Cliff Hall from the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives after she got his email. Now, enclosed with the letters from musical celebrities is a long letter from Partello's daughter, Adeline.

Deborah Shapiro: This is actually the crown jewel of all of them.

Cliff Hall: Adeline Abell writes a saber-rattling letter to the Smithsonian.

Lizzie Peabody: A "saber-rattling letter?"

Cliff Hall: "If you don't, like, give me back my violins..."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The letter, dated 1921, is addressed to the head of the museum, Secretary Walcott. Adeline writes...

Deborah Shapiro: "I am enclosing herewith photographic copies of the few of the many letters of protest, which my husband and I have received from the greatest living musical celebrities. You, no doubt, are wholly unaware of the magnitude of this storm that is brewing and have probably not given a thought to the consequences which the carrying out of my father's mad bequest would bring about.

Lizzie Peabody: Adeline urges the secretary to read the enclosed photocopied letters carefully, reminding him that she has the originals.

Deborah Shapiro: "Thus far, we have kept these letters out of the press, but the demand for their publication is becoming more and more insistent."

Lizzie Peabody: Mmm.

Deborah Shapiro: "Their publication would lead to a newspaper sensation. And we wish to avoid that, if possible." So, yeah. That's a little bit of a threat, I'd say.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: She's like, "Pretty nice museum you got here. Pity if something happened to it." And finishes her letter by strongly urging the secretary to reject her father's donation.

[MUSIC]

Cliff Hall: The secretary says, "Thank you for your information. I really appreciate your point of view. No. Hard pass. I'm going to hold on to these, because, as a steward of the government, that wouldn't be the right thing for me to do."

Lizzie Peabody: Now, reading through the letters in the archives, they all make the same basic two points: first, instruments so prized should be in the hands of musicians; and second, if the instruments aren't played, they'll fall apart. Which made me wonder: How legit is this claim that untouched instruments are doomed to ruin?

Kenneth Slowik: It depends.

Lizzie Peabody: For a reality check, I went back to musical instrument curator Ken Slowik.

Kenneth Slowik: If they're not used and they get stuck away in a closet somewhere, woodworm attacks.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh.

Kenneth Slowik: And they can literally fall apart or get eaten up. If the concern, though, is that they sit in a case and they don't get played and they somehow deteriorate, well, if the humidity and temperature control in the museum is good, they're not going to physically suffer.

Lizzie Peabody: But that's a pretty big "if." Especially in the 1920s. How well equipped was the U.S. National Museum to care for Partello's violins?

Deborah Shapiro: I think that's page two.

Lizzie Peabody: I went back to the archives.

Deborah Shapiro: So, this is the annual report for the section of musical instruments, 1922 to 1923.

Lizzie Peabody: Mmhmm.

Deborah Shapiro: "The collection, as a whole, is in good condition, but many instruments need repair." That's it. That's all that they have to say. Oh, there are 2,052 instruments in the collection.

Lizzie Peabody: So, there were more than 2,000 instruments in the collection. And at the time, there was only one guy to take care of them.

Deborah Shapiro: Who was not a curator. His title, I think, is "custodian of musical instruments." And his name is Edwin Henry Hawley. He actually died in the late nineteen-teens. He was 85 years old.

Lizzie Peabody: Scratch that. 2,000 instruments and zero guys to take care of them.

Deborah Shapiro: So, the Abells were not wrong when they were saying, you know, "If you put these violins in museum, they're just going to..."

Lizzie Peabody: They're just going to sit there.

Deborah Shapiro: There's proof right there.

Lizzie Peabody: Nevertheless, a will is a will. And Partello's will was extremely clear.

Deborah Shapiro: "Further, I hereby give and bequeath my entire collection of musical instruments, bows, and cases to the National U.S. Museum at Wash D.C."

Lizzie Peabody: Case closed. Or so we thought. Because you know what else they say: Where there's a will, there's also a way.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In August of 1921, a year after Partello's death, a ship from Germany approaches port in New York. A woman stands alone at the rail, skirts billowing back in the breeze, watching the Statue of Liberty grow larger on the horizon. Who is this woman?

Cliff Hall: The baroness.

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Lizzie Peabody: The Baroness Carita von Horst, who was actually born Carrie Partello of Washington D.C. Adeline's sister. Like Adeline, she'd moved to Germany to study music. She'd married a German-American who got rich selling California hops.

Cliff Hall: He became the hops king.

Lizzie Peabody: Rich enough to buy himself a baronship.

Cliff Hall: She becomes the baroness. For a while, they live in Germany together. She forms an opera school.

Lizzie Peabody: But by 1921...

Cliff Hall: Her fortune had fallen away from her.

Lizzie Peabody: Her husband was wrongfully accused of spying in World War I and lost all of his money. Their marriage was falling apart.

Cliff Hall: Dun dun dun. She needs money. So, a desperate woman, desperate times, desperate action.

Lizzie Peabody: I like to envision the baroness descending the ship's gangplank. Her parasol in one hand. In the other, a single piece of paper.

Cliff Hall: She's got a bill of sale from 1914, saying that her dad sold her the entire collection for \$10. Everything that was in his Berlin apartment.

Lizzie Peabody: The document states that, seven years earlier, D. J. Partello sold his daughter his Berlin apartment and everything in it. And according to Carita, that included the violins. Now, for starters, the writing style of this document is suspiciously informal, especially when compared to D. J. Partello's actual will. But Cliff says the main thing that's suspicious is the timing of it.

Cliff Hall: If you are going to do this giant letter-writing campaign, why do that? If you have the bill of sale, that's all you have to do. What? She's in Germany, so she is too busy? "Oh, did I not mention I have a bill of sale? Oh, sorry." I don't believe it.

Lizzie Peabody: "My bad."

Cliff Hall: "My bad." You know, it's like—. It's desperation of a woman who lost all her fortune. She saw her sister trying to make it work. She's like, "All right, I'm the big sister. I'm going to make this happen."

Lizzie Peabody: Carita von Horst's lawyer sends the Smithsonian this newly revealed seven-year-old bill of sale. And the District Attorney of Washington D.C., Peyton Gordon...

Cliff Hall: Inexplicably rolls over.

Lizzie Peabody: He sides with the Partello daughters. Apparently, this weirdly convenient bill of sale was all he needed. Why do you think he dropped the case? Why did he roll over?

Cliff Hall: He was new to the job, you know. So, he's, like, still finding his way in the world. But I mean, it's kind of a mystery.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Peyton Gordon told the Smithsonian to hand over the violins. Which they did.

Cliff Hall: And that was that.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Within a few months, the Partello sisters sold their father's collection to a dealer for the modern equivalent of four million dollars.

Cliff Hall: Arthur never worked another day in his life.

Lizzie Peabody: Really?

Cliff Hall: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: He quit writing?

Cliff Hall: Oh, he stopped writing.

Lizzie Peabody: Carita used the money to produce an operetta called "Cavalier Jack."

Cliff Hall: And there's this really catchy song, "Mein Baby," that actually—. I really like it. Carita's a good songwriter. Like, you know what—?

Lizzie Peabody: Well, this is something good that came of it. The world got "Mein Baby."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It would be another sixty years before the Smithsonian would receive a Stradivarius. But today, we have five. And they really are something to see.

Kenneth Slowik: This is the 1701 instrument that's called the Cerve cello. It was played....

Lizzie Peabody: Ken pulled out a sleek, caramel-colored cello.

Kenneth Slowik: You're a cellist right?

Lizzie Peabody: I used to play the cello.

Kenneth Slowik: I don't really have a good chair.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, my gosh. You're going to let me play this???

Kenneth Slowik: Yeah.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: There's a strange kind of magic to holding a three-hundred-year-old instrument. Oh, my gosh. I'm so rusty, Ken.

Kenneth Slowik: [inaudible]

Lizzie Peabody: The instrument itself is a work of art, worthy of protection. But it is also a tool built to create sound. And that sound, that music, is like a voice that speaks to us from the past. I passed the cello back to Ken.

[MUSIC]

Kenneth Slowik: There is, there is something like that, that when you pick up one of these old things, you know, that lots of people before you have handled it, and anybody who has a feeling for that at all, I think, knows that, that you're a temporary curator of it. You try to find out what it tells you. You know that instrument's voice is being molded to be your voice.

Lizzie Peabody: Mmhmm.

Kenneth Slowik: And so, there is some kind of alchemy that goes on there.

Lizzie Peabody: To preserve a musical instrument is a balancing act. You want to protect it, but you also want to let it live a little. Who decides how often the Smithsonian's instruments should be played?

Kenneth Slowik: I do. At the moment.

Lizzie Peabody: And how do you decide?

Kenneth Slowik: We have anywhere between a dozen and 20 or so concerts a year here.

Lizzie Peabody: Today, the instruments in the Smithsonian collection are anything but "imprisoned for life." Ken Slowik makes a point of that. He directs the Smithsonian Chamber Music Society, which is what you've been hearing throughout this entire episode. The Smithsonian's Stradivarius and other historic string instruments from the collection playing the same music they played hundreds of years ago. It's like time travel.

[MUSIC]

Cliff Hall: There's concerts that people can come to for free. And then, so that's the dream. That's not just putting a violin behind glass. That's putting a violin into people's ears again and letting them sing. And that's the point.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In the end, D. J. Partello did not get his wish. But his children got theirs. And honestly, it's hard to say whether the "right" thing happened to the Partello bequest. When I think back on all those letters in the archives, I can see both sides. You know, on one hand, these letters could read as a family's desperate attempt to get back what they see as their rightful inheritance.

Cliff Hall: Right.

Lizzie Peabody: You know, on the other, if we believe the best in them, these letters could be read as, like, a real attempt to save and protect the beautiful, rare instruments from languishing in a place that...

Cliff Hall: Right.

Lizzie Peabody: ...at the time, from the sound of it didn't really have the resources or people to properly care for them.

Cliff Hall: Right. That's true. Their—. If they didn't—. How to put this best? If these people were angels descending from heaven and that was the only thing they ever did and there were no other, no other marks on them, then I would believe that.

Lizzie Peabody: But Cliff says there's one more thing you should know before deciding what you think. Years after selling her father's violins, Carita Von Horst produced another suspiciously timed bill of sale. This time, to lay claim to the Partello family farm.

## Phantom Violins

Cliff Hall: And that judge took one look at that bill of sale and said, "That is a forgery." And only if Peyton Gordon had said the same thing. The Smithsonian would have those violins in this, in this museum right now.

Lizzie Peabody: So, the Smithsonian may have lost out. But on the bright side, the world got "Mein Baby."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks to Cliff Hall for reaching out to us with the idea for this story and for all his original research. Thanks also to the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, especially Deborah Shapiro, for being the keepers of these historical documents that made it possible to tell the story. And thanks to Kenneth Slowik and the Smithsonian Chamber Music Society for bringing the story to life through sound, and the living collections at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: For more information on the Smithsonian Chamber Music Society, recordings, and upcoming concerts, you can visit their website, [smithsonianchambermusic.org](http://smithsonianchambermusic.org).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We'll include a full list of the pieces and the players you heard in this episode in our newsletter. And we might include a video of me playing a Stradivarius cello from 1701. Maybe. So, subscribe to our newsletter. Go to [si.edu/sidedoor](http://si.edu/sidedoor).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks this episode to Karina Kacala for singing "Mein Baby" from Carita von Horst's "Cavalier Jack" especially for us, and to Cliff Hall for playing the instrumentals. Thanks also to Valeska Hilbig and Liz O'Brien.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq, Sharon Bryant, and Lara Koch. Sharon Bryant runs our social media. Tami O'Neill writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Fact checking by Adam Bisno. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at [sidedoor@si.edu](mailto:sidedoor@si.edu).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And thank you to everyone who responded to our listener survey. We read every single one. And it means so much to us that you take the time to offer your feedback. So, thank you. If you want to sponsor our show, please email [sponsorship@prx.org](mailto:sponsorship@prx.org).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.