Knock knock knock. The sound of knuckles on wood cuts through the crisp morning air. Leaves crunch underfoot, before a pregnant stillness pervades the silent forest. It is almost summer in the Italian Alps, and soon the forest canopy will become a carpet of emerald green. Seen from above, the Val di Fiemme (Valley of Harmony) probably looks like any other European postcard vista: the Dolomites are dusted with snow, the Avisio river glitters with refracted light like an Impressionist painting. But the valley is home to no ordinary forest. This is Il Bosco che Suona – ‘The Musical Woods’. Marcello Mazzuchi, a retired forest ranger, wanders here and there, knocking on the trunks of the firs as he goes, leaning in, listening.

“I observe, I touch them, sometimes I even hug them,” he says. “Look carefully and they’ll tell you their life and story, their traumas, their joys, everything.” For hundreds of years, luthiers have walked these woods, selecting the spruce they later craft into instruments. But not all of them are suitable. Trees that have been struck by lightning, for example, are promptly disregarded. Muzzuchi’s keen eye knows exactly what to look for. He finds a perfectly straight, cylindrical specimen, with no branches at the bottom. “If you ask me, there’s a violin trapped inside.”

Since 2007 a festival has taken place here each summer, known as the ‘Sounds of the Dolomites’. Some of the greatest musicians of our time come together for two months of performances, culminating in a unique ritual wherein the artists are invited to select a tree to be named in their honour – a gift from the Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme for spreading “sublime melodies in the world”. Upon selection by the musician, Mazzuchi offers a poetry reading, revealing the “personal qualities” of the tree. The musician concludes the ritual by dedicating a performance to the chosen spruce. The needles shiver overhead, and a mysterious resonance echoes throughout the forest.

Musicians who have “baptised” a tree thus far include Daniel Hope (2008), Isabelle Faust (2011/13/18), Giovanni Sollima (2012), Mario Brunello (2013/18), and Gidon Kremer (2012/18). In the inaugural ceremony in 2007, the Italian violinist and conductor Uto Ughi famously selected a tree that emitted an F sharp when struck by the hand. Mazzuchi subsequently cored the tree, whereupon he established it was 230 years old.

The musician concludes the ritual by dedicating a performance to the chosen spruce. The needles shiver overhead, and a mysterious resonance echoes throughout the forest.”

Today, you can idle through Il Bosco che Suona, pausing at each numbered tree to listen to the ceremonies – all of which are recorded for posterity. But the Trentino tourism website makes one thing clear. “Only twenty audio guides are available because the musical wood is not suitable for crowds.” What makes Il Bosco che Suona so unique is the intimacy of a small gathering, the revitalising power of music in nature, and the act of a community reinvesting a percentage of its resources to pay tribute to a cultural legacy that transcends time.

The Guadagnini Quartet Project

Ulrike Klein. Photo Randy Larcombe
Stringed instruments have existed for thousands of years, but it was only around 1650 that Italy’s master luthiers began perfecting their designs for violins, violas, and cellos, resulting in instruments that have remained unequalled to this day. Now commonly referred to as the ‘golden age’, it began with Andrea Amati (ca.1505–1577) of Cremona – generally credited with inventing the first violin in 1555 – and Gasparo da Salò (1542–1609) of Brescia. While the latter’s legacy perished in the plague of 1630, the Cremonese school flourished. Amati’s knowledge and skill was passed down to his sons, but it was his grandson Nicolò (1596–1684) who took the tradition beyond the family, training over a dozen apprentices, including the Guarneri family and, most notably, Antonio Stradivari (1644–1737). Some 400 years ago, they too walked the woods of Il Bosco che Suona, knocking, observing, listening. The price tags their instruments carry today are, without exception, stratospheric. In 2012 the 1741 ‘Viextempts’ Guarneri del Gesù was purchased at auction, rumoured to have gone for more than US$16 million. The 1719 ‘Macdonald’ Stradivarius viola, one of only thirteen known examples, appeared at auction two years later, with an eye-watering minimum bid price of US$45 million. It failed to attract a buyer. Despite such outrageous prices, the seemingly immortal longevity of these instruments continues to attract investors. Throughout history, their value has never depreciated. Giovanni Battista Guadagnini (1711–1785) is often referred to as the last of the great master luthiers, but the circumstances of his maturation make him an even more fascinating and enigmatic figure. Unlike the Stradivari, Amati or Guarneri families, Guadagnini’s birth certificate confirms he was born not in Cremona, but in the tiny village of Bilegno on 23 June 1711. Nestled in the lower slopes of the Val Tidone, Bilegno is little more than a hamlet of stone-built houses in the countryside, its primary occupation that of agriculture facilitated by a small tributary of the Po River. The Guadagnini family most likely worked the fields, and thus Giovanni Battista had no need for a formal education; he remained a lifelong illiterate, incapable even of signing his own name. Guadagnini’s extraction from this peasant upbringing into the rarefied spheres of instrument making was, by today’s standards as much as those of his day, nothing short of miraculous. In 1734 his father Lorenzo inherited a sum of money, which he used to rent a small tavern and farmstead. They opened a butcher’s shop and baked bread, but the venture was a failure, and within four years it was abandoned. The family relocated twenty kilometres east to the city of Piacenza, where Giovanni Battista’s career would begin to flourish. “Giovanni Battista [Guadagnini] had no need for a formal education; he remained a lifelong illiterate, incapable even of signing his own name.” Little is known about his life before the Piacenza period, and one can only conjecture what led the twenty-seven year old to undertake a four-year apprenticeship in a woodworker’s guild. He was in all respects a foreigner in a new city; the Guadagnini name at this time would have had little, if any, social currency. Age too was against him: it was not common for a man approaching middle age to embark on such a drastic career change. Whatever his intent may have been, Guadagnini’s sole qualifications were a steady hand and an uncompromising eye for detail. He quickly mastered how to carve the scrolls, bend and arch in the wood. The acceleration in his progress was unusual, enabling him to rub shoulders with Piacenza’s finest musicians within months of completing his apprenticeship. His first violins date from around 1742. Subsequent examples exhibit greater attention towards the perfection of nuance, experimenting with factors such as the position of the f holes and the size of each instrument. The lengths of Guadagnini’s cellos, for instance, were reduced from 750mm down to 700mm in response to a growing need for greater facility and tonal brilliance. Paolo and Carlo Ferrari, two of the leading musicians in Piacenza, undoubtedly solicited such experimentation; they would become Guadagnini’s primary sponsors. In 1749 Guadagnini followed the Ferrari brothers to Milan. Here he had access to vastly superior tone woods, and his output increased. The f holes became more angled and oval in shape, while the varnishes from this period were visually more arresting: some feature vivid hues of burnt orange, others a gleaming vermillion when illuminated by morning sunlight.
By 1758 Guadagnini had once again relocated, this time to Parma, where he received his first official patronage as a luthier for the Court of don Filippo di Borbone, the Duke of Parma. Again, the wood changed, as Guadagnini was eventually forced to use oppio, a local stock with knots and roots, occasionally affecting the quality of his instruments. His working tools also changed: the shape of the volutes suggests Guadagnini used a spoon gauge to round out the curves. The varnish too, was less opulent, favouring a more modest colour palette of dark blonde and chestnut hues.

In 1771 Guadagnini settled in Turin, where he would remain until his death in 1786. Shortly after he arrived, a myth circulated that, by virtue of his father Lorenzo, Guadagnini was an heir to the great Cremonese tradition – a fictitious descendancy that he himself disseminated for promotional gain. The rumour did indeed prove useful: it gained him the trust of Count Cozio di Salabue, eventually resulting in a formal partnership.

In 1841 a list appeared documenting the Count’s collection, which included forty-eight Guadagnini violins, in addition to several instruments made by Amati and Stradivari, which Guadagnini used as models to perfect his own designs. The instruments he produced were far cry from cheap imitations; indeed, many examples from this period are often cited among the finest instruments he ever made.

“Today, Guadagnini’s instruments are among the most coveted in the world, as much for their sound as the cultural potency they now possess”

Over the course of his seventy-five-year life, he made around 403 violins, twenty-one violas, thirty-nine cellos, and three double basses. Unlike the instruments of Stradivari or Amati however, Guadagnini’s work is defined by an inherent roughness: the spontaneity of his construction and craftsmanship is often left undisguised.

His nomadic existence, moving as he did from town to town, adapting and changing and perfecting his designs with the resources that were available, enabled Guadagnini to produce instruments that were inimitable expressions of the environment in which they were hewn, carved, bent, chamfered, sanded, varnished and finally strung into being. There is thus more variety, more colour, and more personality across his body of work than any of his Cremonese predecessors, whose instruments stem from a single region.

Today, Guadagnini’s instruments are among the most coveted in the world, as much for their sound as the cultural potency they now possess: they are heirlooms of post-Renaissance Italy that will never become anachronistic, symbols of the last great flowering of human potential, forever yearning to be picked up, played and bequeathed to the world’s great musicians.
Ulrike Klein spent her childhood watching things grow. She lived with her mother and grandmother on a small farm in the tiny village of Blankenheim at the southern part of Germany’s Harz Mountain Range. The surrounding wonders of nature were abundant: badgers and deer roamed forests of beech and oak; finches nestled in the thickets.

In 1945 her father returned home from a prisoner-of-war camp in Belgium. Having endured the kind of conditions that necessitate the suppression of emotions in favour of a stoic will to survive, his attitude towards education was old fashioned and patriarchal. He wrote his daughter a letter, mapping out his dreams of an idyllic future where Klein would grow up tending to the house and the garden, living a practical, dutiful life.

In primary school a deeply passionate teacher exposed Klein to the joys of music. Each morning, without exception, he would gather the class in a circle, where they would begin the day singing. Later, he encouraged Klein’s parents to allow her to take violin lessons. She took to the instrument immediately, but her father remained sceptical and dogmatic.

Experience had long since replaced idealism with pragmatism: if there was one thing he knew, it was that Klein could not sustain a livelihood as a musician in post-war Germany. A career in the arts was diametrically opposed to the ideals he had already envisaged.

Raised a Lutheran, Klein hoped her confirmation gift would be a violin. Instead, she was offered a diamond ring. “What do I do with that?” she asked. All she really wanted was to own, and to play, a beautiful instrument.

“My childhood was dominated by fighting and rebelling against the image my father had in his head of who I was, who I should become and who should be my friends,” Klein recalls. Not long after, her father relented, buying his daughter a violin. Sixty years later, Klein still has it — an instrument she affectionately named ‘cigar box’. She describes it as ugly — the varnish wrinkled, the sound colourless. “A cigar box doesn’t have a resonance,” she says. “This instrument was just dead… but I still keep it today, just to remind me how hard that was.”

Eventually I realised that even with practise, I could never satisfy my ears, and so I stopped playing.”

Klein spent the ensuing years performing in youth orchestras and at music camps, vacillating between recalcitrance and conformity, between family and individuality. This identity crisis inevitably yielded to the kind of self-doubt all musicians face.

Eventually I realised that even with practise, I could never satisfy my ears, and so I stopped playing.”

She abandoned the dream of owning a beautiful instrument; went on to study horticulture, and then pedagogy, at university. She worked as a teacher for five years before she met Jürgen Klein — the man with whom she would start a family, relocate to Australia, and build a natural skincare label from roses, lavender, chamomile and calendula.

*The family of six arrived in 1983 with nothing but a vision: to ‘reconnect people with the healing forces of nature’, to ‘inspire people to wellbeing’.* Deeply influenced by Rudolf Steiner’s philosophy of “spiritual science” and biodynamic farming, Jurlique’s production was labour intensive: every step of the process, from seed to skin, was done by hand. The ensuing years were challenging. A domestic market for this kind of product did not yet exist, and for five years more than 95 per cent of Jurlique’s production was exported to the US. Over the next twenty years, outside recognition slowly began to trickle down into Australia, and by 2004 — at which point Jurlique was already an internationally acclaimed label — the Klein family were ready for a period of renewal. They sold the majority of their shares. Ulrike’s involvement with the company slowly decreased and, in 2009, she began to feel a familiar childhood dream resurface.

“Eventually I realised that even with practise, I could never satisfy my ears, and so I stopped playing.”
Three hours west of Melbourne, at the southern tip of the Grampian Mountain range, lies the town of Dunkeld. Steeped in a spare, forlorn beauty, the silhouette of Mount Sturgeon looms over one of the richest grazing districts in Victoria. The town post office looks like something out of the colonial era: spearmint paint flakes off ageing weatherboards, the corrugated tin roof is flecked with rust the colour of dried blood. But in April each year, music lovers come together in this unlikely place for the Australian String Quartet’s annual festival of music.

Ulrike Klein had been a loyal follower of the quartet for many years, but the 2009 Dunkeld weekend was especially memorable. The four musicians – Sophie Rowell (violin), Anne Horton (violin), Sally Baud (viola) and Rachel Johnston (cello) – were joined by Swiss violist Jürg Dähler, who performed on an 1893 Raffaele Fiorini.

“I remember exactly the moment… Jürg [Dähler] played a solo, and then the quartet played, and you could really hear that their instruments just didn’t have the depth of tone or range of colours,” Klein says. It wasn’t simply the reawakening of desires deeply rooted in childhood, but the sobering realisation that the nation’s only full-time string quartet was culturally disadvantaged. As befitting their name, Klein saw the musicians of the ASQ as ambassadors of Australia. They had performed frequently in Europe – particularly Germany – and Klein was often asked to translate their media coverage. “These reviews were mind-boggling,” she recalls. “It told me something: Australia was not just koalas and kangaroos. We have a real music tradition and we have these dedicated musicians.”

“I was just sitting there thinking, for heaven’s sake – we have to do something about this.” She voiced her concerns to Alison Beare, the then Executive Officer of the ASQ, and the two began brainstorming, dreaming. Seeking advice and direction, they spoke with Dähler, who suggested they try to assemble a quartet of eighteenth-century Italian string instruments. Procuring them would be difficult, he assured them. Instruments such as these are not in circulation within Australia, and even if it were possible to find a dealer overseas, obtaining four from the same maker was unheard of, to say nothing of the cost. To all eyes and ears, it was folly – indeed a ludicrous proposal. But out of that conversation, a thought arose that was impossible to repress. A matched set of violins, a viola and a cello by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini may yet still be possible.
Instrument philanthropy for Australian musicians is not without precedent. In 2015 Sydney Symphony Orchestra patron Vicki Olsson purchased a 1757 Guadagnini violin for the orchestra’s new concertmaster, Andrew Haveron. The interior, Australian violinist Ray Chen plays the fabled 1715 Joachim Stadivarius – the instrument once played by the nineteenth-century virtuoso Joseph Joachim, who premiered many of the most famous concertos in the repertoire.

“To all eyes and ears, it was folly – indeed a ludicrous proposal.”

The Australian Chamber Orchestra currently holds the nation’s largest collection of instruments from the Cremonese golden age. The organisation has acquired no less than nine instruments through its ACO Instrument Fund and other key donors. In 1996, the Commonwealth Bank of Australia loaned Richard Tognetti (the ACO’s Artistic Director since 1990) a 1759 Guadagnini violin from Parma. Ten years later, the Guadagnini passed to Glenn Christensen, former violin, a 1728–9 Stradivarius, while Valve performs on an even older instrument – a 1743 Guarneri del Gesù violin – the instrument once played by the fabled 1715 ‘Joachim’ Stradivarius. The instrument is currently in the hands of Principal Violinist Satu Vänskä, whose former violin, a 1726–9 Stradivarius, passed to Glenn Christensen.

In 2016 the ACO’s Principal Cellist Timo-Veikko Valve was the recipient of a 1729 Guarneri cello. Donated by arts philanthropist Peter Weiss, the instrument is valued at $1.8 million, and currently represents the largest single gift in the ACO’s history. Julian Thompson now plays the Guarneri, while Valve performs on an even older instrument – a 1616 Amati cello. In February 2018 the ACO announced yet another addition to its collection: a 1726 Stradivarius violin, purchased by Guido and Michelle Belgiojorno-Neltis. The instrument is currently in the hands of Principal Violinist Salu Varsakul, whose former violin, a 1726–9 Stradivarius, passed to Glenn Christensen.

Until 2009, the acquisition of a quartet of matched instruments, all from the same luthier, had rarely been attempted, and never within Australia. Exorbitant prices aside, how would one go about obtaining two Guadagnini violins, a viola and a cello, when there are only twenty-one violas and thirty-nine cellos in the world? “Sometimes you really have to have the right help at the right time,” Klein says. “Jürg was really excited that there was the right help at the right time,” Klein says.

Dähler knew exactly where to begin. He had connections in England, namely the respected dealer and consultant Dmitry Gindin, who in turn had contacts at John & Arthur Beare, a London dealer with a reputation dating back to 1892. Anticipating the possibility of an unprecedented sale, Gindin worked hand in hand with Beare’s, reaching out to every conceivable contact in the business. Enquiries were made, favours were called, and a selection of Guadagnini instruments from all over the world was assembled in Gindin’s studio, fortuitously coinciding with the ACO’s tour to Europe and London in July 2009. The four players had the opportunity to test out the instruments. “It was like watching kids in a candy shop,” Alison Beare recalls. “It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

“In the last couple of decades exceptional instruments that could be compared to the violin in question have come up only on very few occasions…”

Of the thirteen instruments on display, there were three clear standouts. Sophie Rowell leaned towards a violin made in Turin in 1784. Dmitry Gindin offered a persuasive assessment, writing to Klein via email: “It is definitely one of the purest Guadagninis in existence and frankly, no Guadagnini violin I have seen thus far possesses the rare combination of acoustic superiority and such fine condition; the varnish has not even been so much as polished since it left Guadagnini’s hands!”

The auctioneer Claude Lebet only come up only on very few occasions and to my knowledge a Turin Guaragnini violin in near perfect condition has never come up at any auction in recent history.”

Everything seemed to suggest it was the first violin right for the ASQ. Anne Horton on the other hand chose a 1748–9 violin made in Piacenza. Gindin once again offered his assessment. “Tonaly, it is deeper and darker than the 1784, as we have all noted during the trials – this is very desirable in the context of the quartet as its femininity will certainly attenuate the brightness and sheen masculine power of the first violin,” he wrote. Klein agreed: “For me it was just so clear that the Piacenza was a second violin, because it has a much softer, deeper tone – it definitely doesn’t have that fire that the Turin has.”

Klein realised she’d have to be prepared to buy both instruments in order to kick-start the initiative. But such an investment was too big for one person alone. Klein purchased the Piacenza violin in 2010, while Maria Myers, whose Dunkeld property had been used as a concert venue in the ASQ’s festival, bought the Turin, thus completing the first steps in the project.
Among the other instruments under consideration at Gindin's studio were a cello from Parma and a rare 1784 viola from Turin. It did not seem likely there would be many other buyers out there who could afford the viola. Klein attempted to negotiate the price. "I didn't know the game. I thought: they're dealers, I'm sure you can barter." In retrospect, she now concedes this was a mistake. The instrument was quickly sold to another foundation in Norway. It was an important lesson, and one that would provide the impetus to complete the quartet before Australia lost some of the last remaining instruments to other countries.

The purchase of the two violins had also inadvertently created another problem: there was now an obvious imbalance in the quartet. "It was like having two Lamborghini's and a Commodore," Alison Beare says. Soon after, another Turin viola from 1783 appeared on the market. The dealer agreed to loan it to ASQ for three months, in order to assess its compatibility with the newly acquired Guadagnini violins. "The blend was outstanding and I was faced with the dilemma because I had developed a very special relationship with my own violin, a 1756 Giovanni Gabrielli from Florence. So while I felt deeply saddened by the news, I decided to treat the two violins as two different instruments," Klein says.

The current first violinist of the ASQ, Dale Barltrop, says. "For me in my career," Dale Barltrop, the violist of the ASQ, describes it succinctly: "A lot of young musicians don't have the patience – it’s like talking with your grandfather," he says. "The topic of discussion is not ending after half an hour… it can be… days!"

For Barltrop, it was a constantly evolving relationship. "Finding my way with this violin has taught me a lot about my own playing," he says. "What I found more challenging on this instrument was creating intimate colours – the warmer, more hushed tones, the kind of nuance one needs particularly in a quartet." Playing melodic lines in the upper register is heavenly. As a first violinist's violin, it’s the perfect Prima Donna. It just soars.

"The quality I love most in this violin is its capacity to sing. Playing melodic lines in the upper register is heavenly. As a first violinist’s violin, it’s the perfect Prima Donna. It just soars." Barltrop explains. "Playing melodic lines in the upper register is heavenly. As a first violinist’s violin, it’s the perfect Prima Donna. It just soars." Does the Turin Guadagnini have a personality? Barltrop pauses, laughing. "I think it’s like a male peacock – loud and proud, asserting itself with presence and command."

"The quality I love most in this violin is its capacity to sing. Playing melodic lines in the upper register is heavenly. As a first violinist's violin, it’s the perfect Prima Donna. It just soars." Hiew describes the Piacenza violin as mellow, broad and earthy – the polar opposite to Barltrop’s. She explains how her former teacher likened it to a kind of hybrid violin-viola. "There’s definitely this richness that I’ve felt in the group with these instruments that I haven’t felt before," Hiew says. "When we’re all playing the same thing – a harmony or a chorale section or something – it can be so rich. The sound as you’re standing in the quartet… it’s like caramel."

Stephen King, the violist of the ASQ, tells a similar story. "I remember receiving the viola from Alison [Beare] when I was still living in Sydney. I was just coming out of the ACO at the
time, and we were having an enormous farewell party at our home, and Alison came along, and dropped this viola right into the middle of that party. But it was almost like it was a sleeping beast at that point. It hadn't been played for a while, and so you could tell there was all this 'stuff' inside it. It took a little while to get that stuff out, to make it come alive again. But from the start, it just had colours, and so many more depths to plumb.*

Before receiving the Guadagnini, King played a modern viola. His approach was simple. "You could just put bow on string and just pull, and there was your sound." Smaller than a typical modern viola, and possessing a powerful upper register, the Guadagnini again demanded considerable adjustments from its new player. Bringing out the bass proved particularly challenging for King. "The main thing I notice now when I go back to a contemporary instrument is that I just have to work and work and work to create any colours. I'm starting to take for granted the colours that this can give you." He likens the character of his Guadagnini to an African-American spiritual singer: "She can growl but she can also wail like a gospel choir," he says. "That might sound a little weird, but that's the sound world it's in for me."

Like the two violins and the viola, the Guadagnini cello was a difficult beast to tame. "I made a lot of ugly noises when I first started," the ASQ's cellist Sharon Grigoryan admits. "But when you do finally learn how to play the instrument, there's just an infinite number of choices. There's no limit really, whereas on my own cello – which is a very good instrument – I knew I'd reached the limit of what it could do, and I had to play within that. The sound of this cello has such a warmth to it, it feels and sounds so welcoming when you play it...at the same time, it has real guts and punch. In the lower register, you can really hit people in the face with it, without any harshness to the sound."

For the ASQ, the impact these instruments have made is immeasurable. "I like to think of it as a family," King says. "If you had four siblings, they're going to be completely different. And yet they all have this common thread. They've been through the same upbringing, and they have a DNA that is very similar, but they all have different colours.*

"If you're painting a picture, matched instruments doesn't give you only instruments that are blue, and you can only paint with blue. It's like you're using the one brush, and so your brush strokes are the same, but you're using these different colours. There is this unifying factor to having four. Within that, one voice can still become different and define itself outside of its family. But it's incredibly special when they resonate and vibrate together."

*The main thing I notice now when I go back to a contemporary instrument is that I just have to work and work and work to create any colours. I'm starting to take for granted the colours that this can give you."
“…if you’re painting a picture, matched instruments doesn’t give you only instruments that are blue, and you can only paint with blue. It’s like you’re using the same brush, and so your brush strokes are the same, but you’re using these different colours.”

Impressive as it was, acquiring the instruments themselves was only half the project. Klein quickly realised that she needed to find a group of music lovers who would share her passion and contribute. In order to allow people to make tax-deductible donations, a foundation with the correct legal structure needed to be set up, a process that took over eighteen months to complete. Klein created the Ngeringa Farm Arts Foundation, now known as UKARIA, and in October 2010 it was granted DGR 1 status as a public cultural organisation. Her plan was to raise enough money so that UKARIA could purchase each instrument. Once in the foundation, the future of the Guadagninis would be secure. They could never be resold, and would be made available to Australian musicians in perpetuity.

But progress was slow, often arduous. “At times it was just frustrating,” Klein says. “Why can’t people understand how important this is?” Fortunately, some did. Over the next few years, the project attracted significant donations from Maria and Allan Myers, the James and Diana Ramsay Foundation, Didy McLaurin, Joan Lyons, David and Pam McKee, and many others. By 2017, almost ten years since Klein embarked on the project, an end was in sight; by December, there was only $25,000 left to raise.

It was around this time that Klein underwent a hip replacement. Recovering from the operation, she found herself unable to get out of bed without fainting. Dr Rabin Bhandari, a rehabilitation physician, was called in to assess her. As the two conversed, Bhandari became intrigued about Klein’s story. A curious, striking individual, Bhandari seldom appeared without his spectacles and a bowtie (always, according to Klein, a different colour for each day of the week) – lending him an earnest, professorial aesthetic from a bygone era. As Klein began to talk about the growth of UKARIA, her Guadagnini quartet project, and her love of music, Bhandari noticed something remarkable. Her blood pressure had risen dramatically. She was on her feet again.

Klein and Bhandari had a lot in common. Once a singer in Sydney, he abandoned dreams of becoming a musician in favour of a more financially viable field. Having now established a successful professional career, he was looking for ways to give back to the community. By a curious coincidence, Bhandari was also treating UKARIA board member David McKee who, in the last few months of the project, had been crucial in galvanising support from several key donors. In a chance moment of synchronicity, Bhandari noticed the vivid crimson UKARIA logo of a business card on McKee’s bedside table. Bhandari asked how much was left to complete the Guadagnini project. The next day, on 18 December 2017, he wrote the cheque, and one of Australia’s most culturally ambitious philanthropic projects was brought to a close, at a total cost of AU$6,183,188.

“As Klein began to talk about the growth of UKARIA… Bhandari noticed something remarkable. Her blood pressure had risen dramatically.”

One might be forgiven for wondering: was it worth it? Does the sound truly justify the cost? And was it really about sound, or status? A comprehensive blind experiment conducted in 2014 revealed some listeners even preferred the sound of a younger, modern instrument to that of a Stradivarius. And yet, despite all logic to the contrary, there is just something about them, a kind of indefinable poetry, a quasi-numinous quality that makes the hairs on the back of your neck prickle each time you hear them. All notions of monetary value and financial concern are washed away by a sense of awe. Being in the presence of Klein, you cannot help but feel inspired. Her modesty and magnanimity invariably disarms, and she exudes the kind of sincerity that can only be found in those who are not born into wealth, but earn it – through consistent hard work and indomitable perseverance. “All I did, all I claim ownership of, is that I put that seed in the ground,” she says. “And now it’s growing, but it’s not me – it’s the tree that’s growing.”
I
t is high summer in the Adelaide Hills. The Klein and O’Brien families have gathered at the Mount Barker Summit for a ‘giving back’ ceremony. It is a site of special significance, a place where the rituals and songs of the Peramangk people have been heard for many centuries. Atop the dusty escarpment, one gets an unobstructed, panoramic view of the region. Nothing disturbs the tranquillity up here; perhaps it has been like this for thousands of years. A flock of pink and grey galahs chirp in the distance, and the ceremony begins.

Dr Lewis Yerloburka O’Brien, an Elder of the Kaurna people, passes round a Coolamon filled with eucalyptus leaves. As the two families gather in a circle, their hands joined, O’Brien speaks in the language of his ancestors, translating as he goes: “Now we all become one.”

The purpose of this ceremony is to obtain permission to bestow the Guadagnini cello with an indigenous name. “This country in the Adelaide Hills has been really special to us,” Klein says, gazing reverently out towards the land named Ngeringa, which was once home to the Jurlique herb farm. “The way I want to give back is to enrich cultural life. Out of that came this vision to collect these four Italian instruments. And just as a reflection and an honouring of the land which has given life to all of us, I wanted to give the name Ngeringa to the cello.”

Sharon Grigoryan concludes the ritual with a performance of Reclaiming the Spirit by Australian composer Sarah Hopkins, composed in 1993 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the renaming of Uluru. It is a poignant offering: in Grigoryan’s hands, the Guadagnini assumes an inexplicably natural symbiosis with the uniquely Australian landscape, the cello’s chromatic slides indistinguishable from the warble of a nearby magpie greeting the dusk. As the sun melts into the horizon and the sky turns to flame, the cello becomes a didgeridoo in deep, powerful, buzzing drones that reverberate across the landscape.

“I had this sense that something had become complete,” Klein says after the ceremony. “It’s just the grace of life to be able to close circles. It’s an Australian story that connects us to an old European tradition that we don’t have.” In this way, Klein’s achievement becomes Australia’s collective achievement. A matched quartet of Guadagnini instruments is not only unique to Australia: the acquisition is currently unprecedented anywhere in the world. It is a gift that fulfills, more than words could ever express, that oldest lore of our land: if you get something from the country, give something back.
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