

Maison Vatelot Rampal Project for South Africa

Press Release

A dream team of the world's foremost violin experts – from France - are planning to visit South Africa in January 2018. **Jean-Jacques Rampal** is Director of the Paris-based *Maison Vatelot Rampal* and along with his colleague, **Jean-François Raffin** – who is the arguably the world's foremost bow expert – will lead a team of five of France's leading experts to various centres in the country.

Mr Rampal is indisputably one of the world's supreme authorities on violins and the foremost authority on French instruments, appointed as expert to the Paris High Court (*Cour d'Appel*). Likewise Jean-François Raffin is considered internationally as the leading expert on violin bows, whose certifications and assessments are beyond dispute. Along with Bernard Millant and Bernard Gaudfroy he co-authored the massive three-volume book, *The Bow*, which is the foremost reference work on the French School of Bowmaking. From 1996 onwards he has served as bow expert to the Paris High Court.

These two authorities will be accompanied by Jonathan Marolle, Yannick Lecanu and Sylvain Bigot. Marolle is the master craftsman at the Vatelot Rampal studio in Paris and also undertakes the majority of evaluations for the regular international violin auctions in Vichy – one of the world's most important violin auctions. He travels regularly to Russia, Japan and other countries as assessor representing *Maison Vatelot Rampal*. Yannick Lecanu and Sylvain Bigot are foremost French violin and bow authorities, both being appointed as experts to the High Courts in Douai and Lyon respectively.

Founded in 1909 in Rue Portalis, Paris by Marcel Vatelot, the *Maison Vatelot Rampal* is France's foremost violin establishment and stands as a giant in the international violin landscape. Since then it has been part of the stomping ground of the world's foremost violinists where the most valuable instruments are set up and repaired. With the death of Mr Etienne Vatelot in 2013, the business came under the full direction of Mr Rampal, who is the son of the noted flautist, Jean-Pierre Rampal. It has always been on a par with *W. E. Hill & Sons* and *Beares* in England, *Hjörth* (Copenhagen) and many others which no longer exist, and is believed to be the oldest of the great and legendary violin establishments in the world still to operate.

Mr Rampal and his colleagues are examining the possibility of establishing within South Africa a similar infrastructure to those they have already set up in Russia, South Korea, Japan, Germany and Switzerland, being a bi-annual or even annual visit to the main centres in order to give musicians access to the highest international expertise for obtaining written assessments, evaluations and above all, certifications for their instruments and bows.

In order to undertake the initial survey for such a visit, *Maison Vatelot Rampal* approached Johan Grobbelaar, who is an established violin dealer and expert within South Africa. Mr Grobbelaar, who is a former SABC Television Music Producer and who later was Manager of KZN Philharmonic Orchestra, is Director of *The Violin Connection of Southern Africa*, which specializes in dealing in fine violins and bows. He also lived in France for 10 years and speaks French fluently. He would eventually coordinate the French team's visit to South Africa, should adequate interest be shown.

“It is accepted throughout the violin world that certifications by Mr Rampal and Mr Raffin are beyond dispute and virtually bulletproof,” says Mr Grobbelaar. *“Considering the almost complete absence within South Africa of any meaningful expertise in this sector of our music world, such a venture could be a worthwhile service to music in this country. Mr Rampal is qualified to authenticate the most valuable instruments in the world.”*

“However, the main difference between this project and other similar visits by experts from abroad - particularly in recent times - is that this service is not free, but would incur a fee based on the norms that apply internationally for such expertise and documentation. This means that the cost of a written assessment would be 3% of the value of the instrument. In the case of a certification of authenticity the price is 5% of the value of the item, but then the certification will include a free evaluation. For more basic instruments a flat-rate once-off fee will apply to all, in this case €100, irrespective of what the instrument is. And that's how it's done throughout the world.”

What will musicians here stand to gain from such a visit? Says Grobbelaar, “*Since no-one in his right mind would argue against a Rampal or a Raffin certificate or evaluation, this would greatly empower and protect our musicians in a ruthless and exploitative violin market and ensure a bulwark against attempted exploitation by self-seeking “experts” and smooth-talking auctioneers, ensuring that true attributions and values are respected. And it would definitely make this country a less attractive target for the Indiana Joneses from Europe seeking easy pickings from gullible and ignorant instrument owners. This in turn would help develop a viable violin market within South Africa, which will exclude the European dealerships and auctioneers which so far has pillaged and ransacked this country at the cost of our young musicians who can no longer find decent instruments locally.*”

Another difference with other similar expert visits over the past two decades, is that in this case the objective is not to remove instruments from South Africa for sale in European dealerships and auctions, as has mostly been the case in the past, but to render a genuine, regular and reliable service to musicians. South Africa has lost large numbers of very valuable and excellent instruments to European dealerships and auctioneers, having led to a depletion of our own instrument stock. In some cases the highly-publicised visits and offers of “free” assessments amounted to little more than a thinly-veiled reconnaissance of what is available here, with the ultimate objective of raking these instruments into auctions and dealerships in Europe. Such auctions are mostly designed to benefit the auctioneers and sadly, in many cases, resulted in a loss for the gullible and ignorant owners who parted with their instruments after promises of huge sales prices.

For this proposed project Mr Rampal and his associates gave the assurance that no efforts would be entertained to remove instruments from South Africa and that those who make use of this opportunity would be guaranteed a fair and accurate assessment in writing which would stand up to any scrutiny.

What gave birth to this international project by the *Maison Vatelot-Rampal* was a growing awareness that musicians in 3rd world countries simply did not have access to world-class expertise, yet had very good and valuable instruments. Furthermore, in many cases the original certifications that came with the instruments were simply lost over time. But most importantly, many of the authentications dating from the before the 1950s have in recent times come under dispute in that many instruments, originally thought to be by a certain maker, turned out to be by someone else. This is directly due to the massive increase in printed references, improved photographic records over the years and - more recently - to the internet and its virtually inexhaustible sources of reference with almost complete photographic records of the work of the most important makers. Such was simply not available in the 1920s and 30s. For example, whereas an expert back in the 1920s may in all honesty and good faith have believed that a superb French violin labelled *Nicolas Lupot* was indeed by Lupot, a more recent assessment against the far wider reference framework available today, has concluded that the violin was in fact made by *Gand Père*. A cello labelled *Rocca* turns out to be by the *Gagliano Brothers*. Furthermore, some of the most valuable French violin bows are unstamped. And so the reliability of one’s certification could mean the difference between a massive gain or massive loss in value.

For owners of valuable instruments or bows, it is essential to review certifications, attributions and assessments made more than 30 years ago, to ensure correct identification in the light of modern references and to serve as an effective firewall and bulwark against disputes, to discourage any attempted under-valuations by auctioneers and dealers and to guarantee value according to contemporary price histories. Furthermore, many high-profile instruments which may have lost their original papers identifying authorship, can through this service be issued with fresh and valid paperwork. Having such documents established by such world-renowned authorities as Mr Rampal and Mr Raffin, is a rare opportunity.

Anyone wishing to meet either Mr Rampal or Mr Raffin or another member of this team during their proposed visit next year with the objective of obtaining documentation for their instruments and bows, is invited to send email directly to info@violins.co.za indicating where they are based (the closest large centre) and information about the instruments in question. Alternatively, a link to a dedicated page for this proposed visit will be available on the website www.violins.co.za. On the home page click on “*Vatelot Rampal Project*”.