

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

# Violin makers working together



STAFF PHOTO BY PATRICK GOLDEN

Todd Goldenberg, a violin, viola and cello maker at the Boston Violin Makers Cooperative on Main Street, polishes a cello which is near completion.

## Making music together

Boston Violin Makers Cooperative is a group effort

By Patrick Golden  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

WALTHAM - Within a 150-foot stretch on Main Street, you can pick up a \$1 cup of coffee and a \$20,000 handcrafted cello.

The Boston Violin Makers Cooperative handles the latter.

From their second-floor workshop, five artisans craft and repair their masterpieces with painstaking

precision. Their commune-style business is nearly as unique as the stringed instruments they sculpt.

"This group is very stable. The formation time is over," said Marilyn Wallin, founder of the collaborative.

A 20-year veteran of the violin-making trade, she taught the craft at the North Bennet Street School in Boston for more than a decade. She

left the school in search of making stringed instruments full-time, but didn't want to end up like most crafters.

"Most violin makers have to work alone," she said. Not wanting the isolation, three years ago she decided to form a cooperative of violin makers similar to the ones she had seen in Salt Lake City and Chicago.

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The violin, viola and cello makers in the Main Street shop work independently, but share tools, ideas and support. Each had his or her own business, clients and production schedules.

Constructing violins the way they do at the cooperative requires years of study, the right materials and at least a month. There's no such thing as an A- instrument.

"My plan for the year is to make four," said Marco Coppiardi, while filing away at the top of one of his violins. By the time it is varnished, strung and ready for play, Coppiardi will have spent 250 hours laboring over his creation.

The Italian native arrived as the Waltham collaborative six months ago. He was trained in his craft in Cremona, Italy, the birthplace of violin making. Coppiardi said the city of 50,000 features at least 100 violin crafters.

Coppiardi is commissioned for most of his work. Players ask him to make them an instrument. He's currently working on a violin for a teacher in Rochester, N.Y. Coppiardi will earn \$16,500 for his creation.

Most of the wood he uses is imported from Europe and aged for five to 10 years before it is ready to be made into a violin, viola or cello. He explained the extended aging process is necessary to dry out tree sap and bring the wood to its proper playing form.

The quality of the wood also gives each violin or stringed instrument a unique sound. No two violins sound exactly alike, no matter how hard a

craftsman tries.

"Our talent is to understand the wood," Coppiardi said.

Most of the instruments he crafts are modeled after ones built during the 16th and 17th centuries. His current violin is a replica of one built in 1603 by A&H Amati.

In another room across the studio, Todd Goldenberg polished a faded, nicked-up cello. But what appeared to be a restoration job was actually the finishing touches on a brand-new instrument. The 25-year veteran of the trade had purposely marred the cello because, he explained, that's just how some people like it.

"There's a culture that (believes) old violins sound better," Goldenberg said. Bruised and battered is better than brand new to some.

So, as Goldenberg makes his perfect calculations to construct his stringed instruments, he hangs away at them to appear as if they were built it 1700 rather than 2000. He calls them "shaded" instruments. Ones that are built to look new are called "straight."

"Some makers only shade. Some only make straight. It's artistic freedom," he said.

Unlike Coppiardi, Goldenberg makes his instruments without a predetermined buyer. He crafts them and looks for a buyer, a task he said can be difficult considering the price of a handmade instrument.

"There's a market out there, but there's also a lot of makers," he said.

The going rate for a Todd Golden-

berg cello is \$18,500. He gets \$9,000 for his violins and violas, and produces between six to 12 instruments a year, typically spending about 200 hours on each.

He didn't go to violin-making school, but learned the trade hands-on after beginning as a guitar maker. He taught at the Bennet School for two years and has been on his own since 1988.

"I think (making) a violin is infinitely more challenging than guitars is so many ways," he said.

For starters, violins hang around much longer than guitars. While it's not uncommon to find an orchestra member playing a 300-year-old cello or viola, guitars are generally much newer.

"There's nobody on a concert stage with a 1710 guitar," he said.

Jerald Weene has made a career of resurrecting instruments. Unfortunately, he lost several when his Moody Street studio burned down in last year's fire. But his business, Artisan Violins, lives on at Boston Violin Makers.

"I lost an enormous amount of stuff, and a lot of it belonged to my customers," he said while restringing a horsehair bow.

He found refuge at the Main Street studio.

For music businessmen such as Weene, there's more to worry about than fires. Internet and mail-order companies that offer cheaper prices for instruments and accessories have threatened much of the business shop owners once called their own.

"It's unfair to all of us, but there's nothing we can do about it because it's free enterprise," he said.

Despite the stiff competition for business, Weene remains busy in his trade of 33 years.

"It's something you do because you love to do it, market or no market," he said.

"We have an incredible variety of making styles and educational backgrounds," Wallin said.

She's assisted by Jason Hoynash, a Pennsylvania native who first hoped to build guitars, but learned the field was too tough unless he owned his own business. Without the resources to start his own company, he enrolled at the Bennet School, where he met Wallin.

"I knew as soon as I made my first violin in school I'd be doing it for a long time," he said.

While Hoynash helps with the production, the instruments are considered Wallin's work.

"Marilyn's hand is the last thing to touch the instrument," he said.

She said she can spend 300 hours on a cello and 150 hours on a viola and violin. Hoynash's assistance often helps cut the time in half.

Some of her instruments are used by world-famous orchestras, including the Boston Symphony Orchestra. She doesn't sell them directly to customers, but goes through music dealers.

With an established name in the industry, Wallin said the market for her instruments and those of her collaborative remains strong.

"The price keeps going up, and they still go out the door," she said.