

Violin maker Goldenberg works to a slow tempo

BY JODY RECORD
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PORTSMOUTH — There are probably better places for violin maker Todd Goldenberg to have his business than in this city of 25,000.

Like Boston, maybe. Chicago. Philadelphia.

After all, it's not every day — or every week — that someone finds his way into Goldenberg's shop to purchase one of his hand-carved instruments. There have even been months, he admits, when he hasn't made a sale.

But like most craftsmen, Goldenberg isn't in it for the money. He's in it for life. And the choice to stay in Portsmouth after coming here 10 years ago was a lifestyle decision. One he does not regret.

"Maybe I'd sell more violins if I was in a big city; I don't know," Goldenberg says from his studio in the Button Factory, an old warehouse on Portsmouth's west side that serves as an enclave for local artisans. "In a more metropolitan area there are more makers and you get to be known. But I didn't want the city life."

Goldenberg had lived in the Granite State in the mid-'70s while attending the University of New Hampshire. He was studying the sciences, thinking he would naturally end up teaching. But then he realized he didn't want to go on to graduate school and would have to consider an alternative for his future.

Enter fickle fate.

"I was with a friend fixing his guitar in his basement one night when it occurred to me that someone had to make guitars and I thought, 'Hey, that'd be a pretty cool thing to do,'" Goldenberg says wryly.

He found his way out west, where he entered a guitar-making apprenticeship. From there Goldenberg moved to Chicago and got involved in guitar work. When the chance came up to learn violin making, he took it.

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Jodi Record Photo

VIOLIN MAKER Todd Goldenberg in his Button Factory studio on Portsmouth's west side.

A West Side Story

"Guitar makers don't get into carving like violin makers do and the carving aspect really intrigued me," Goldenberg says. "Besides, back then, guitar making was not as respected as it is now and it didn't pay well. So economics sort of said, if you want to do instrument work, go with the violin."

Goldenberg went.

In 1988, he moved to Portsmouth to open his own business. In addition to carving violins, Goldenberg makes violas (larger than violins and tuned a fifth lower) and cellos (about 4 feet long). He also specializes in repairs.

It takes about 200 hours for Goldenberg to make one violin. The tops, backs and ribs are made of spruce. The necks are carved from imported maple. Goldenberg gets the wood in rough form—it resembles a piece of firewood with the bark removed—so he can see the grain.

Some of Goldenberg's violins are made on request. Most he makes with hopes of selling them in shops around the country.

"I make them because I like making them, not necessarily because I have orders," he says. "If you want to get better, you have to keep doing what you do. I'd hate to have someone show up one day asking for a violin and not have made one in a while."

Goldenberg's violins cost \$8,000, which is competitive with the Boston market, where starting prices run between \$8,000 and \$10,000. Cellos sell for more than twice that, about \$18,000.

But the worth of a violin, Goldenberg says, is not just measured in dollars. Some have an art value; others, a historic value and then there is the musical value. In rare cases, as with Stradivarius, one instrument has all three components, driving prices "very, very high."

"There is everything from

there to me," Goldenberg says of the famous violins. "Mine have no historic value; I'm alive; I'm here. The art value — well, it's like modern painters; the art value is in the eye of the beholder."

When it comes to the musical worth of a violin, Goldenberg says people must find an instrument that speaks to them. Each one sounds a little different. The choice depends on one's aspirations.

"There is no point in buying a Ferrari if you're going to use it for a taxi," he says with a laugh.

As for financial security, Goldenberg says that, as with most people in the arts, he's had good years and bad years.

"If money was not an issue, I'd be a happy guy," Goldenberg says. "For a fairly intelligent person, there are probably better ways to make a living. It definitely defies logic that I'm still here, but I haven't been able to shake loose. I guess I'm hooked pretty bad."