

By Claire Joubert

ALL STRINGS CONSIDERED

Claire Givens and her husband, Andrew Dipper, keep locally, nationally, and internationally known string players and their instruments in tune.

From across the show room at Claire Givens Violins, I watch Claire Givens examine a violin under a high-intensity lamp. A gray-haired couple, presumably the instrument's owners, leans over the glass case to see what Givens is seeing. "This," she says, "is a beautiful instrument. These can auction off for \$10,000."

The man and the woman are speechless. When they walked into the shop, they did not expect to experience an *Antiques Roadshow* moment (something Givens herself knows a bit about). They did expect that the violin, forgotten for forty-five years under a guest room bed and recently discovered by their young granddaughter, would need some work to return it to playing condition.

Such moments happen only a few times a year at Givens's shop, largely because most of her customers are active musicians who know their instruments. A more common situation occurred during another of my visits. A local professional violinist was trying out bows, in the \$12,000 range, and wanted some feedback. Shannon Frid, a shop sales associate and violin player, led the musician into Givens's office. The violinist played her instrument with her current bow and the two new ones; Frid repeated the exercise. After the three discussed the different sounds, the musician took the two bows to test them in various performance spaces. At this writing, two months later, she was still experimenting. "She is making a serious purchase," says Givens. "For better players, the process can take several months.

"It takes a while to grasp what a musician needs," she says. "Since there isn't a vocabulary to talk about sound, you have to watch and listen to their reac-

tions and try to form an idea of what would work for that person. It's a communication process, and some players are better communicators than others." For Minnesota Orchestra concertmaster Jorja Fleezanis, who Givens describes as a "very colorful speaker in the way she talks about response and sound and the experience of playing," Givens has found four pieces—her current violin (a 1700 Gofriller), a viola, and two bows—which Fleezanis connected with instantly. Says Fleezanis, "As Claire and I got to know each other, she'd ask me what I liked and didn't like about my violin. She also got to know my sound by hearing me perform."

In 1977, Givens returned to Minnesota after college and a two-year stint studying in Florence, Italy. She says she was intent on "opening a violin shop the community deserved." She sought advice from her parents, cello teacher John Solie, and friend and Twin Cities violin connoisseur Seymour Locketz. In December, after her first buying trip to Italy, Givens, then twenty-five, set up shop in her apartment.

Twenty-seven years later, Claire Givens Violins occupies a large office in the Arts and Handicraft Building in downtown Minneapolis. The shop's inventory, worth about \$2 million, is the largest and most diverse of its kind between Chicago and Los Angeles. The instruments range from \$900 to \$500,000, the bows from \$150 to \$20,000. Between Givens's shop and her husband Andrew Dipper's business, Dipper Restoration and Museum Services, they have fourteen employees. All but one of the restorers have professional instrument-restoration training, and six have additional violinmaking

training, making it one of the nation's largest workshops. Mark Bjork, University of Minnesota associate professor of violin and pedagogy, has worked with Givens's shop for more than fifteen years and is among many who believe Givens has achieved her goal. "It was a big order," says Bjork, "especially with there being two professional orchestras, an active string community, a university, and many private colleges here, but she did it. Andrew's European background adds another element."

"Shops like ours are becoming a rarity," says Givens. "Most shops contract out the repair work, which means a certain loss of control. If we're working with a customer who has a small complaint about the sound, we have a workshop to go right back to and make minor adjustments."

In the workshop, a few steps from the showroom, violins, violas, cellos, and bows, in every stage of repair, hang from wall pegs, sit on countertops, and fill built-in drawers and cabinets. Each of the four instrument restorers (Doug Lay, Theodora Wynhoff, Frank Davis, and Charlotte Holmes) and the full-time bow restorer (J. E. Vierow) occupies a bench stocked with small clamps; files, knives, chisels, and scrapers with delicate angles and edges; modified dentist's tools; and plastic squirt bottles containing water, alcohol, linseed oil, or varnish. Vierow also has thick shocks of stallion hair; small jars of gold, silver, pearl, and Brazilian wood; and tiny bags of salvaged ivory and whalebone. The restorers, focused on their tasks, seem as content as Santa's elves.



Givens (left) and Dipper (right) with Lupot, their chief of security.

PHOTO BY ORIN RUTCHICK

Givens's office, with its Oriental rug, traditional furniture, and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with what seems like every pamphlet and book from violinmaking's 450-year-old history, feels scholarly. A locked case holds her most prized stringed-instrument books, to say nothing of what might be in the massive safe adjacent to the door. Lupot, the couple's Brittany spaniel and the shop's chief of security, lounges at my feet.

In nearly all our conversations, Givens, in her no-nonsense way, uses superlatives—"finest," "best," "highest"—to describe the quality of instruments, service, and craftsmanship she strives to provide. It's not just talk: Givens has earned the trust of national, regional, and local string players, including both of our orchestras' concertmasters. Fleezanis, who relies on the shop for frequent violin adjustments and bow rehairings, says her "professional musical life has been

enhanced by the high standards the staff has provided" since she moved here in 1989. Steven Copes, concertmaster of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, has worked with the shop since his relocation in 1998. "Doug's work stands up to the best of the people I've worked with in New York City," says Copes. "Soloists who come to town can feel very comfortable going to Claire's shop and getting first-class work."

Several years ago, Yo-Yo Ma was one of those soloists. He was in Minneapolis to perform with the Minnesota Orchestra, and during rehearsal noticed his cello didn't sound right. Givens and Lay were called in to hear Ma play and make some recommendations. At the workshop, Lay reglued a few edges and adjusted the sound post. The result pleased Ma.

Givens's commitment to the string community extends beyond the orchestras to many levels of players. For the past decade, her support of the MacPhail Center for Music master classes has allowed players to work with Ma, Joseph Silverstein, and others. According to MacPhail vice president Paul Babcock, "Claire is also very interested in supporting the development of our string teachers." Violinist Kathy Wood, MacPhail Suzuki department director and instructor, has worked closely with Givens Violins and knew of the shop years before she moved to the Twin Cities. "We deal with little, as well as big, violins," says Wood, "and I commend her shop for treating every size and need equally."

Givens funds three youth music-competition prizes—for the Minnesota Sinfonia, the Minnesota Orchestra's Young People's Symphony Concert Association, and the Minnesota String & Teachers Association—thereby reaching some of the string community's youngest members. Each year, Givens sponsors events that serve the broader community, including this past spring's eleventh Biennial Suzuki Association of the Americas' Conference and the thirty-second International Viola Congress. Later this month (October 16–30), the shop hosts the seventh Cremona Violin Exhibition, which features nearly 100 historic and modern Italian stringed instruments and has become a tradition for local string players. The Twin Cities is the exhibition's second of six U.S. stops.

Pairing old with new is, well, nothing new. But the two can be wonderfully complementary. After Givens and Dipper married in 1989, Dipper moved his early instrument restoration-business from Taynton, England, to Givens Violins' space in Minneapolis. Where Givens's shop works primarily with musicians and modern instruments, Dipper's business deals mostly with museums, collectors, and early historic instruments—and each has the other as an invaluable resource.

English-born Dipper says that as a boy he was "fearless" when it came to taking things apart—even bicycles. What he's added to his fearlessness is knowledge (he studied and taught violinmaking in London and Cremona, Italy, and has published and translated important texts on stringed instruments), experience (he's been making stringed instruments since age twelve), meticulous notation (he documents everything he does to an instrument), and a reputation (pieces he's worked on appear in the finest private and public musical-instrument collections around the world).

Called the "king of weird instruments" by friends, Dipper deserves the title. In addition to restoring one of Marie Antoinette's harps, Dipper, on my first visit, was completing a fifteen-year restoration of a 1601 lute, one of only two in the world. "There isn't anyone who does work to the extent that we do," he says, "which is to take everything completely apart and put it back together. It's too difficult, and it's extremely expensive. An average restoration for us is about 400 hours, whereas a normal violin restoration is about twenty hours."

Since 1991, when Darcy Kuronen, curator of musical instruments at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, began working with Dipper, the museum has purchased two pieces Dipper has restored, a 1724 Italian mandolin and a highly decorated 1840s French guitar. "There are many skilled restorers," says Kuronen, "but Andrew also has a good sense of taste, of what's ethical and appropriate when restoring an instrument. [A restorer] must subjugate [his] ego and not make the piece better than it was originally made. He does an excellent job of putting an instrument back the way it was, using the original types of materials—and not improving it. Andrew is the only person in North America I would be comfortable taking an instrument to, especially a rare one."

In spring of 2001, Richard Rephann, Yale University Collection of Musical Instruments director, asked Dipper to restore a 1664 viola da gamba. The instrument had a complicated history, having been rebuilt in France shortly after its original construction in England, and required a high level of expertise. According to Nicholas Renouf, associate curator, "We asked Andrew to restore this piece not only because he does beautiful work, but also because he

understands how instruments fit into the social history of time."

Compared with Givens's restorers (except Vierow), who work on all parts of the instruments, Dipper's two employees have their own areas of focus. London-born Philip Cole, who made his first violin at age thirteen, recently completed a three-year apprenticeship under Dipper, learning the techniques of the original Cremonese violinmakers. Rinchen Dorjee, a Tibetan, applies his knowledge of paint and color to varnishes. Dipper's workshop, which has a different atmosphere than Givens's workshop, looks like a space inhabited by a medieval alchemist. Workbenches crowded with instrument cases and jars of brushes take up most of the room. Bottles of varying sizes filled with colored concoctions cram the shelves, schematics of unusual instruments cover the walls, and glass-doored cases reveal worn books, a Tibetan horn, and odd little tools Dipper has fashioned for specific uses. It's also very quiet. "We like it quiet back here," says Dipper, "so we can concentrate."

Later Cole tells me, "A violinmaker I know from Cremona told me I was lucky to study under Andrew, because, he said, 'For all the knowledge Andrew has, he must be 300 years old!'"

If you're not a string player, but you are an *Antiques Roadshow* fan, you may have seen Givens and Dipper on TV. Since 1999, when they were recommended to the producers by one of the show's current instrument appraisers from Boston, they have been two of eight *Roadshow* instrument appraisers—and the only regularly appearing appraisers from Minnesota. "It's an exciting, but long, twelve-hour day," says Givens. They appraised 300 instruments this past June in St. Paul, but only Dipper discovered any finds. He was on the air twice with two rare but not very valuable instruments—a mid-nineteenth-century, court-quality koto and an 1890s *cimbalom* made in Minneapolis by a Hungarian.

"My favorite story," recalls Givens, "is when I told a bankrupt man in Tucson that the violin his Aunt Helen gave him was worth \$25,000. I thought he was going to go through the roof!" ■

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