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NEIGHBORS

Coming out of the woodwork



Sonja St. John, Altus, prepares to fit together the face and body of a violin she is refurbishing.

Altus woman handcrafts, repairs stringed instruments

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ALTUS — For Sonja St. John, making and repairing violins, violas and cellos is much more than a job.

It's a personal obligation to celebrate and honor the centuries-long history of the bowed instrument and its developers by stepping in to keep the tradition alive.

"I suppose we're in a world with a lot of disposable things, and I feel like what I do is kind of the extreme opposite," the 25-year-old Altus resident said. "And in the process, there's a certain regard to the history of other makers and the beginnings of the violin."

St. John said she started playing when she was 8 years old, and, as her playing progressed, so, too, progressed a fascination with the instrument's shape, design and acoustics.

She volunteered as an apprentice for a maker near her home in Wisconsin when she was 15 and remembers spending most of her time in the shop, fitting bridges or fixing tuning pegs.

The smallest details mean everything to a violin's sound, and it was working as an apprentice, she said, when she really began to understand the instrument's intricacies and mystique.

"It just felt like I stepped into another century," she said. "The world of the violin combined for me the music and the old world of antiques."

Later, in Chicago, she enrolled at a three-year professional violin-making school, spending her off-

hours repairing the bowed instruments for a local shop.

"But, even before school, my vision was to have a shop of my own," she said. "I would like, when I'm 90-something years old, to be at my workbench crafting fiddles."

At her climate-controlled home shop in Altus, where she lives with her airman husband, St. John took a break from some repair work on an old cello to demonstrate the steps of transforming blocks of seasoned spruce and maple into a violin.

The two jobs — making and repairing — are distinctively different, St. John said.

"Making, I start from the inside out," she said. "With repair, it's often undoing or redoing what time and wear and tear and sometimes accidents do to instruments."

Each repair job is different, she said, because she has to mimic the original maker's intent, preserving as much of the original parts and original design as possible.

"If there's a part that needs to be replaced, it's important to take into consideration how that flows with the rest of the instrument," she said.

With her own creations, she said, she follows the blueprints laid out by the godfathers of the violin but is allowed to add her own signature.

"I take what I'm inspired by but also put in my own influences as well," she said.

With tiny finger planes, saws and knives, St. John transforms a block of spruce into the face of new violin — arched outward, bowl-shaped on the underside and with tiny sound holes called



Using a tiny finger plane, Sonja St. John shapes the arched face of a violin she is making in her shop in Altus. St. John said it will take her a minimum of 200 hours to complete the delicate instrument.

f-stops carefully carved into each side of the face.

"The placement and position of the sound holes is pretty important for acoustic reasons," St. John said.

Shaping for the sides and back, she said, is done by molding maple wood around custom-sawed willow blocks, with perfectly angled arches steam-bent on a bending iron.

"It's not going to be the same measurements from violin to violin because each piece of wood is different," St. John said.

A bass bar is installed inside to support and to transfer vibration throughout the instrument, and then comes the careful crafting of the scroll — which must be weighted and measured perfectly — and an ebony fingerboard, which must be a precise size so the instrument's strings are in synch and in tune.

St. John said it takes about 200 hours at the minimum to craft a violin.

"And that doesn't include the varnishing process," she said.

On a corner shelf sits dozens of bottles full of chemicals for creating various varnishes.

Especially with repair work, St. John said, creating just the right varnish for a specific instrument can be a painstaking process.

"It's a personal preference," she said. "Some violins are a golden, amber color, and some are just a deep, warm red. Some people like blondes and some like brunettes."

The process brings together skills common to everyday carpentry work — mathematics, hand tools and physics — but, St. John said, it's an artsy carpentry job because of the need for attention to aesthetics and acoustics.

"But really, I'm not an artist," she said. "I'm a craftsperson."

St. John said her work repairing instruments is fundamental to keeping the tradition of bowed instruments alive.

Though Altus does not have a string program in its schools, she said, she's found there is a great need for violin, viola and cello repair work as far away as Lawton.

"There's been a need in the area for repair work, and it's showing in the number of teachers that have been contacting me," she said. "Instruments are coming out of the attic and things, and there's a certain

consistency to the repairs needed here because of the dryness."

She said children are more likely to stick with an instrument if the instrument is in good shape.

"The instruments really have to be functioning right for a beginner or a professional," St. John said. "It can be especially frustrating, even discouraging, if they're not functioning properly for a child."

But, most satisfying of all, she said, is finding a home for an instrument she has created from scratch — putting her own notch into the 500-plus-year tradition that is violins.

"I think, 'Where will my instrument be in 100, 200, 500 years from now?'" she said. "You just kind of send it off into the world and wish it well."



Dozens of jarred chemicals used for creating varnishes sit atop a shelf in the corner of St. John's home shop, with wooden bridges for violins, violas and cellos hanging below.



Sonja St. John works a coat of varnish into the body of violin she is refurbishing at her shop in Altus.