

Newsday

# Llife

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DIX HILLS ARTISAN  
CHARLES RUFINO  
HAS BEEN CRAFTING  
STRING INSTRUMENTS  
SINCE 1974 E4

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# The making of a MASTER

Luthier **Charles Rufino** worked and educated himself to 'do one thing well;' his masterpieces attest to it

BY KAY BLOUGH  
Special to Newsday



Charles Rufino, in the spring of 1975, during his first year in an apprenticeship at the Newark School of Violin Making in England.



Rufino in the repair shop of the Newark School of Violin Making in England during 1975.



Violin restorer V.Y. "Nigo" Nigogosian and a young Rufino work together in the late 1970s.

**V**iolins in various stages of completion lie scattered around violin maker Charles

Rufino's home workshop in Dix Hills.

Warm russet, amber and honey patinas color the nearly finished and varnished models, while pieces of bare wood glued and clamped together inside forms show the beginning stages of new instruments. Nearly completed violins and violas hang by their scrolls from a rack, awaiting finishing touches.

Rufino, 66, sits in the light of a south-facing window at his carpet-covered workbench. His tools surround the bench and line two walls; a segmented box holding knives for doing delicate scroll and cutting work sits within reach.

"I'm trying to do this one thing well," he said, waving around his workshop at the violin forms, tools and instruments in progress. "I enjoy the awareness when I'm working and shaping and cutting the wood. I'm the luckiest man I know."

While he talks, Rufino uses a woodcarver's gouge to channel



**ON THE COVER.** Charles Rufino in his Dix Hills studio. Rufino says he makes instruments for now and the future.

## THE LONG ISLAND VIOLIN SHOPS

8 Elm St. Huntington  
250 Main St. East Setauket  
855-343-3535; liviolinshop.com

The stores handle equipment sales and rentals, and offer lessons. Owner Charles Rufino also is available to do a Power-Point presentation, The Art and Lore of the Violin, for interested groups about the history of the violin, tapping his perspective as a maker and historical researcher. Teachers interested in learning instrument repair techniques can inquire for information on summer workshops.

— KAY BLOUGH



Rufino shows an inscription he wrote in one of his violins. "To the greater glory of God," in latin, is always in his inscriptions.

the edge of a violin in progress, one of the many steps in making a member of the orchestral string family, which includes violins, violas and cellos.

A visit with him to discuss his

work turns into a run-through of the history of violin making and violin makers, along with a healthy side of technical information on wood types, measurements and techniques.



Master string instrument maker Charles Rufino has been pursuing his craft since 1974, when he left New York University to help build a house in Maine.



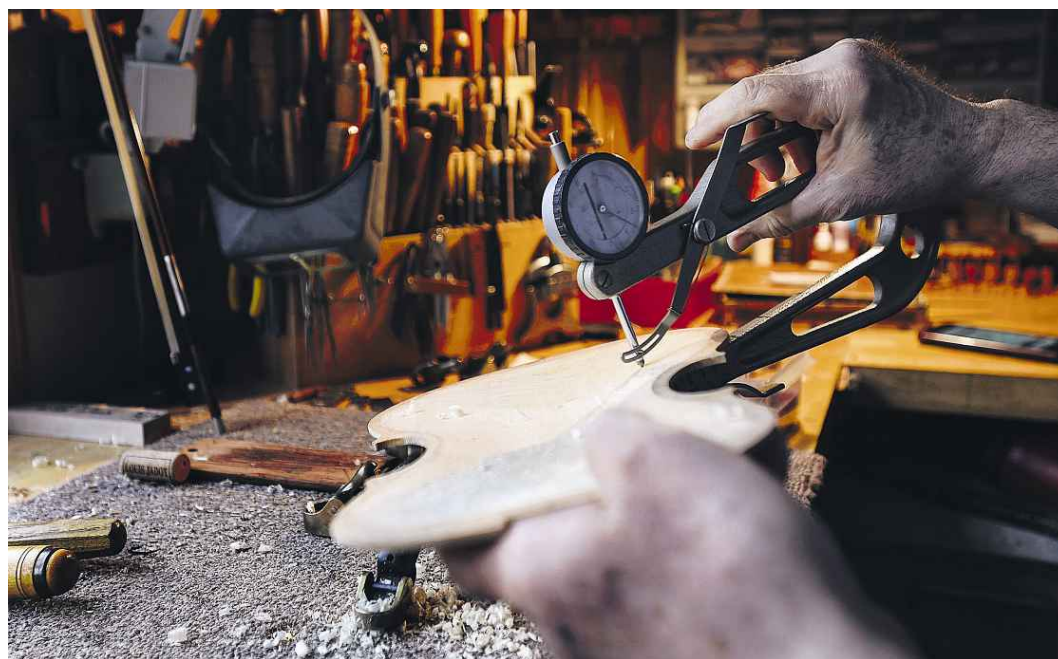
Rufino uses a tiny thumb plane to carefully hollow out a side of a violin he is building.

Rufino is a luthier, the name for those who craft stringed instruments that also can include guitars. Violins — unlike guitars, which have ends and sides flush with the top and

back — have a curled, overhanging edge of about an eighth of an inch.

“It protects the side from a

See COVER STORY on E6



Rufino works on a violin in the varnish and finishing room of his home studio in Dix Hills.



Charles Rufino, who says there are various styles of violin makers, lightly grips the scroll of one of his creations.



Violins on a rack in the Dix Hills workshop of luthier Rufino, who likens each of his creations to "a Savile Row suit."



Rufino shows off some of the wood that he has collected to make instruments.

## The making of a masterpiece

COVER STORY from E4

lot of damage that guitars do get," Rufino said.

The edge of the violin is highlighted by a narrow decorative inlay called purfling. The purfling — two bands of black-dyed pear wood that sandwich a strip of white aspen for contrast — shows a maker's skill and mastery, particularly how the points join in the corner.

When the violin is nearly finished, Rufino applies an oil varnish to it, based on a recipe he has developed over the years, made of natural plant resins mixed with drying oils.

Making a violin takes six to eight weeks of work, all told, Rufino estimates. "It's not in a straight line," he said. "You've got to be totally on your game. Sometimes you just don't feel like doing it. That's what makes it art."

He has made several hundred instruments, the majority of them violins — but also violas and cellos — since he began training in 1974 after leaving New York University, where he had been a classics and history major. He had responded to an ad in the *Village Voice* to help build a house in Maine. He didn't get paid, but he was able to live on a 100-acre property during construction. When the job was done Rufino returned to New York and worked as a carpenter, but found it wasn't enough of a challenge. He wanted an apprenticeship where he could "study and learn secrets that didn't come out of a book."

"I've never looked back," Rufino said. He first explored different options, visiting furniture makers, harpsichord makers and the late New York City guitar maker James D'Aquisto.

"I knew I wanted to work with wood, and then I got bit by the violin bug," he said.

Rufino signs and dates his instruments, writing "Ad maiorem dei gloriam" (To the greater glory of God) inside his violins. The tagline ties back to his faith and family — both his wife and daughter have master's degrees in theology — and his fondness for his wife's uncle, who was a Jesuit priest. "We are a family of God-lovers," Rufino said.

"I've been given astounding

gifts and opportunities here, and I'm responsible to a higher power to fulfill what has been given to me," he added. "It's not just about me."

Rufino apprenticed at the Newark School of Violin Making in England and also studied at the London workshops of J & Arthur Beare Ltd. and W.E. Hill & Sons.

After graduating, he returned to New York in 1977 and trained under luthier V.Y. "Nigo" Nigogosian, who also was a master violin restorer. In 1980, Rufino began a 4-year apprenticeship with Carl Becker & Son of Chicago.

He opened his own studio in 1984, on Broadway near Columbus Circle in Manhattan, making violins, violas and cellos, and also helped Nigogosian establish the Oberlin Restoration Workshops in 1986, where violin and bow makers study restoration and learn new techniques.

Rufino, who also plays viola in the North Shore Symphony Orchestra, is a member of the American Federation of Violin and Bow Makers and is on the executive committee of the International Society of Violin and Bow Makers.

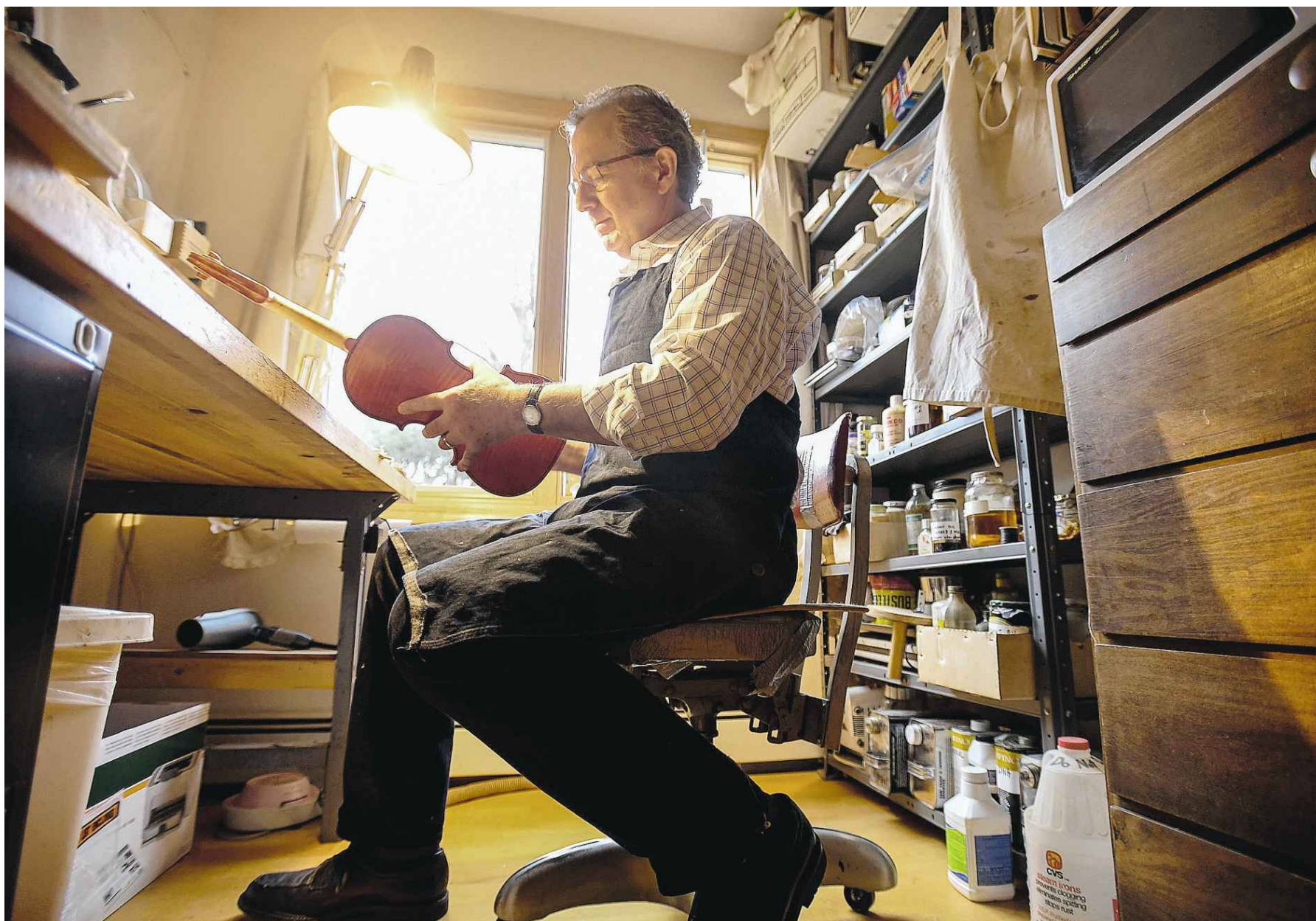
### HE ALSO SELLS RETAIL

While violin making is his passion, one he runs under the Charles J. Rufino Violin Maker name, Rufino's Long Island Violin Shops are what he calls his brasserie (an informal French restaurant), where he offers stringed instrument sales, lessons and repairs. Rufino initially did sales to students from his home, including after he closed his Manhattan workshop in 2004. He opened the Huntington store in 2008 and the East Setauket store in 2014. He plans to open a Smithtown store this year.

On a 1977 trip to Europe, Rufino bought wood he now uses to make his instruments, going for the sound that is made by spruce from the Alps in Italy and maple from Bosnia, searching for wood with the tonal characteristics that give violins their sound.

"If you want to make a supremely great instrument, you need great raw material," he said.

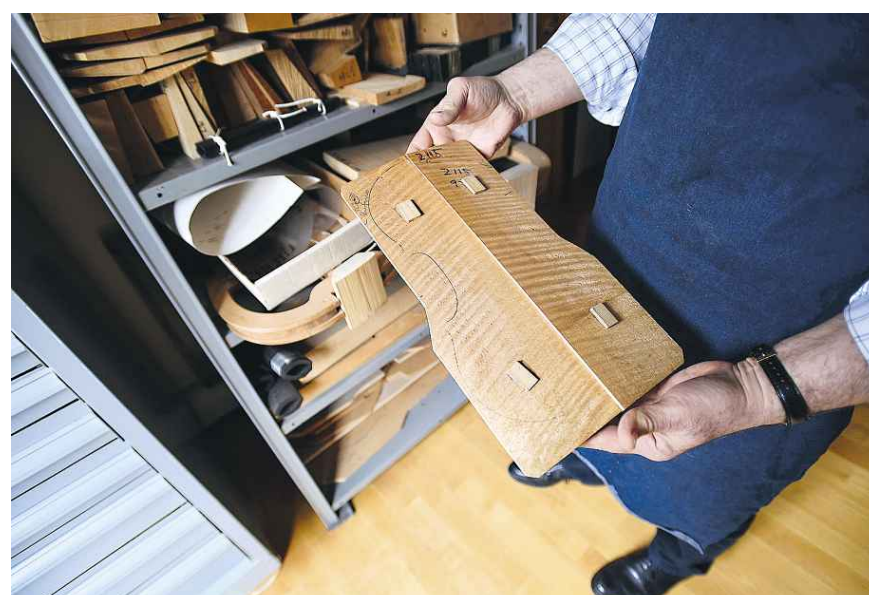
See COVER STORY on E8



Rufino checks his work on a fiddle under construction. "I enjoy the awareness when I'm working and shaping and cutting the wood," he said. "I'm the luckiest man I know."



Rufino looks down the neck of one of his violins. He is not only a luthier, but also plays viola in the North Shore Symphony Orchestra.



These pieces of wood are destined to be an instrument. Rufino has extensive technical information on wood types, measurements and construction techniques.

# Pursuing a chosen craft

COVER STORY from E6

You also need a design plan. Like any great chef or painter, luthiers start with the same raw ingredients and recipe, but the results differ.

"It's not a formula," Rufino said. "When you discover your voice or soul as a maker, you discover it's OK to bring your life experience to creating this violin."

Rufino said he considers the instruments he makes to be inspired by works of master luthiers in earlier generations, but not copies. "I want to be a maker of instruments for today and tomorrow," he said.

Some of Rufino's handcrafted violins can cost tens of thousands of dollars. While he enjoys making fine, handcrafted instruments, he notes that there is room for many options depending on budgets and a player's needs.

A violinist who uses one of Rufino's instruments sings its praises and the creator's.

"I consider him one of the finest makers alive," said Dale Stuckenbruck, 64, of West Hempstead, an adjunct professor of violin at LIU Post in Brookville and orchestra director at The Waldorf School of Garden City. "He's had the best training possible and really does know what he's doing. Historically, he's very solidly rooted, and yet he's making violins for the current generation, to meet our needs."

## MODERN-DAY VIOLINS

The whole setup in instruments used today — from the tension to the tuning to the standard pitch — is different from what was needed to play in 17th and 18th century orchestras, Stuckenbruck said, adding that modern-day violins also must have enough projection to reach the back of far larger concert halls.

He has firsthand experience with how one of Rufino's violins performs. The week before Christmas 1996, Stuckenbruck's violin was stolen from his car parked in the driveway. As concertmaster of the "Victor, Victoria" orchestra on Broadway, he was due to play that



Sound check: Charles Rufino listens intently as he plays one of his violins in the workshop in his Dix Hills home.



Tools of the craft crowd Rufino's workbench.



The finish of a violin, done using varnish, gives it style and color.

night, and he also had a week-end performance scheduled at Lincoln Center's former Avery Fisher Hall.

"Charles came in that night with a violin he was able to dedicate for my use," Stuckenbruck recalled. "It was a competitive violin that I was able to use in my solos, my chamber music and in recording sessions with my colleagues. I felt comfortable with it."

A week later, police recovered and returned Stuckenbruck's stolen violin, but he continued

to use the Rufino. "I realized what Charles' violin was doing for me, and I decided to sell the old one," Stuckenbruck said.

Shem Guibbory, a first violinist with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, bought a Rufino violin in 2007. He loved its sound during a blind sound test at the opera house in comparison with an Italian violin he considered selling.

Guibbory sat in the top rear of the hall and had a colleague on stage play excerpts from several works on both violins.

"On one song, I was certain Violin A sounded so much more present and warm and really caught my attention in the big hall of the Metropolitan Opera," Guibbory said. "And I was kind of crestfallen, because I knew that was my Italian fiddle, and that made me think, 'Well, I better not sell it.' It turned out that was the Rufino! That really persuaded me. Plus, colleagues' reactions were very strong."

Guibbory said he has known Rufino since the late 1970s when Rufino studied with Nigogosian.

During that time, he said he has observed consistency in sound from Rufino's instruments.

"They're beautifully crafted and they speak evenly and warmly in all the registers, so from the lowest notes to the highest notes there is a very smooth, even grade of sound," Guibbory said.

Rufino likens his creations to "a Savile Row suit."

"I like to think they're instruments that stand up to the heroic instruments of the past," he said.