



A First-String Violin Maker

BY JIM MERRITT

THE VIOLIN rests in the sunlight by the garden window, looking like a study in still life. It needs one last finishing touch before it can be played for the first time.

Charles Rufino, 46, the luthier, or violin maker, will be the first to play those inaugural notes. He sits in a captain's chair at his studio in a woody section of Dix Hills, in a room redolent of mahogany furniture and the shiny, new cellos stored here. On the walls are framed maps of Italian cities renowned for their violin-making history.

"This is a wonderful moment of anticipation," Rufino says of his decision to finally try out the new violin. He wears a blue denim apron over his white shirt and violin-patterned tie. He carefully picks the burnt-orange violin up by the neck and brushes the floral print table cloth where it has been resting, lest a piece of debris scratch the new creation.

He's been making violins—Rufino familiarly calls them "fidles"—professionally for over twenty years. He learned the centuries-old craft at an English school during the 1970s, and earned notice in music circles during the 80's, when he restored a priceless violin that had been squashed by a car. "It sounded better after I finished the restoration," he notes with quite pride.

Rufino lays the violin on the clean cloth, string-side up. It was begun six months ago in his

downstairs workshop, when he glued together two pieces of Bavarian Alpine maple to form a back piece. Then came 250 or so hours of cutting, gouging, planning, and gluing the rest of the pieces in place. Since the varnishing and setup was completed about a week ago, the only thing separating this instrument from its musical destiny is the metal bridge jacket holding up the strings. That needs to be replaced by bridge made of hard maple.

Rufino picks up a knife with a blade no bigger than his thumbnail—he carved the tool's apple wood handle himself from workshop scraps—and begins to whittle the squat flat footed wooden bridge that will transmit sound from the silvery strings to the hollow

body. The bridge holes aren't big enough to provide the kind of lively acoustic effect he wants. He holds the bridge up to the window, checking its "balance" through the reading glasses clinging to the tip of his nose.

After the bridge is whittled to his liking, Rufino nestles it in place under the strings, which are now ready for tuning. He taps a nearby tuning fork with his index finger, twists the violins pegs and plucks the strings, which make a noise reminiscent of a sitar as the tension builds up the correct pitch. (These days strings are made of sheep entrails, not the cat gut of yore, Rufino notes.)

"Sounds pretty well," he says of his pizzicato, noting that violins quickly lose their pitch the first time they're tuned. But he won't know how well it sounds until he's used the bow, the product of another craftsman's workshop.



Five hundred years from now, he says people may still be playing this violin. "These are the first notes. It's a very spiritual, mystical moment."

He picks up the gold inlaid bow and starts to play a scale. After a few more scales and chords, the violin maker makes his call: "It's a little stiff, like a newborn that has to clear its lungs out." But he adds, it has a "sharp yet dark" sound that should appeal to his musician clients, many of whom play in Broadway shows or studio orchestras that record commercial jingles and movie scores.

"I'm very happy with the way it sounds," he says, becoming more enthusiastic the more he plays. "Hear the crispness?" He considers each violin a work of art, with idiosyncrasies like slightly asymmetrical sound holes that make it unique. Inside each violin—he makes about eight a year, fewer when he has to produce a cello or viola—he inscribes his signature next to the Latin phrase, *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*, which

Charles Rufino of Dix Hills tunes a violin he has almost finished.

means, "For the Greater Glory of God."

In a minute or so, he'll put the instrument away, revisiting it for a daily retuning until it gradually settles down and matures, beginning what may be a centuries-long career. In time, the varnish will melt onto the player's hands, an intentional outcome that lends an aged look.

But right now, it's brand spanking new, and Rufino is having a ball, improvising a catchy ditty he calls "Rufino's Hoe-Down." He stops. He takes the bow off the strings. "See," he says, twisting again at the pegs. "It's already dropped a half-tone."

He lays the violin down. A couple of musicians have already told Rufino they're in the market for an instrument. In a few weeks, they'll come in and test-drive the violin. Someone, he's confident, will buy it. And it will head out into the world and make music.