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Charles Liu's fine stringed instruments will catch the eye

Midvale master

By Kathryn Jones
Close-Up Correspondent

Charles Liu started playing the violin when he was 10 and has refused to bow out ever since, even when the Beijing native's teacher told him he would never make it as a professional violinist.

"If you asked about your future, [the teachers] would flat out tell you," he recalls. "They wouldn't worry about hurting your feelings, and I was used to that. I'm glad [my teacher] told me and I said, 'Thank you.' "

Turns out, his teacher in China was right. But Liu kept playing and has no regrets he didn't make it as a virtuoso violinist.

"I just didn't take my dream that way," he says.

Instead, Liu continued with his schooling and never gave up on the violin because it was fun. When he turned 16, he was given the opportunity to make violins at a new factory in Beijing.

"This was a big deal for them," he says, speaking of the teachers who worked there.

The year was 1982, and there had never before been a violin-making

class. The teachers sought talented students who were interested in learning the craft. Liu was certainly that - and very grateful for his chance.

Liu logged three years at the factory. After leaving high school, he attended college and learned about international business.

"I was learning English, too," he says, adding he worked at a Holiday Inn in Beijing. "I got a lot of experience in speaking English. That's one reason I worked for them. I wanted to practice [my English]. I wanted to learn. I got a lot of chances talking to tourists."

He also continued crafting violins. But his music dream nearly died when he tried to further his violin-making studies in the United States.

"At the time the [U.S.] embassy [in China] was pretty tough. It was hard for students to get into the country," he says.

Finally, after three years and four visits to the embassy, Liu was given a visa and was free to go. He began his violin-making studies in the United States in 1990, at Peter Prier & Sons in downtown Salt Lake City.

His instructors there were impressed - with him and his command of English.

"Before me, there were two or three Chinese [violin] makers, but none of them spoke English," Liu says.

In 1998, Liu opened a violin factory in Beijing, which serves as a wholesale business.

Six years later, in June 2004, he debuted his first retail store: Charles W. Liu Fine Violins, at 7450 S. State St. in Midvale. While his wholesale business in China is still running, Liu says his energy is devoted to his retail operations in Midvale.

"When I talked about opening my retail shop, people said, 'Oh, you're crazy. How can you survive?' But we've been really successful because . . . our prices are right - for rental, for sale [of instruments]. We have great service."

Liu's store conducts a huge volume of rental business with local schools. Students who buy or rent from the store are not only offered stringed instruments - violins, violas, cellos or basses - at a great price, but all great instruments that are top quality. The store also does repairs.

"We're makers," Liu says. "We don't just buy and sell. We make some here - [some] in Beijing. We take [older] instruments and do major restoration on them."

Currently, Liu has several employees who help with restoration and repair.

One of them is Eldon Gomez, who happened on the shop while accompanying a friend who was looking at violas. His friend scored an instrument, and Gomez landed a job and has been working at the shop for nearly nine months.

"I love this place," Gomez says. "It's classy."

Liu's violin store is not only first-string, it's also homey. The former home passed through various owners before its current incarnation as a violin business.

It now is partitioned into a showroom, a cello room and a room for pricier products - a place where instruments from France, Italy and Germany are displayed. The business also includes a workshop where a garden reposed until being uprooted in 2005.

"Customers really enjoyed looking out the windows at the beautiful garden, but we needed the space and we didn't need a garden," Liu



Charles Liu began learning how to make violins in Beijing. After several tries, he finally got a visa to the United States, where he continued to learn the craft at Peter Prier & Sons in Salt Lake City. He opened his own shop in 2004. (Kathryn Jones/Close-Up Correspondent)



The front of Charles W. Liu Fine Violins. The former home passed through various owners before its current incarnation as a violin business. It now is partitioned into a showroom, a cello room and the room for pricier products. (Kathryn Jones/Close-Up Correspondent)



High-end instruments from France, Italy and Germany rest in a room specifically for the pricier instruments. (Kathryn Jones/Close-Up Correspondent)

says.

Few fret about the change, though. They enjoy the extra space and the additional lighting from the multiple windows.

There's other changes in the works. Liu is busily organizing an international violin contest.

The premiere Stradivarius International Violin Competition is scheduled for June 11-14 at Libby Gardner Concert Hall at the University of Utah. The winner will receive a handmade violin, prize money and the privilege of playing as a featured soloist in a concert with the Utah Symphony.

It will be the first international competition hosted by a violin shop.

"I always had it in my mind to do something for the teachers, and when the business got stronger I [decided] I wanted to do this internationally," says Liu, adding this his way he can give back to the community and show his appreciation.

The violin maker

Charles W. Liu Fine Violins is located at 7450 S. State St., Midvale. The store is open 9:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. on weekdays and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturdays. For more information, call 801-255-9636.