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**New life for old cellos**

**Published: Monday, April 21, 2008**  
By Joel Banner Baird  
Free Press Staff Writer

**BERLIN** -- Three century-old cellos lay belly-up in a workshop last week: spruce tops straddled with clamps; decades of use exposed in at least a dozen neatly seamed scars.

A warming pot of hide glue -- the animal-based concoction that makes possible repeated, radical repairs to members of the violin family -- sat within easy reach.

If a curtain call is an instrument's crowning moment, the weeks it spends at Paul Perley Cellos must be its enforced time-out, far from the hands that coax beauty from its strings.

"You never take a top off a cello in front of its owner," said Paul Perley, who is chiefly responsible for instrument restoration and repairs at the Berlin workshop. "There's a certain noise associated with it. It can sound painful if you're not expecting it."

His wife and co-owner of the business, Melissa Perley, said some customers appear traumatized when they glimpse a fiddle's innards.

"It's akin to seeing your child in surgery," she said.

The cellos emerge unscathed. Paul Perley and the studio's other technician, Bryan Bryne, have learned their craft under some of the Northeast's most respected restoration experts.

Their goal is straightforward: An instrument must leave the studio sounding better than it did when it arrived. It must meet or exceed the structural integrity it possessed on the day it was created.

"People fall totally in love with their instruments in ways that they weren't before," said Melissa Perley. "If they've had it in their attic for decades, it will come back to life. It gets a second chance to sing again."

The craftsmen do not build cellos; they improve them. Located at the end of a bone-rattling and rutted dirt road, the studio tends to the tonal needs of musicians from around the country and even overseas.

Work orders arrive from top-tier string players and hobbyists. Some seek expert repairs. Others look for refinement: the tweaking of an instrument's voicing and response.

It can mean shaving millimeters off the treble end of a bridge, reshaping a tailpiece or coaxing a centuries-old seam back into line.

"We want each instrument to be as perfect as it can be," Paul Perley said.



Copyright 2008 **THIS WEEK IN PHOTOS**

Paul Perley mixes varnish pigments while his wife, Melissa Perley, watches. The couple own Paul Perley Cellos in Berlin. JOEL BANNER BAIRD, Free Press

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I want the Jacqueline Du Pre autograph model that's bright and unfocused with the butterscotch tone!

Posted: Mon Apr 21, 2008 4:59 pm

hey mind,  
ya think they can afford health care?

Posted: Mon Apr 21, 2008 11:17 am

This is such a great business. Hope they make enough to live in Tax and spend Vermont.

Posted: Mon Apr 21, 2008 10:26 am

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Cellos making a pit stop at the mom-and-pop studio range from \$1,500 student models to manicured antiques costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. That variety is part of the business plan.

"In order to afford a storefront on 57th Street in [New York](#), you have to deal exclusively in high-end instruments," Paul Perley said.

Plying only that end of the trade -- and its hectic tempo -- appeals to neither of the partners.

They started the business 20 years ago at the southern end of Berlin Pond and gradually expanded from commissioned repairs to include the purchase, restoration, rental and sales of cellos and double basses.

The studio, however, remains the same size.

"Quality of life has always been a priority for both of us," he said. "From the beginning, we tried to make our business work out of that. We've raised four children here. It's worked out better than we imagined.

"We're not extravagant people," he continued. "We figured it out as we went. I'm personally a very big fan of a low-overhead business."

The painstaking, measured approach of woodworking dovetails with his wife's energetic marketing savvy.

Melissa Perley manages the business -- and serves as an expert player and listener, counseling first-timers as well as old hands.

Together, the couple translate customer requests into a language that ultimately finds expression in wood.

Paul Perley elaborated on a few of the more common buzz-words:

**'Dark'** ("Amateurs and intermediate players almost always ask for something with a 'dark' sound, what they think Yo-Yo Ma sounds like on their CD player.")

**'Bright'** ("If someone refers to a 'bright' sounding instrument, it's usually a negative term")

**'Focused'** ("Generally the same as 'bright,' but it's a positive term")

**'Big'** ("Everybody seems to want a 'big' sound; it's a very common request")

**'Mellow'** ("Not big: A preference stated by people who don't want their instrument to stand out")

**'Chocolate'** ("It's a term we use to describe a rich, complex tone")

Some tonal preferences are one of a kind, Melissa Perley added -- and she's matched instruments with customers over the phone.

"We've had people ask for a 'gravy-on-a-pot-roast' sound; a 'warm-sweater-on-a-fall-day' sound," she said.

Paul Perley Cellos delivered the desired sound, dead on, both times.

The studio hews to the physics of vibrating wood for more objective benchmarks of tonality. Newer, unblemished instruments, for instance, typically appeal to less-experienced players, Paul Perley said, "but there's no substitute for old wood. It's more brittle; it vibrates with significantly greater strength and character after 80 to 150 years."

Several dozen new cello, bass and violin bridges festoon the studio's south-facing windows. [Ultraviolet](#) light, destructive to so many synthetic varnishes, actually helps wood age, he said.

Arm's length from urban hubbub, the Perleys' pace and scale allow them time to play: Both are accomplished cellists, and perform and record as a duo, "Soavita."

They say their voices, and those of their bowed instruments, resonate sympathetically with the cellos that line the studio's western wall, improving their tone.

In that respect, they transcend isolation.



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Remote?

Hardly, countered Paul Perley.

"This is a specialized field; there's not a whole lot of us out there," he said. "People will seek us out if they need us."

Contact Joel Banner Baird at 660-1843 or [joelbaird@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com](mailto:joelbaird@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com)

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