

Peter Mulvey shows, rather than tells, the details of his songs' emotional landscapes... *The Washington Post*

peter mulvey

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First String

Old cellos get an encore at a Berlin Pond shop

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he cello's elegant scroll and symmetrical curves, and its rich, versatile sound, make it one of the loveliest and most beloved orchestral instruments. It's also one of the most expensive. World-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma plays a 1733 Montagnana model from Venice worth \$2.5 million. The Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra owns a cello crafted by famed 18th-century Italian maker Antonio Stradivari worth \$3.5 million. A new instrument from a noted contemporary maker can cost between \$50 and \$100 grand.

Cellists who can't afford these astronomical prices can find a better deal in an unlikely place: at the end of a winding dirt road in the small town of Berlin, Vermont, in a shop owned by cellist Paul Perley. The wiry 60-year-old musician, who performs with the Montpelier

create a fuller, richer sound. "You can't get the sound out of a new one that you can out of an old one, in my opinion," Perley explains. "No one has figured out how to simulate that hardness in the wood. That's where you get the sound everybody's looking for." His customers, spread all across the country, are inclined to agree with him.

Since he moved out of his original location in Worcester a year ago, Perley's modest shop has fit in his garage. Driving up to it, you'd never guess what's inside. The 18-by-18-foot room looks like a wood-working studio. In addition to the two sawdust-covered workstations on one side of the room, a table-mounted precision drill sits just inside the door, a band saw occupies a corner, and a rack of different-sized clamps and planes dominates one

When you play a cello it rests against your chest. It really does massage the internal organs: the heart, lungs, liver.

PAUL PERLEY, INSTRUMENT RESTORER

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Chamber Orchestra, has been a luthier — a craftsman who makes or repairs stringed instruments — for 18 years. He sells and repairs cellos, old and new, and deals less frequently in stand-up basses. His prices fall in the \$2000 to \$10,000 range.

Perley specializes in restoring older models from obscure but competent makers. He says he prefers to work with and play older instruments because cellos, like fine wine, improve with age. Time and ultraviolet radiation harden the wood to

wall. Industrial-strength fluorescent lights illuminate everything.

But the shop's main attractions are the instruments themselves: Three giant stand-up basses lean casually against a back wall, and 15 chest-high cellos, resting on floor racks, form two orderly rows of wooden splendor.

Perley plucks a cello from the formation to demonstrate how to play it. He sits on a small black bench and extends the metal endpin at the instrument's base. Then he



PAUL & MELISSA PERLEY

rests its curved torso between his legs and strokes its four strings with a horsehair bow — the tune is a short piece he wrote himself. The strings vibrate, producing a resonant tone capable of projecting into every corner of a concert hall. In this small shop, it's overwhelming.

Joshua Blouin, Perley's 11-year-old stepson, watches him play. Joshua took up the cello at age 7. He says he'd much rather play cello than violin. "The violin is like a screaming noise," he says. "I don't like it."

Perley's assistant Rob Morse is a bassist — he plays in the jazz ensemble Vorcza — but he agrees the cello possesses a distinctive sound. "I think the cello has a certain depth of character that isn't found everywhere in the string family," he says.

The instrument pleases more than just the ears, Perley claims. "When you play a cello it rests against your chest," he explains. "It really does massage the internal organs: the heart, lungs, liver."

Perley, who teaches on Fridays, says that playing the

instrument has a profound effect on his students, both children and adults. "They organize their lives around it; there's something about how it feeds them."

Though he sounds a little like a preacher seeking converts, Perley actually spends more time seeking the instruments themselves — his biggest challenge is stocking the shop. "Finding old cellos, that's really the trick of this trade," he says.

He relies primarily on a loose network of dealers to find instruments at estate sales. Perley usually takes those the bigger dealers don't want, then painstakingly restores and sells them. He acts as an agent as well, repairing and selling cellos for clients who find them in attics after their relatives have died.

Perley also sells some new instruments. While the oldest one in the shop is a bass dating to the 1860s, the newest is a cello just a few months old, made by Barbara Theobald. The Massachusetts luthier has crafted two instruments for Perley according to his precise specifications.

Although he designs instruments, Perley doesn't actually make them himself. "I would love to build instruments," he says, "but it's an extremely difficult way to make a living. There are a lot of great instrument makers out there who are starving."

There are no customers in the shop on a recent Wednesday afternoon and none are expected, according to Perley's wife and business partner Melissa; interested buyers must make an appointment to browse. But their business doesn't depend on foot traffic. "It's not like going to Wal-Mart," she suggests.

In fact, many of Perley's customers never even see the inside of the shop. Most of the 10 to 15 cellos Perley sells during a typical year go to musicians who live out of state. They find him through his ads in *Strings Magazine* or through word of mouth. Perley talks with these cellists about what they want. If he has anything in stock that



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first string

<< 35A



Perley straps his cellos in, inflates the airbags with a black rubber hand pump, closes the case and wraps the outside buckles with duct tape.

might suit them, he ships the instruments out for a two- or three-week test drive — on loan. “They’re these huge, expensive instruments, and they go out like library books,” marvels Melissa.

Like *really well-protected* library books, that is: When Perley ships his cellos, they go in style, encased in bulky, bullet-proof, Kevlar-coated cases, the insides of which are lined with velvet-covered airbags. Like an overprotective parent, Perley straps his cellos in, inflates the airbags with a black rubber hand pump, closes the case and wraps the outside buckles with duct tape. “They can take quite a fall,” he says. Over the years, he’s sold cellos this way to customers in all 48 contiguous states — and, he notes with pride, there are seven in Alaska.

But if these precautions sound extreme, they pale in comparison to Perley’s efforts to rehabilitate damaged instruments. Repair work — 50 to 75 instruments a year — is how he spends most of his time. He has help from Morse, who is currently laboring over a cello with a cracked top.

The cello’s exterior symmetry notwithstanding, two distinct sides are evident when you open it up — a long bass bar supports the spruce top beneath the bridge

on the bass side, and a short sound post provides support under the treble side. The crack in this particular instrument appeared above the sound post.

To fix it, Perley and Morse plied off the damaged top, poured a plaster mold to hold it, and clamped the thin, intricately carved piece of spruce to the mold. They then scraped a two-inch oval gouge into the underside of the wood beneath the crack, stopping when the wood was 1 millimeter thick.

This afternoon, as a recording of Bach’s Goldberg Variations plays in the background, Morse is painstakingly fitting a patch into this divot. He lines the small hole with chalk and fits the oval piece of wood into place. Then he removes it to see the chalk residue where the wood was raised, indicating an imperfect fit. He scrapes the round wood chip with a dogleg chisel to get it just right. This fitting process alone takes several hours, Perley explains. “The wrong piece of wood or a fit that isn’t close enough can really reduce the quality of an instrument,” he says.

Perley often deals with cracked wood, and sometimes with more unusual repairs. He once cared for a cello that had been damaged in a fire. “We

ended up replacing the neck,” he recalls, “and we revarnished the top because the varnish bubbled up.” He got rid of the smoke smell by treating the instrument for two days in an ozone chamber. The bill came to \$2000.

But Perley’s customers find his prices pretty fair. John Rivers, who teaches jazz bass at Johnson College and at the University of Vermont and plays with local groups, brings his 90-year-old stand-up bass to Perley for repairs. “His rates are really great,” says Rivers. “He’s really generous with his time.”

Mary Roisin of Hanover, New Hampshire, whose son Brendan is a student at the New England Conservatory in Boston, describes herself as a “very satisfied customer.” She’s purchased two cellos from Perley, most recently an English model for \$4000. She says its “very clear and beautiful lyrical quality” is typical of an instrument in the \$12,000 range. With four kids, two of them in college, Roisin says she couldn’t afford to buy one that expensive, and she’s glad to have found Perley.

He’s happy to help, and not just because he appreciates the business. “There are so many stresses in our lives,” Perley says. “It does something to the soul to play the cello.” ☺