With Violins, Lyons is King

by Frank Chrupcala

Michael Lyons Violins in Foster, R.I., has built a reputation as the state's leader in quality, guaranteed sales, rentals and repairs of fine stringed instruments.

"My shop offers the lowest prices on the largest selection of the highest quality violins, all backed by unconditional lifetime guarantees," Lyons said.

Lyons used to repair furniture, but once he got his hands on a violin, he knew that he had found his passion. He now has over two decades of experience in construction, repair and restoration. Lyons met master violin maker Vincenzo Monacelli in 1987 and began a 10-year apprenticeship under his guidance, learning from one of the best in the industry while working out of his basement. Now, Lyons is a skilled professional in the field and he recently built a state-of-the-art shop on his property in Foster. He converted an old barn into a new, climate-controlled building suitable for his business.

"It was fun to put an old chair back together and pass it along to somebody who really liked it," Lyons said. "But bringing an old, neglected violin back to life, one that hasn't been played in perhaps 80 years, and having a skilled violinist pick it up and immediately fill my shop with beautiful music is gratifying beyond words. Seeing the smile on a player's face when they hear their instrument for the first time is the most satisfying part of the job."

Customer satisfaction is Lyons' primary motivation. He built the foundation of his business with four customer-pleasing goals in mind: the highest quality, the largest selection, the lowest prices and the best guarantees. After 23 years of meeting and exceeding his lofty standards, Michael Lyons Violins is a respected fixture in the industry.
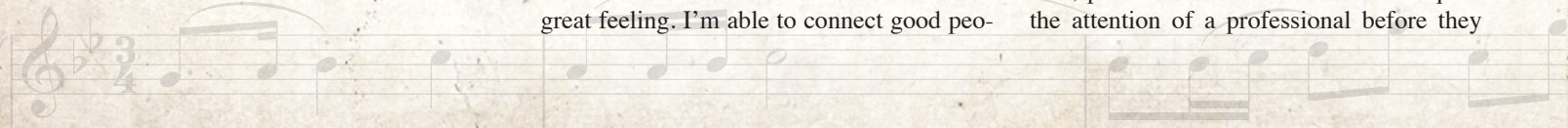
"Having so many amazing and interesting people visit my shop is my favorite part of the business," Lyons said. "Having them leave with the violin of their dreams is a great feeling. I'm able to connect good people with exceptional instruments at affordable prices."

Lyons' work is never an easy task. Each intricately carved scroll, beautiful fitting or expertly adjusted bridge or sound post on his instruments requires time and effort from his trained, professional hand. Building a violin from scratch can take over a month of extensive work, and repairing or restoring each broken or neglected instrument is its own separate, unique challenge.

"Finding the optimal tone of a violin takes hours and hours of work," Lyons said. "But it's worth it, because it's not all about looking good. The instrument has to feel good and sound good, too."

Lyons cautions players about buying a violin online or at a consignment shop and assuming that the instrument is properly fitted and adjusted and ready to play. Violins are delicate, precise instruments that often require the attention of a professional before they

are ready to produce beautiful music. He believes that this is an especially important consideration for new players.

"It's just as important for new players to have access to properly adjusted, correct sounding violins as it is for a professional player," Lyons said. "If it isn't done right, it will never sound right, no matter how much or how hard the student practices. People want the best for their children, and some folks think if they don't spend thousands of dollars, they won't get a good instrument. But that couldn't be further from the truth."

The violin can be an expensive instrument, but Lyons strives to put one in the hands of anyone interested in playing. Lyons estimates that he spends as much time setting up student instruments as he does high-end violins. Lyons' unique rental opportunities are an affordable and risk-free option for first-time players, and he even offers a rent-to-own program. The instruments in his fleet of rentals meet the same high standards as the violins that are for sale in his shop. His prices and his selection make it possible for all players to find the instrument of their dreams.

"I have a lot of good stories, a lot of happy endings," Lyons said. "One young Berklee student comes to mind. He had been visiting shops around the region and he was struggling to find an affordable violin that he liked. Then he came to me and found the violin of his dreams at a fraction of the price, a handmade instrument right in his price range. He still calls me and and tells everybody about my shop."

This particular Berklee student is just one of Lyons' many satisfied customers. The business boasts a perfect score on Google's customer reviews, and Lyons plans on maintaining his remarkable service for years to come.

"Because I so thoroughly restore my instruments, I fully insure the reliability of each and every one, guaranteed," Lyons said. "I don't sell other people's troubled instruments on consignment. You'll never buy another person's problem from me."

Lyons, who was born in R.I. and has lived in the state his entire life, knows that his small business relies on the support of local customers. His small shop in Foster has all the same instruments, old and new, that a customer would find in a big store in Boston or New York.

"I like the idea of 'buy R.I.' and keeping small businesses in Rhode Island," Lyons said.

Although Lyons is a lifelong Rhode Islander, his successful business reaches across the country and the world, offering customers a wide variety of services and leaving people satisfied from coast to coast and across the Atlantic. He has shipped violins to California and Texas and recently talked to a customer in France about an instrument. In addition to violins, Lyons also works with cellos, big bass fiddles and violas. He offers free appraisals on all string instruments and lessons are available, as well.

Michael Lyons Violins is located on the Hartford Pike (Route 101) in Foster, R.I. Call 401-647-4747 to speak with Lyons and schedule an appointment. He is available seven days a week and on short notice for emergency repairs. Visit his website, www.lyonsviolin.com, or e-mail lyonsviolin@yahoo.com for more information.