

## **Mending Bridges and Bows**

Robert Portukalian, owner of Providence Violin Shop, has owned the same store on North Main Street in Providence, Rhode Island for over half a century. But few people, unless they have a violin needing repair, are even aware of his small operation which is located next to a pawn broker on a run-down commercial strip in the north end of the city. Portukalian doesn't have much in the way of walk-in business and doesn't advertise - his customers tend to find him, coming from all over Rhode Island and neighboring Massachusetts.

Portukalian, 78, is not a luthier; in other words he is not a violin maker. His business is devoted to violin repair, restoration and appraisal. While Providence Violin is a niche business, it's far from a high end boutique, and his clientele ranges from professional musicians to school kids just learning the instrument.

The majority of Portukalian's time is spent on basic repair and maintenance: stringing violins, replacing broken bridges, mending cracks to violin bodies, and rehairing bows. He takes great pride in his work, but is unpretentious about it, "A violin is like an automobile that needs servicing - things wear out, they break, and need to be fixed," he says. Portukalian has more than enough work to keep him busy; when I dropped in unannounced one day for a chat, he motioned toward a stack of bows on the counter, "Not today," he said, "you'll have to come back."

Robert Portukalian was born near Boston in 1926. The younger of two children, he survives his sister who died in 1999. Portukalian's parents were immigrants from Armenia and his father, a railway worker, was a survivor of the 1915 Armenian genocide. Portukalian now lives in the Providence suburb of Warwick with his wife Hazel, whom he married in 1951. The couple have two sons, one of whom is in the violin rental business, and three grandchildren.

Portukalian not only fixes violins, he also plays them. He first became acquainted with the instrument when he was nine and his father gave him a used model. Over the years, he has performed classical and Middle Eastern music with a number of different Providence area groups. Portukalian doesn't, however, keep a prized vintage instrument for his own use, "I'll play anything," he claims.

Portukalian considers himself a music lover, and likes rock and country in small doses, but states, "Classical is the only kind of music I can tolerate unconditionally and listen to throughout a day." As for favorite composers, Portukalian refuses to be pinned down, and says he likes at least something from all of them. When it comes to particular violinists, Portukalian is also cagey, but counts among his favorites Michael Rabin (1936-1972), a virtuoso acclaimed for his Paganini recordings.

Providence Violin is more workshop than showroom. It is also a very personal space - winged cherubs and small busts of classical composers sit on shelves, and plaques, pictures of grandchildren, fliers for violin concerts, and cards from appreciative customers adorn the walls. And, of course, there are the violins, their cases forming small piles throughout the store. Portukalian opened his store on North Main Street in the early 1950s, but until 1975 his primary business was kitchen design, not violins. For several decades, Portukalian dabbled in violin

repair, “It was a hobby that just kept growing” he says. Eventually, he shut down the design business, devoted himself exclusively to violin work, and renamed his store “Providence Violin Shop.”

The neighborhood surrounding Providence Violin has undergone radical change over the last several decades. North Main used to be a busy retail and entertainment artery. It featured not only the now demolished Rhode Island Auditorium, but also a drive-in theater, a department store, and a number of restaurants. At one time, Providence Violin’s display window featured a mannequin seated before a candelabra adorned mantel balancing a violin on its shoulder. The decline in area foot traffic, and a need for storage space, led Portukalian to scrap this nineteenth century scene and cover the window. Today, the storefront features variations on the color brown with the simple “Violin Shop” inscribed in large letters.

Portukalian may look like he is 78, but he has the energy of a far younger man and still works a forty-hour week. His day begins long before the doors of his store open at nine a.m., and he often arrives before six so that he can perform repair work uninterrupted. It is tempting, he says, to lie in bed in the morning, but suggests that this is a bad thing, “When you wake up, get out of bed and move around!”

Portukalian doesn’t work late anymore – he closes shop at three. An advocate of regular exercise, he walks two-and-a-half miles most days. He also recommends a daily salad; after that, “You can eat whatever you want.” According to Robert Portukalian, the whole business of living well in one’s 70s is not complicated, “You have to keep working your mind and your body.” In other words, treat your body like a fine musical instrument: don’t abuse it, but don’t be afraid to give it a good workout.

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