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This Fairport shop fine-tunes for its growth

By KERRY FELTNER - 7/11/2014



<http://www.rbj.net!/userfiles/image/stringedinstrument.jpg> Stringed Instrument Services has an active rental inventory of 1,200 stringed instruments. (Photo courtesy of Stringed Instrument Services Inc.)

Despite 26 years in business, it was just last week that Stringed Instrument Services Inc. hung a sign denoting its presence on North Main Street in Fairport.

Based on its evolution from a one-man repair shop into a nationwide wholesaler with ties to China, the business's new marquee stands to enhance a firmly rooted business.

Founded by Paul Strelau in 1988, the repair shop has morphed into a diversified business offering retail and wholesale stringed instruments as well as rentals. The company employs 11 people with plans to add a couple this year.

"We're very student-focused," Strelau said. "We love working with schools and students that are just starting out. That's our niche."

Strelau, a native of Owatonna, Minn., turned a love for music into an apprenticeship with a violin maker after receiving an undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin. He moved to Rochester to enroll at the Eastman School of Music for his master's degree in 1985 and remained after meeting his wife, Nancy, at a gig.

He played with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra for 12 years. Playing the instruments he repairs is crucial in fixing them, he said.

"You can feel if an instrument is not playing properly," he said. "Everyone here is a musician; it's very important because it's a combination of being a musician (and) being a woodworker. If an instrument is difficult to play, if the strings are too high, if it's not balanced, you have to be able to hear that. I know there are a lot of violin makers who don't play, but it's a big help."

For the first 10 years Strelau worked by himself. He added an employee in 1998 and has expanded gradually.

“The best part about this job is we keep kids playing music,” said Justin Rister, an instrument repair technician for the company. “Everything that I work on usually gets back in the hands of the student.”

The 8,000-square-foot shop caters to 12 school districts and four colleges with an active rental inventory of 1,200 stringed instruments.

“The employees who work there are very well-trained to do a professional job,” said Sandra Halleran, a member of the strings faculty at Nazareth College of Rochester, a teacher at the Hochstein School of Music and a longtime client of the firm. “It’s phenomenal. I probably have 20 students renting cellos for them now, (and) all of the instruments are equal quality. You’re not going to get a bad product from them.”

Every month the company ships roughly 120 of each instrument in its portfolio—including violins, cellos, basses and violas—to customers across the country. Roughly 8 percent of sales are local with the majority of sales spread nationwide.

Readying the instruments for use is a process that is still done by hand.

“Everything is still hands-on,” Rister said. “We have a limited couple of power tools, but when I first started, I had to learn how to sharpen a chisel.”

In 1996 the company began working with CSC Products Inc., a wholesale division of Samuel Shen Musical Instruments, a company based in Suzhou, China. The new business venture came out of a friendship with the owner, Samuel Shen, and a need for inventory, Strelau said.

“That’s where things really started to take off,” he said.

In the global industry of stringed instruments, seismic shifts have taken place in the past 20 years, he said.

“Whether we like it or not, China has made big steps (in) the student part of the business,” he said. “(It) belonged to Germany for years, even for centuries.”

Strelau’s philosophy has remained the same for more than two decades in business. Getting instruments in the hands of students and amateurs will always be the company’s mission, he said.

“To me, I like helping out, I like seeing young kids enjoy playing instruments; instruments that are easy to play,” he said. “I love working with the students and with amateurs and providing them with good instruments that don’t cost much. It has been really rewarding.”

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