

## Joseph Curtin's workshop reverberates with acoustic experiments and recorded detective novels



PHOTOS: COURTESY JOSEPH CURTIN

**Joseph Curtin is a violin maker based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, US**

**MY WIFE AND I LIVE ON SIX ACRES OF** beautiful land just outside Ann Arbor, Michigan. When the lease expired on my downtown workshop five years ago, we decided to build a studio near our home. Though it is primarily a violin shop, the large upstairs room in the picture doubles as a rehearsal space for my wife Jesse, a singer-songwriter and performance artist.

The vaulted ceiling and the large arched windows at each end give the room the feel of a well-lit chapel. This is the north end, where I do my varnishing. I also use it for acoustical tests and trying instruments. On the left of the picture is my equipment for measuring violin sound radiation. Though the rig is designed for use in normal listening environments, I'm currently building a small anechoic chamber in one corner of the room. The instrument mounted for testing is one of my prototype Ultralight violins. The laminated wood top is about 20 per cent lighter than even the lightest old Italian top, greatly affecting the projection and response.

The large wooden box behind the measurement rig contains 14 individually switched UV lamps. Only a few are needed to cure oil varnish, but to tan wood quickly it helps to throw a lot of energy at it. It also has an exhaust fan to keep things cool, and a kill switch that turns everything off when the door is opened, for safety reasons.

Next to the lightbox is a business desk. Above it is one of my mother's paintings, which was done in her studio in our family home in Toronto. The black speakers are high-quality studio monitors. I used to listen to music through a boombox, but last year my physicist friend Gabriel Weinreich suggested something better was needed for

our acoustical research. These speakers and an iPod have made a big difference to my workday. I listen to a lot of violin and chamber music, and I would have a hard time being a violin maker without recorded books – everything from Henry James to Elmore Leonard. There's nothing like a good detective story to get you through a boring stretch of varnish work! Beneath the desk is a yellow fireproof cabinet for varnish solvents, and some reference books.

On the right of the photo is my varnishing bench. Among various jars and an archaeological layering of used rags and sandpaper are colour-coded solvent dispensers (the large bottles are the sort used by bartenders) and a can of varnish stripper – I use that more than varnish! There's a cutting board on the left, a piece of maple with a dark colour from a wood treatment experiment. It has just the colour I'm trying to get on a viola.

On the window sill on the left is a violin back from one of my early instruments. My teacher Otto Erdesz gave me the wood, and I keep it for inspiration. In the middle is a top I took off a violin because it was a little heavy; I'm thinking about re-graduating it and building a new instrument around it. Then there's the back and scroll for my next Ultralight. Under the varnish bench is a grey hairdryer. It's controlled by a foot-switch, so I can dry something quickly while keeping both hands free. Below it, out of the shot, is the compressor for an airbrush. I bought it almost 30 years ago, ruined a few violins with it and haven't used it since, but I'm not yet ready to part with it.

Though I love the peace and quiet of my studio, if I didn't regularly spend time around people, I'd go mad! So there's another room that's also essential to my work life – a local café where I write, do research and design instruments every morning. **Interview by Cecilia Leung**

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