

Competition for violinists a labor of musical love

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For nearly the past year, Charles Liu has been leading a double life.

Besides running his successful violin-making business, Charles W. Liu Fine Violins in Midvale, Liu has been busy planning the prototypical Stradivarius International Violin Competition.

"Charles has really been burning the midnight oil. He's been everything from an accountant to an international diplomat," said Michael Fraughton, one of Liu's colleagues at the shop and director of public relations for the competition.

Fifteen violinists from around the world will compete in the main category, while more than 60 students - almost half of whom hail from Utah - will compete in the youth competition. All winners will get cash prizes and the top winners will get the opportunity to play on genuine Stradivarius violins at the final concert. The event, which runs from June 11 to 14 at the University of Utah's David Gardner Hall, marks the first time a violin-making shop will have sponsored such a competition, Liu said.

The idea for the event arose shortly after Liu first opened his shop in 2004, when violin teachers asked him to host a competition showcasing local students. Due to a lack of funds, Liu had to temporarily place the idea on the back burner, but "it was something I kept in the back of my mind because I thought it was a good idea," he said.

Once business started to flourish, Liu began to explore the option of hosting a competition - but he wanted to expand it beyond the local violin scene.

Fraughton says that Liu is sponsoring the event as a way of giving back to the Salt Lake Valley music community for having supported him over the years.

"Charles could have thrown a party or had a sale, but what he wanted to do would push them to a higher level of artistry for the future," Fraughton said. "He wanted to permanently benefit the community."

Fraughton and Liu hope to not only offer Utahns a chance to compete with some of the world's best violinists in front of world-renowned judges, but also a chance to learn about violins and classical music.

"It's not strictly a violin competition; it's an educational event," Fraughton said, adding that some of the contest judges will be offering both concerts and lectures about the history behind the Stradivarius and Guarneri violins. "Nothing on this scale has ever been done," he added.

Being a benefactor doesn't come without great cost, however. Liu says he has received assistance from the U., which is providing the venue, community members, who have volunteered to take on such tasks as timekeeping and ushering, and from people whose donations have offset printing costs.

Robert Walzel, chairman of the U.'s music department, is happy to help Liu's competition get off the ground by being a co-sponsor.

"It's the kind of event we like to have at Libby [Gardner Hall] because of the intimate setting and the great acoustics," he said. "We're always looking for ways to promote art music, and to bring in that sort of talent really helps put Salt Lake City on the national and international map."

Even with the help he is receiving, Liu estimates he has put up at least \$100,000 of his own money to sponsor the event, with the majority of the cost going to judges' wages and prize money. Although organizing the competition has been physically and financially draining, Liu believes his investment will pay off.

"I'm not thinking about the money. . . it's well worth it to bring more attention to Utah, to make it another center for violin play and making, with a focus on fine Italian instruments," Liu said. "It will work for us

internationally. By the third year, people will fly anywhere to see those instruments."

Liu says he plans to make the competition a permanent fixture in Salt Lake City, and believes it will be able to expand in future years to feature more competitors and showcase more violins. Because the operation is expensive and done completely in-shop, he says it will only be feasible to stage the competition every other year and hopes to host a large festival every fourth competition. He also wants to eventually add a violin-making element to the competition.

Fraughton is amazed by the amount of community support that has surrounded the event.

"There's been this sort of dynamic that people feel that this event is going to be successful and they want to be a part of this first one," he said. "Volunteers are making this event. Sometimes it feels like the event is happening around us."

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