



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff Photographer
Shu Sheng Kot checks his prize bow's curve. The violin maker came in 1991 to the city whose orchestra long ago inspired him in a forbidden recording.

He followed the violin's call

Chinese immigrant crafts instruments for orchestra that inspired him.

By Julia Terruso
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Behind a locked door in Shanghai, Shu Sheng Kot heard a phonograph recording of a piece of music that Chinese authorities had banned as poison: a violin concerto by the Philadelphia Orchestra.

It was 1971, more than midway through the repressive decade of China's Cultural Revolution, and the 19-year-old was enraptured. He decided to teach himself to replicate those tones and bought a \$14 factory-made instrument that did little but frustrate him as his skills improved.

He could do better, he figured. So he dismantled an armchair and a coffee table and, with heaps of resolve, managed to craft a violin just in time for a 20th birthday present to himself.

Thirty-eight years and two local violin shops later,

Kot reached a career milestone: He won his 10th gold medal at the international violin-making competition held last month in Mittenwald, Germany. His latest award was for a viola bow, and he doesn't intend to rest.

"To me, what's important about violin- and bow-making is that our creativity and craftsmanship can always be better," said Kot, who owns Kot's Violins in Bryn Mawr.

These days, Kot makes bows and violins for members of the same orchestra that inspired him with Tchaikovsky's violin concerto.

He is also one of the few people in the world who make both bows and violins (and win awards for them), rather than specialize in one discipline.

"It's incredibly rare," said Christopher Germain, See **VIOLINS** on B11

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who owns a violin shop in Philadelphia and has judged bow- and violin-making competitions.

So is Kot's journey.

When he graduated from high school, he hoped to become a scientist. Instead, the government sent him to Yunnan Province in the country's far southwest to work in rice paddies. Still, he continued to make bows and violins, selling them domestically, and dreamed of studying in Cremona, Italy, home of many of the world's master luthiers.

"I thought if I can learn there, I'll learn from the best," said Kot, who lives with his two sons and wife in Wayne.

Finally, 16 years later, he was granted a student visa to Sydney, Australia, where he sold and repaired violins for that city's orchestra. Within a year, he had earned enough to make the pilgrimage to Cremona, where he apprenticed under two legends, Pierangelo Balzarini and Alessandro Voltini.

"Before," said Kot, "I had just used books — English, British, Chinese — but the best way to learn is from a person, watching their hands work."

Voltini has fond memories of Kot's time in his workshop. It was a productive kinship, but a quiet one. Kot spoke no Italian and Voltini no Chinese.

"To do this work, you need

to be humble," said Voltini, who has been a judge at the international competition for three years. "Shu Sheng Kot is a person that always thinks there's something to learn and never thinks, 'I'm the first and I'm the best, and I never need to learn other things.'"

Kot studied in Italy for a year and came to the United States in 1990. He landed in Philadelphia in 1991 — he'd had his eye on the city since hearing that orchestral recording so many years before — and opened his first shop in the city, operating it for seven years before moving to Bryn Mawr.

Michael Ludwig, a professional violinist and former artistic producer of the Philadelphia Orchestra, purchased a violin bow from Kot 15 years ago. It's one of his favorites.

"Bows are such an important part of violin playing. They're like the paintbrush for the violinist," Ludwig said.

Kot's followers praise his attention to detail, the way he melds pernambuco, a wood native to Brazil, for the bow stick, with strings made of Mongolian horsehair to produce an exquisite tool.

"He's very strict," said Xiang Tong Zhu, who apprenticed under Kot in 1994 and is



a gold-medalist himself in international competitions.

Zhu recalled how Kot had taught him to measure wood density the old way: by dropping pieces into a glass of water.

Kot's sons, Oliver and Grant, attend the Juilliard

School, Oliver for violin and Grant for the cello. Kot made their instruments and bows.

His bows typically fetch about \$7,000 and his violins between \$15,000 and \$20,000. It takes him a week to make a bow and a month to finish a violin.

"The sound of the violin so deeply touches my heart," he said. "I want to make it so more people benefit from such a beautiful sound."

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