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West Seattle flute wizard crafts classic instrument and revives a tradition

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In his secluded West Seattle workshop, Alexander Illitch Eppler makes and restores some of the country's most venerable, highly regarded flutes.

With long, silvery hair and traces of a Slavic accent in his elegant English, Eppler is an unusual figure.

He's a painstaking artisan, producing at most 50 instruments in each of the past 35 years, but turning a profit. He seems cloistered in his subterranean-feeling studio, but he's frequently in touch with other instrument makers worldwide.

"In terms of quality, I'm near the top," said Eppler, 50, in an interview last week. "As far as number, I'm near the bottom. Production, design -- that's really interesting to me. Everything else is tedious beyond belief."

Eppler's specialty is restoring and making wooden orchestral flutes, made of rare Cocus wood, Grenadilla wood or African blackwood.

He also makes flutes of sterling silver and 14-karat gold and turns out wooden head joints, or mouthpieces, for use in metal or wooden flutes.

His flutes cost between \$6,800 and nearly \$30,000. He or one of three assistants makes and assembles every body, screw, rod and spring in each flute. Only the keypads are bought.

Lathe tolerances are as small as two-ten thousandths of an inch -- tough to manage when working on hard metals such as sterling silver and red-orange gold. Wooden bodies are aged for up to 10 years before being bored, burnished, polished and sealed, in stages that may be a year apart.

Entire orchestras have converted to wooden flutes in Europe, though silver models still prevail in this country, Eppler said.



 zoom

Mike Urban / P-I

Alexander Eppler carefully listens for stray mechanical noise while reconditioning a flute at his shop in Seattle on Friday.

"Wooden flutes have greater power, volume, depth and richness," he said. "If you're the first owner, it completely takes on your personality. And I really warn people: If you're a slob, if you play harshly and out of tune, please reform yourself immediately."

Players of Eppler flutes or head joints include musician and conductor Ransom Wilson; Ann Wilson, of Seattle's Heart; and Jim O'Halloran, who plays with Charanga Yerba Buena, a Seattle-based, 12-person traditional Cuban dance band.

"He's dedicated and meticulous, and the sound of his wooden head joint knocks me out," O'Halloran said of Eppler.

Felix Skowronek, a flute professor at the University of Washington, called Eppler "a genius, a wizard with wood," and said Eppler's metal flutes include features not usually found on medium-priced models. Eppler's restoration of wooden flutes, which were popular in the United States until the 1920s, has helped re-establish those instruments in orchestras here, Skowronek said.

Three wooden flutes refurbished by Eppler and equipped with his wooden head joints will be featured in a Dec. 6 concert by the University of Washington Symphony, at Meany Hall.

After training at the Bulgarian State Conservatory, Eppler toured in Russia and the West as a musician playing the Bulgarian kaval, an end-blown flute. He built violins and violas until the mid-1970s, when he met Skowronek and "got very excited by a British wooden flute I was playing," Skowronek recalled.




 zoom

Mike Urban / P-I

Eppler takes a moment from work to listen as apprentice Danijela Djakovic tests a flute at the Seattle shop on Friday. Djakovic, who is also a flute instructor and owns a silver instrument made by Eppler, plays in the Lake Union Civic Orchestra. She calls Eppler a demanding teacher.



 zoom

Mike Urban / P-I

Flute blanks, some 25 years old and

Competition is stiff in the flute biz. At least six American companies now make wooden flutes, up from zero in the 1920s, Skowronek said. Eppler said he often hears from Chinese companies seeking to work with him, build for him or hire him as a consultant. He turns away all such inquiries but fears what they foreshadow.

"The Chinese are already building good midrange flutes. Anyone who thinks they won't crack the high end is terribly misinformed," Eppler said.

He said he realizes his craft is "the worst sort of 19th-century labor-intensive work," yet he intends to persevere.

"If you don't work on the highest level, this becomes very quickly a kind of toaster repair," he said.

Apprentice and flute instructor Danijela Djakovic said Eppler is a demanding teacher.

"He's very strict; he's very picky. Everything has to be perfect," she said approvingly.

Eppler showed off the silver flute he made for Djakovic, who also plays in the Lake Union Civic Orchestra. A shiny label on it is engraved in Cyrillic and English characters.

Squinting at his instrument, he said proudly, "You have to look a long way before you see 'Seattle, U.S.A.' on a flute."



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ON THE NET:

www.epplerflutes.com

www.bulgariankaval.com

www.music.washington.edu/events

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