



Hammond Ashley

Violins

Balancing business and art

by Danielle Rhéaume

Just a short drive from Issaquah's artsy Front Street, past the Bavarian facade of Boehm's Chocolates, Hammond Ashley Violins sits in the cool shadow of tall evergreen trees. From the parking lot, the distant hum of steady I-90 traffic carries softly overhead. Once inside the shop, however, the music of violins swiftly transports visitors into the melodious world of an instrument with a fascinating past and, thanks in part to Hammond Ashley Violins, a promising future in Washington.

Historic instrument

When the violin emerged in northern Italy around 1520, it had descended from a varied and rather chaotic family tree. It was the culmination of a long line of stringed instruments, dating as far back as 3000 B.C., that emerged from the hands of stringed instrument makers, or luthiers, in a continuous process of evolution lasting centuries. More than



Photos by Kim A. Fowler/AWB

Music student Cayley Keogh (above) tries out a cello in Hammond Ashley's Issaquah showroom while her mother listens. General Manager Bryce Van Parys (top) plays a double bass in one of the store's audition rooms.

130 years after violins emerged, the golden age of violin-making began. During this period, the legendary luthiers Amati, Stradivari and Guarneri created the violins that would set the benchmark for all modern luthiers to pursue.

Modern luthiers often transition into their craft after years of experience doing other highly skilled occupations. Such was the case with Hammond Ashley.

Second career

Ashley, who was born in Butte, Mont., in 1901, began making instruments in the mid-1960s after retiring from an engineering career at Boeing. This was after he'd

already worked for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Europe, the Air Force, and operated a custom cabinet shop where he specialized in custom antique furniture reproductions and fine interior woodworking. As a luthier, his clients included Jack Benny and Jerome Kern.

Throughout his life and amid his different careers, Ashley always enjoyed music. He played banjo in a dance band while earning his mechanical engineering degree from Stanford University and picked up the bass while working for the Corps of Engineers in Europe. In the Pacific Northwest, he played bass with Highline Symphony, a group he helped to found in the early 1960s.

Ashley opened his first luthier's shop in 1964 near Sea-Tac International Airport, later moving it to a secluded four-acre plot at Normandy Park. It was there that Ashley built a store and 2,000-square-foot workshop devoted to making violins, violas, cellos and basses.

For the first 30 years, Ashley built his business largely on word-of-mouth referrals. He had what people described as an easy, "give people the benefit of the doubt" attitude. This approach attracted a loyal following of professional and serious amateur musicians. The workshop and store became a destination for people who enjoyed visiting with Ashley while watching him and his luthiers build instruments.

Ashley remained in charge of his business until 1991, when he brought his grandson, Paul Ashley, on as the new manager. At that time, Ashley was ninety years old and finally ready to cut his hours back to just over 40 a week. He died two years later.

New beginning

Not long after Paul took over, Bryce Van Parys, a recent Central Washington University graduate and professional double-bass player, came to work at the shop. Today, Van Parys is general manager and Paul has opened a second Hammond Ashley location in San Diego.

"What we're doing as a company is trying to balance business and art," said Van Parys.

Before a violin arrives in the hands of a student or musician at Hammond Ashley Violins, it has already traveled across the world. Often, violins are built in countries like Romania, where factory production is inexpensive. From Romania, they travel to Germany for additional refinement. Then, they are sent to American wholesalers who sell the violins to Hammond Ashley and other violin-makers. Once Hammond Ashley gets them, they further refine the instruments by setting them up for playing.



Veteran luthier David Wilson (above), who has been with Hammond Ashley since 1973, repairs a crack in a double bass. Such exacting work often requires the use of unique tools, many of which Wilson builds himself. Every violin that Hammond Ashley sells gets a new custom-made bridge (right), hand carved from high-quality European maple.



Shop manager Scott Marshall displays one of the violins that come to Hammond Ashley for refurbishing. This one's worth \$15,000.



Luthier Rick Wickland fine tunes a one-eighth-size violin at his workbench. The instrument is sized for a young child.



Violins line the walls in Hammond Ashley's Issaquah showroom.

According to Van Parys, violins don't come from the factory easy to play. Often, they need work on the playing board or the playing surface, and every instrument requires a new, hand-carved bridge. Hammond Ashley also replaces every tuning post and restrings the instruments with high-quality strings. After that, a musician plays the violin to be sure it's ready for the student. If it's not ready, it goes back to the luthiers for more fine-tuning.

It's important that violin students have instruments that encourage, rather than discourage, the learning process, according to Van Parys. For the student to do well, the violin must fit the student and the student must fit the violin. For that reason, Van Parys discourages people from buying instruments online.

"If you're looking at a picture, you can't hear, touch or feel it. All you can say is 'that looks like a good instrument'—but then it arrives and sounds terrible," he said. "If you want a Fender guitar, you can go to a store and try it out and then order it on the Internet for less money. But in this business, with violins, you just can't do that."

At Hammond Ashley Violins, customers can try one instrument and understand its unique qualities against 10 others in the same price range. Students can also take it out of the store on loan and see if their teacher approves of the instrument. Prices for ready-to-play violins at Hammond Ashley range from \$500 to \$30,000.

Van Parys and the other staff at Hammond Ashley enjoy their relationship with students, teachers and the local community. "We're not a pretentious violin shop like many are. But, at the same time, we are a high-quality and uncompromising full-service violin shop," said Van Parys.

New location

Earlier this year, Hammond Ashley Violins moved from their Normandy Park location to Issaquah, not far from Issaquah's downtown arts center. Their move was inspired by a marketing study that determined that only 1 percent of their customers were within a 10-mile radius around their Normandy Park store, whereas more than 60 percent came from Seattle and the surrounding cities to its east. They also discovered that most of the youth symphony players lived in and around Issaquah. Van Parys attributes this to Issaquah's excellent school music programs.

Moving to Issaquah gave Van Parys an opportunity to redesign Hammond Ashley Violins and offer more services to their clients. One of the first things he did was to design an open, spacious sales floor where instruments line the wall, rather than hang overhead as they did in their former location. He also built a new workshop that better suits the special needs of the luthiers. On the second floor are several instruction and rehearsal spaces for use by students taking music lessons. Having the sales floor, workshop and rehearsal space all under one roof makes their shop more accessible and useful for musicians, teachers, parents and students.

Hammond Ashley's new setting is a natural extension of the unique experience customers enjoyed at the Normandy Park location. It also brings Hammond Ashley Violins even closer to the people who share the musical passion of their founder—a man whose diverse talents and passions helped to carry the incomparably rich legacy of the violin into the 21st century. 🌱