

The fiddle doctor is in

Violin maker Pablo Alfaro, a virtuoso of instrument set-up, has won the confidence of elite musicians. **K1**

Arts & Books

"Every morning I'm always thinking about [that day's] violin, before I make my coffee."

PABLO ALFARO, violin maker and restorer



Fixated on the fiddle

By PIERRE RUHE / pruhe@ajc.com

Making a violin is equal parts music, woodworking, engineering and mythology. It's often said that violin craftsmen — known as luthiers, reflecting their lute-making origins — must hold an obsessive, religious devotion to the art.

The earliest known violins don't survive, but they were depicted in paintings as early as 1508. By around 1700, the instrument reached perfection in the Northern Italian workshops of Stradivari and Guarneri.

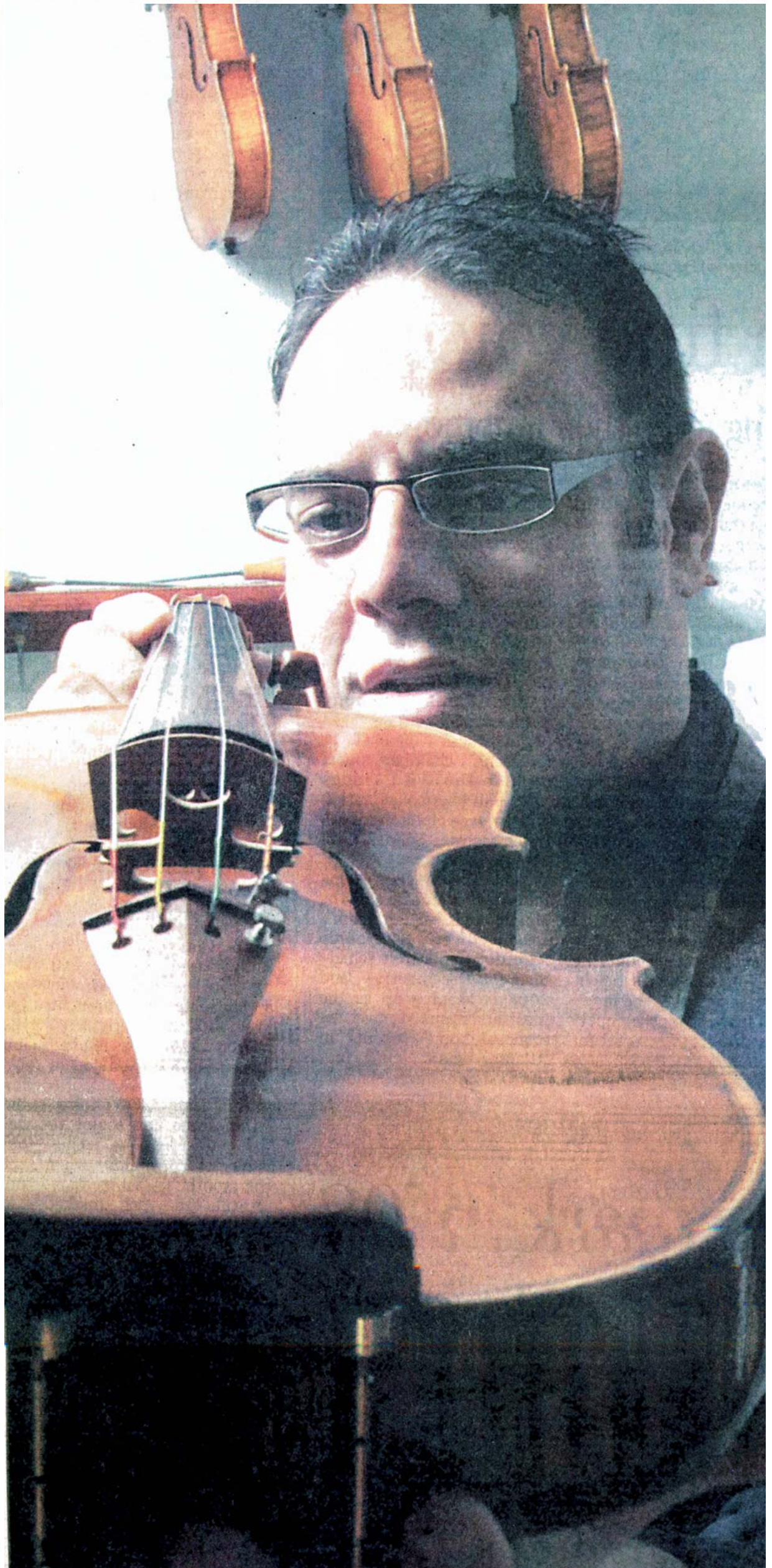
Jump ahead 300 years. Hunched over his workbench in Decatur, Pablo Alfaro has a reputation as the region's most prized luthier. Exactly like his famous forebears, he carves instruments from the choicest blocks of maple and spruce, gouging out each shaving of wood with the discipline and musicality of the violinists who play his creations. He builds just three a year; many have won international prizes.

But Alfaro is energizing the local music scene with a rather less celebrated facet of the trade: repairing and adjusting violins, violas and cellos. His clientele is growing fast and includes top string players and some of the most prominent members of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

Where the art of the violin has been more or less fixed for centuries, Alfaro had to travel far from his Mexico City youth to learn his life's calling.

Meet Atlanta luthier Pablo Alfaro. **K5**

A veteran ASO violinist says metro musicians have waited 30 years for someone with Alfaro's skills.



Sure to get ASO's strings attached

Unifying the tone: Violin maker Pablo Alfaro, a virtuoso of instrument set-up, has won the confidence of elite musicians.

By PIERRE RUHE
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At 14, a precocious violinist studying in Belgium, Pablo Alfaro grew enthralled with a "violin hospital" he visited on a trip to Amsterdam with his uncle, a professional cellist.

A few days later, when his time was better spent practicing, young Pablo instead tried his hand at violin making. It was a boy's play project, using cardboard, glue and tape and tracing the outline of his real violin.

"I felt something I couldn't explain," he remembers of his first visit to the Dutch luthier's shop. "I was so impressed seeing those violins open, their guts on the table. There was a life inside the animal, beyond just the sound it made."

Seated recently at the workbench that dominates the dining room of the modest ranch house where he now lives in Decatur — where a violin shingle hangs from his mailbox — the 43-year-old master violin maker shrugs at the memory.

"Maybe I was in love?" he wonders, his soft voice and lyrical Mexican accent modulating across the words. It sounds like a well-rehearsed answer to a question he's often asked about devoting his life to an obscure profession.

After some 15 years as a professional violinist — all the while tinkering as a hobbyist with instruments of his own and those of friends — he slowly gained hands-on confidence. In his early 30s, he quit his orchestra and enrolled in violin-making school, first in Xalapa, Mexico, then in Salt Lake City.

Increasingly prominent jobs and many violin-making awards later, he moved from Utah to join a shop in Buckhead, only to grow dispirited by servicing an endless stream of low-grade and student instruments.

Now Alfaro, on his own, is set to wield tremendous influence over Atlanta's classical-music sound.

A 'whole body' approach

Not via his own violins, which take him three months to build and start at \$12,000. (A cello takes six months and sells for more than \$24,000.) Instead, he's become the repair and adjustment luthier of choice for the region's elite musicians, with a growing clientele of some 100 violinists, violists and cellists. (He no longer works on double basses, the giant of the orchestra, citing old back injuries.)

"Pablo will change the sound of the Atlanta Symphony," predicts ASO concertmaster Cecylia Arzewski, who's known as perhaps the most finicky musician within a thousand miles.

As a relatively young orchestra with no major conservatory in town, the ASO's string section, at the micro level, is a hodgepodge. Unlike the ASO's rivals, from Philadelphia to San Francisco, there's no unified tonal sheen.

That's where Alfaro's expertise comes in.

Although she's never performed on one of his violins, Arzewski's became hooked on Alfaro's "whole body" approach to what's called the "set-up" — the infinitely subtle adjustments that balance an instrument's parts: the bridge, strings, tailpiece, fingerboard and, inside, the soundpost and bass bar.

"He can make a violin sound its most vibrant, with maximum presence," says Arzewski, who used to fly monthly to New York to have her violin worked on but switched to Alfaro two years ago. "He set up my violin beautifully; it 'speaks' as well



Photos by RENÉE HANNANS HENRY / Staff

Award-winning violin maker and restorer **Pablo Alfaro** sensed a need in the Atlanta market for a high-end violin repair business. He settled in Decatur and soon developed a prestigious clientele. "He can make a violin sound its most vibrant, with maximum presence," ASO concertmaster Cecylia Arzewski said.

now as it has since I bought it in 1977. He's got a rare gift."

Veteran ASO violinist Juan Ramirez, who knew one of Alfaro's uncles in Mexico, says the local music community has waited 30 years for someone with his skills. "Pablo is a very necessary addition," he says.

"He's not a dealer on the side; he's not trying to make a lot of money, but his heart and soul are inside the violins he works on."

'Like a doctor'

As a boy, Alfaro blossomed as a virtuoso violinist, winning competitions in Belgium and in Mexico City, his hometown. At 18, to help support the family after the death of his father, a tailor,

Alfaro worked as the concertmaster of a pops orchestra. A few years later he won a slot in the State of Mexico Symphony Orchestra, one of the country's most respected ensembles.

Despite his infatuation with the art of the luthier, he resisted the all-consuming calling.

"I felt it was a betrayal of my own decision to become the best violinist possible," he says, "and of the tradition of my family."

That lineage goes back five generations. A century ago, his great-grandfather was handpicked by tenor Enrico Caruso, the world's first recording star, to accompany him on tour.

Alfaro's parents and sib-



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PABLO ALFARO
master violin maker (on his first visit to a luthier's shop)

lings had professional-caliber training.

Playing in an orchestra was a decent living for a restless young man who married at 20, fathered two kids, divorced, continually looked for new outlets for his art and, somewhere inside, knew what he really wanted to do.

When he was 30, a close friend and orchestral colleague was found dead, a shock to the community.

"It gave me the courage to ask myself, 'If you had one year to live, what would you do?' Playing in an orchestra wasn't the answer. What I loved was making vio-

lins, caring for them, like a doctor."

From student to master

So he enrolled in luthier school, keeping his fingers nimble by playing in a string quartet. Talented with charcoals and pastels, too, he'd go to the park on weekends and sketch silly caricatures of people out for a promenade, just to bring in extra cash.

At an advanced program in Utah, he was the only student who'd give professional recitals on violins he'd carved himself. They sounded so good, or he played them so well, that dealers would buy them on the spot. After a few years, working seven days a week, he had his own small client base, found a job and received a green card. When he built a sonically matched string quartet of instruments — two violins, viola and cello — that won a prestigious award, his new path seemed assured.

After moving to Atlanta almost five years ago, and urged on by the ASO's Ramirez, he quit Buckhead's Williams Gengakki Violin Shop on good terms, eager to grab the wide-open high-end niche. But he quickly discovered local musicians wouldn't trust an unknown luthier with their priceless fiddles.

Only after Arzewski was desperate, turning to him at last resort while preparing for solo concerto performances with the ASO, did he secure the endorsement of a demanding trend-setter.

From here on out, he says gleefully, it'll be 10-hour days at his bench.

"I don't know if I live in my workshop or work at home, but I know that every morning I'm always thinking about [that day's] violin, before I make my coffee. I find my mind is passionately engaged."