

Music man: Tom Croen of Walnut Creek is one of the world's top violin makers

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Tom Croen's violins, violas and cellos have won awards and other accolades and have been on display at the Fort Mason Museum in San Francisco. Chronicle photo by Lea Suzuki

At any given time, odd noises spew out of Tom Croen's workshop. Chop, chop. Tap. Blink, blink. Loud whistling tones send vibrations throughout his home as the craftsman makes his next violin.

Croen, 45, spends most of his days working inside a spacious room in his Walnut Creek home, carefully crafting instruments that have been sold around the globe. "In the world of violin making, Tom is in the very top 10," said Joan Balter, 50, of Berkeley, who has been repairing, making and selling violins for 28 years. "He's won so many medals. He's one of the few people who actually does acoustical experiments using scientific principles.

"There's a freeness of sound in Tom's instruments," she said. "He's also open to ideas. A lot of makers have fixed thoughts. Tom is flexible, creative and damn good."

A handful of top-notch violin makers can ask for as much as \$30,000 for a new instrument, but making a living as a violin maker isn't easy. It takes many hours to shape the wood, and countless others for the glue and other chemicals to dry.

Croen tries to make about seven instruments each year. An average violin will take him about six weeks to complete.

"It's very difficult for someone to make a good income with their hands," concedes Bill Atwood, a particle astrophysicist who makes violins and has collaborated with Croen. "A lot of what you're doing in violin making is craftsmanship. To make \$100,000 a year in that is really hard."

Croen, who agreed to be interviewed on the condition that the prices of his violins would not be disclosed, lives comfortably and has the luxury of spending time with his wife, Lisa, his son, Robin, 13, and his daughter, Madeline, 10. Lisa Croen, an epidemiologist, does research in child development and autism. Tom and Lisa met in 1982 when she was playing the violin with the Bay Area folk band Westwind. Tom was one of the dancers.

"That's how we got to know each other," said Lisa, who married Tom in 1985. "He worked on my violin, and the next year he was working for a violin repair shop in San Francisco."

Lisa Croen said that her husband's violins are "comfortable, and something about the way he carves them makes them feel and sound good."

Tom Croen has received accolades from The Violin Society of America, judged on workmanship and tone. He was awarded a gold medal in 1984 for violin and viola making and a gold medal in 1986 for making a cello.