

Out of the woods

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Luthier Gwyneth Wilbur spent much of the last year crafting a violin from wood gathered around her Elmsville stomping ground. The result, the Charlotte County Violin, is a gorgeous construction of St. Stephen spruce, Bayside hornbeam and cherry and poplar from the 175-acre woodlot she calls home. Story by Kate Wallace

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Standing in the kitchen of her Elmsville home, Gwyneth Wilbur makes the Charlotte Country Violin sing. Her face is set in concentration, but her body is relaxed as it sways to the music she draws, seemingly effortlessly, from the instrument she has spent much of the last 10 months making. The sound is rich and clean, brightening the room as much as the unseasonably warm November sunshine that streams through the windows.



Wilbur, 47, has been making professional-quality stringed instruments for decades, but never before has the New Brunswick luthier constructed one of local wood. For this extraordinary violin, she took the tenets of a movement that espouses eating locally and applied it to her craft, making the exquisite violin from wood native to Charlotte County, where she lives and works.

"I think the idea came from so many programs and magazine articles about living within 100 miles of your existence," she says. "Can you eat within 100 miles? Can you save on gas by getting around other ways (than driving)?"

She began to think about how far the raw materials of her craft must travel to get to her rural workshop. "When you look at it, the wood is coming from a huge distance away," she says. "That means you have a lot of middlemen and transportation."

James MacKinnon, co-author of *The 100-Mile Diet*, which details his and Alisa Smith's year of eating local, says Wilbur's violin is one of the more interesting projects he has heard about that has been inspired by the best-selling book. Others include a 100-mile suit, a 100-mile house and even a 100-mile herbalist.

"We never thought anyone else would be interested in the 100-mile diet, let alone transferring it into all of these other realms," he says recently from Colorado, laughing.

MacKinnon says that a big part of a sense of local culture comes from working with local materials.

But Wilbur's project transcends that, too.

"You're not just getting a violin that's made of local products," he says. "It has a story, of who collected the wood and who made it. It's more than just an object."

MacKinnon says Wilbur's violin takes him on an "imaginative journey" in which he envisions instrument makers across the country using local materials, and "how interesting it would be to travel from place to place and hear the unique sounds that each place would make."

In September, Wilbur applied for a New Brunswick Arts Board creation grant. In January she received confirmation her proposal had been accepted.

She began experimenting in her home workshop, a tidy room full of quartered wood and tiny tools. Her workspace is bright with natural light and small lamps, with a view onto a huge woodpile that will keep the cabin warm all winter.

Beyond it is the forest that her husband Dave Thompson logs with two teams of Percheron horses.

"We joke about it, that our life consists of wood," she says. "This building, every stick of wood came from this property."

The kind of concerns that motivated Wilbur to make the Charlotte County Violin is nothing new.

"It's just the way we live."

She and Thompson raise pigs for meat, keep chickens for eggs and have a huge garden that yields enough to keep them in vegetables year-round.

"Everything we grow goes into the freezer."

Wilbur delights at how little is wasted: the chickens love table scraps, while the pigs gobble up weeds from the garden.

"There's such a cycle that stays right in your own yard," she says. "I love it."

Inside, a big woodstove keeps the roomy and bright log house warm and heats the hot water tank suspended beside the chimney.

In one corner of Wilbur's workroom, a series of shelves are laden with different kinds of wood, including the imported varieties she typically uses.

The back, sides and neck of a violin are always made of hardwood, typically maple from Europe or the Western United States, as it yields a wood that is less red than local maple.

"You're looking for a nice flame," she says, holding out a chunk of raw maple, pointing out the gradations in colour that dance - like a flame - across the grain.

"It's very pretty in the instrument."

For this project, she replaced imported maple with poplar, which she calls an under-utilized hardwood.

"Poplar is one of these woods that no one has any use for. It's a junk wood."

Around two years ago, Wilbur had come across a big poplar about 35 or 40 years old on their 175-acre woodlot.

"Before I even had the idea of applying for the grant, I said, 'Let's cut down this tree.'"

"My husband went out with the horses and dragged it home."

She was excited by the poplar's flame, which is subtler than a maple's.

"I was surprised at how pretty it was," she says. "It's a very white wood, but it has a lot going for it. I was pleasantly surprised."

The fingerboard is normally made from ebony, generally from India. For the chinrest, tailpiece and pegs she usually uses rosewood that comes from India or Brazil, "a wood that's somewhat exploited," she says. "You never know who is getting it. It is almost an endangered species."

For the Charlotte County Violin, she replaced the ebony with hornbeam, an increasingly scarce dense

local wood, that came off a property in Bayside, and substituted rosewood with cherry that came off their property.

As with any experiment, there were adaptations required. Instead of the pegs she normally orders and just has to file the tips down to fit in peg holes, Wilbur had to make pegs by hand.

"They took days."

The front of the instrument is made of spruce. Instead of the imported spruce she typically uses, including wood from an American instrument-maker who owns property in Italy's Dolomite Mountains, she used a piece of timber she had tucked away 15 years ago that had come off of the St. Stephen golf course.

She also used that local spruce for the inside blocks that give the instrument structural support.

The local spruce had quite a nice, tight grain, she says, but she worried about the sap-holes that appear as curved brown slivers.

"I was wondering if I was going to run into them," she says. "Sure enough, I did."

She fretted over the imperfections, wondering if she should start over. Then she realized that some of the most celebrated violins ever made had the same sort of tiny flaws.

"When I look back at the masters' work, at Strad's work and Guarneri's work, a lot of the wood wasn't perfect. They used a lot of defective wood," she says, opening up an illustrated textbook of famous violins, "whereas we don't accept that in our instruments."

"And yet these instruments are worth millions."

She simply filled them in with a tiny sliver of spruce.

"It just becomes part of the character of the instrument," she says. "After a while you don't even notice it, it's just part of who it is."

The modern-day quest for a flawless finish could be a result of increasing competition among instrument-makers, she says.

Considering Wilbur's training, it's not surprising that the tiny defect bothered her so.

"When I was 15, I decided I wanted to be a violin-maker," she says.

She grew up in Fredericton, where her father taught at Fredericton High School.

"Then he got this bright idea to write a book about the Acadians," she says. When she was in Grade 2, the family moved to Caraquet.

"None of us spoke a word of French. We were the only English family in town.

"We had to learn French very fast, and we did. Within three months we were bilingual."

In the summer, she and her sister would attend music camp at Mount Allison University in Sackville, where she first learned violin. The instructors had lined the kids up and randomly handed them instruments; when Wilbur's sister got a violin, she piped up that she wanted one, too.

Once a year, they'd drive to Bathurst and jump on the train for Sackville for a private lesson and to get material for the rest of the year.

When she was in Grade 7, her father got a job teaching Canadian history at Concordia University in Montreal. Right next door to his building was one of the oldest violin repair shops in the city. With three

kids who played stringed instruments, her father was always in there, getting a violin repaired.

One day he mentioned that his daughter was interested in woodworking. The proprietor, Mr. Fogl, invited her to come to the shop.

"He was my mentor," she says. "I'd go in there and they'd plunk me down and I'd just sit there and watch them work."

She took a course through Concordia University's Baroque music program, where her older sister was enrolled as a baroque viola student, when she was about 16.

"That was the first time I put my hand to it," she says. "There was something about working with wood that just felt right. I was so comfortable. I loved the look of it, I loved the feel. It just felt right."

She tried her hand at other woodworking projects, including two sturdy armchairs she made as a teen that are in her kitchen today.

After she completed high school in Montreal, she went to Salt Lake City to attend one of only two violin-making programs in North America.

"That was gruelling," she says. "To find out how accurately you have to work, how often you have to reject something because of a 1/4 millimetre."

She spent three weeks making her first set of blocks, those wooden cubes that go inside the instrument to give it structural strength.

"Eventually you get a feel for your tools and an eye for perfection."

She uses calipers that can measure a fraction of a millimetre, and tiny finger planes that remove the merest whispers of wood.

She doesn't use sandpaper except, perhaps, just before varnishing a finished instrument. "When you think about it, it's sand glued to paper and those little bits of grit do come off," she says. Plus, it is harder to control than the tiny instruments she uses.

Being a luthier is to be in a constant state of becoming, she says.

"You're never done studying, there is always something you have never mastered."

After spending what would amount to more than three full-time months on the Charlotte County Violin, it looked good. But, as with any instrument, there is a bigger test than appearance: what would it sound like?

Because poplar is lighter than maple, Wilbur had compensated by adding two-tenths of a millimetre to the back and sides; she also gave the back of the instrument a little more arch, "so it wouldn't have a heavy, muffled sound." The body cavity is the same size as any other violin she's made with maple.

She was delighted when she first played it.

"It projects very nicely. It is bright and even," she says.

Like all of her instruments, "it has a voice of its own."

When she goes to a concert, she analyzes the instruments, she says. "I am very critical and analytical, especially with the violin, with how it projects and how it sounds."

She likes to work with musicians, to hear them play her instrument and get their feedback.

"You can do quite a bit to get it to sound right," she says. The sound-post on the inside of the

instrument, which transmits vibrations from the top into the back, can be tinkered with. A different set of strings can make a big difference, too.

Raymond McLain, a Kentucky-born musician who has played bluegrass and Appalachian music around the world, including numerous performances at the Grand Ole Opry, knows of Wilbur's latest project, her Charlotte County Violin.

"I can hardly wait to see it and hear it," he says recently from his office in Johnson City, Tenn., where he directs the bluegrass and country music program at East Tennessee University, his Kentucky lilt rolling like the hills around him.

He first met Wilbur in 2006, after a show he played in St. Andrews. She had noticed his fiddle needed some repairs, and told him she could fix it. He was booked to leave the next day, so she offered to take it home that night, fix it, and return it in the morning.

I thought, 'That's very generous of you, but a person needs to sleep, too.'"

Wilbur insisted, and she returned the next day with his repaired fiddle, as well as a violin she had made that she invited him to play.

"I loved what she did to my fiddle and I love my fiddle, but when I played hers, it was just like there was a beautiful halo around the instrument. It sounded so warm and rich," McLain says. "I felt like I couldn't stop playing it."

He wasn't in the market for a new instrument, though, so Wilbur offered to loan it to him. Reluctant at first, she convinced him to take it.

"Well, naturally, I had it about a week before I called her and said, 'OK. I want it,'" he says. "I have several other instruments, but I can't seem to play any of them."

McLain plays his Gwyneth Wilbur violin every day and has toured with it across North America and to parts of Asia.

Wilbur claims she isn't a great salesperson, but "everything I've ever made, I've sold. They all have found a home.

"It is always interesting how an instrument finds its owner or how an owner finds its instrument."

She makes about three instruments a year, which go for between \$6,000 and \$10,000. She also does repair and restoration work that is the "bread and butter" of her trade, which takes up about three months a year, and does contract work for the province's Department of Education, assessing students' proficiency in conversational French.

Like any of her instruments, the Charlotte Country Violin is for sale - and it is built to last.

"It will outlive all of us. To me, that's priceless."

Kate Wallace covers the arts for the Telegraph-Journal and is a frequent contributor to Salon.