

From tree to timbre

This is the story of one man, one tree, and nearly 400 violins.

The man's name is Hratch Armenious Tchalkouchian, and his birth certificate will tell you that he was born on May 1, 1944, but this detail of fate is merely a footnote to the true chronology of his life.

Reckoned by the measure of time that matters to him most — in other words, violin time — the Armenian native effectively entered this world late on the first day of winter in the year 1967.

On a moonless December night, Tchalkouchian and five helpers climbed up into the Caucasus Mountains above the Black Sea, somewhere north of the Armenian capital of Yerevan.

At the time, Tchalkouchian was in search of a tree, and not just any tree, but a perfectly configured maple.

At a height of 1,300 metres above sea level, the young man found what he was seeking and pulled out an axe. He and his comrades spent the next four days lugging the timber down the mountainside, piece by piece — and Tchalkouchian's life, in violin time, had begun.

"Some people talk about the discovery of the wheel," he says. "I prefer to talk about the discovery of the violin."

Almost four decades have elapsed since that winter night, and Tchalkouchian lives in a different country now.

He is a resident of Willowdale in the north end of Toronto, where he dwells along with his wife, Goar, on a wide street of stolid bungalows near a huge brace of hydroelectric towers. He is the father of two, the grandfather of three.

"I am Canadian now," he says. "Canada is my country."

But violins are his life. Sixty years old, with just a few stubborn flecks of black in his pewter-grey hair, Tchalkouchian continues to ply an age-old craft.

He is a violin-maker — a luthier — one of only a handful of people in Canada who make their living by a kind of aural alchemy, turning wood into song.

In Tchalkouchian's case, he owes nearly a lifetime's worth of fine musical instruments to the fibre of just one tree, the same majestic European maple that he cut down on that moonless night above the Black Sea some 400 violins ago. "Until this day," he says in his energetic if somewhat laboured English, "I am using only that wood."

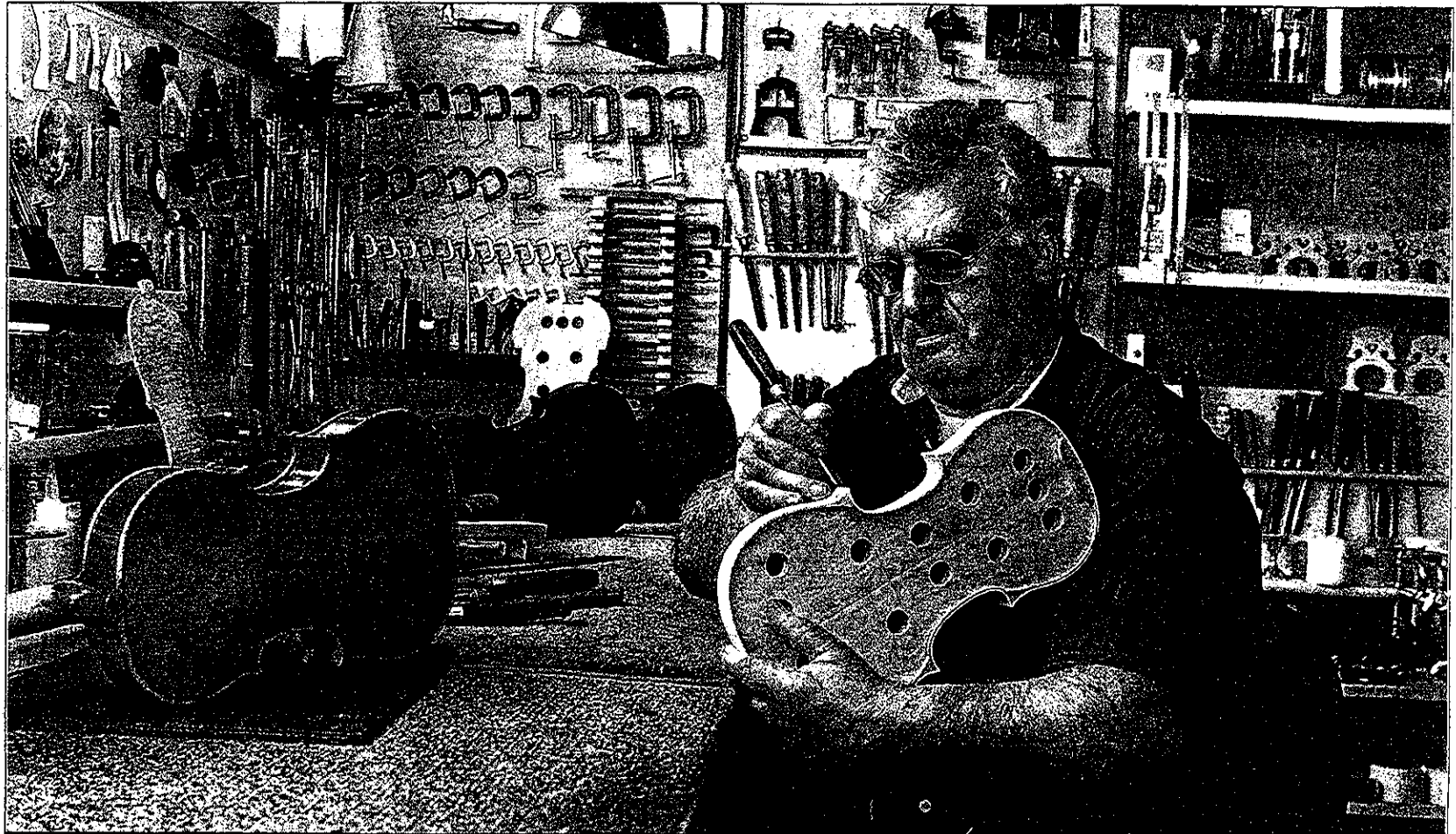
Tchalkouchian arrived in Canada in 1995, along with his wife, a son, and a daughter — and that wasn't all. In addition to his family and his precious supply of European maple, he also brought with him certain other materials that figure in the painstaking and somewhat arcane craft of fashioning beautiful handmade violins — crushed carmine beetles, dark tree roots, dried apricots, and other commodities the luthier won't even name.

But it is the wood that matters most — and, oh, how Hratch Armenious Tchalkouchian cherishes his timber.

To ensure that an accident or a fire won't destroy his entire stock, he keeps his store of maple in five caches scattered around Toronto, all stacked in neat piles of small, blond planks.

You might suppose, in this country of all countries, that Tchalkouchian would deign to avail himself of the local lumber

Canadian among select few who make their living through aural alchemy, turning wood into song
Armenian maple helps make violins sing but magic behind the shine is top secret, writes Oakland Ross



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR

Hratch Armenious Tchalkouchian found his calling in the Caucasus Mountains above the Black Sea. In December of 1967, somewhere north of the Armenian capital of Yerevan, he cut down the perfect tree, which he used to fashion his first violin. Since then he's made nearly 400 of his highly regarded instruments from the same tree.

Magic of maple

Violin makers are notoriously fussy about the wood they use, especially the maple.

And no wonder. Not all of a violin is composed of maple, but most of it is — the back, the ribbing, the neck and the scroll.

Other parts of the instrument require different woods — spruce for the top, narrow strips of willow for the internal

lining, ebony for the finger-

board and pegs, and rosewood or ebony for the chin rest.

For the tops of his instruments, Hratch Tchalkouchian once relied exclusively upon a supply of spruce he obtained from the Carpathian Mountains in Ukraine. Now, however, he is even happier with Canadian spruce from British Columbia.

"It is excellent wood," he says. "Very even."

But it is maple that constitutes the soul of a violin, and

Tchalkouchian has an almost spiritual attachment to the supply of wood he culled from a single tree high in the Caucasus nearly four decades ago, the same tree that has served as the raw material for some 400 of his violins.

It was vital that the tree be found at a high altitude, he says, for such plants grow slowly and their wood is therefore particularly dense. By cutting the maple in winter, Tchalkouchian ensured that the tree

would be slumbering. This, too, affects the quality of its wood.

Finally, it was essential that the maple be harvested on a moonless night. Without the moon's gravitational pull, he says, the sap recedes through the fibres of the tree, much as ocean waters ebb in the absence of the moon. Such wood is drier and therefore lighter — or so some luthiers believe.

And belief is the essence of art.

ties, the pigment is composed primarily of the aforementioned carmine beetles, tree roots and dried apricots. Tchalkouchian identifies the ingredients without hesitation.

Inquire about his varnish, however, and he suddenly turns coy. "I can tell you about everything except the varnish," he says. "Every violin-maker has his own varnish. I never tell."

Never mind. It's the music that matters, and just now there is music to be heard.

Although Tchalkouchian insists that he himself is an indifferent violinist, the same cannot be said of his daughter-in-law.

She is Gayane Bareghamyan, a musician to be reckoned with. She teaches the instrument and also plays first violin in the North York Symphony.

A striking, dark-haired woman, dressed now in a blouse and blue jeans, she takes up a position in her father-in-law's office and showroom, the walls decked with Armenian violins.

She settles one of these fine instruments between her chin and the blade of her left shoulder. She raises her bow.

"Bach Sonata Number 1," she says. "First movement. Adagio."

The ensuing minutes stream past in pure violin time, and they are heaven.

It is fair to say that no European maple, thrumming in an autumn wind high in the Caucasus Mountains above the Black Sea, ever dreamed of someday sounding like this.

"There is no limit to a violin's beauty," says Tchalkouchian, who sways in his chair, a violin balanced in his lap, his eyes closed, a blissful expression on his face. He may not play his violins much, but he surely knows how to build them. "I am going to die," he vows, "with a chisel and a gouge in my hands."

supply, especially the portion of it known as *Acer saccharum*, or sugar maple. But no.

"When I think of Canada, I think of maple," he says. "It is our emblem. But I haven't found good maple here. It's a little bit heavy."

And so Tchalkouchian conjures his finely tempered violins from the flesh of a single European tree.

"I never tire of violins," he says. "When I go to bed, I am thinking about the violin I will be working on tomorrow. Every violin-maker is like that."

Nowadays, Tchalkouchian uses his middle name to identify his handiwork, and an Armenian violin compares favourably with some of the best instruments being fashioned anywhere in the world.

If you were thinking of purchasing a new Armenian, you had better be prepared to absorb an additional dent of between \$12,000 and \$15,000 on your next bank statement.

This may seem like a lot of money — and it is — but handmade violins built by masters of the craft are not pennywhistles.

The most coveted violins can be stunningly expensive, partic-

ularly antique instruments fashioned in France, Germany or Italy by illustrious luthiers of centuries past.

The most revered of the species undoubtedly are Stradivarius violins, made by Antonio Stradivari of Cremona, Italy, who lived from 1644 to 1737.

When a Strad finds its way to auction these days, it might well fetch a price of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of dollars. But Stradivarius violins are rarely offered for sale.

A more modest yet worthy instrument — say, a good French violin from the late 19th century — might change hands for \$50,000 or more. This is the sort of investment a hard-working professional violinist pretty much takes for granted, generally accompanied by a second mortgage on the family home.

Still, as newly constructed instruments go, Armenian violins are well respected and command impressive prices.

"My violins now are all over the world," Tchalkouchian says. "Every continent has my violins. A lot of Canadians are playing my violins."

Other musicians are playing instruments fashioned by

Tchalkouchian's son, Artak, who is 29 and plans on making a living as a luthier, too, even if he does have a university degree in computer science. "I think about it every day," says Artak. "It is waiting to blossom."

Already, Artak has sold many of his own violins, albeit at more restrained prices than those paid for the violins crafted by his mentor and parent.

The older man says he became a luthier by degrees.

In his late teens, Hratch Tchalkouchian was playing violin in a student chamber orchestra in Yerevan. One day, the bridge broke — that is, the slender wooden device that raises the strings above the fingerboard.

"I made a new bridge," he says. "I thought, okay. Next, I read a little about violin making. I thought, okay."

Later, he had to fashion a new chin rest for his violin, and his life has unfolded from there.

Initially, Tchalkouchian served as his own teacher and copied techniques used in the French school of violin making, one of three broad tendencies in the luthier's art. The others are the German school and the Italian or Cremonese school.