

Even nonplayers admire passion with which designer makes his stand for music

• Gary Anderson's love of music has found expression in his latest product: a stylishly crafted wood-and-brass music stand.

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In his 20s, Gary Anderson earned a meager living playing clarinet and tenor sax in local dance bands.

In his 30s and 40s, he kept body and saxophone together with the proceeds from several energy-related products he helped develop.

Now in his 50s, Anderson has combined his musical roots and inventive impulses to design a product that's generating a chorus of praise — if not yet an eye-fetching stack of greenbacks — around the world.

Anderson, 57, owns Minneapolis-based Lotus Design. It makes the Anderson Music Stand, which combines stylish good looks with simple adjustments and surprising portability.

Thanks to some ingenious design, the 4-foot-10-inch stand with the wide wooden music rack, sturdy wooden legs and telescoping metal shaft folds in seconds to fit into a padded bag that is 20 inches long and 5 inches in diameter.

"I've been doing this for 20 years, and I've never seen a stand I wanted to sell until now," said John Waddle, a St. Paul violin maker and retailer of stringed instruments. "It's nice to see someone making something here in the U.S. with such passion."

Waddle isn't the only inhabitant of the music world to rhapsodize about the stand.

"Your work is ... made with love and golden hands," wrote Wilfried Armbrecht, a German operatic teacher. Added harpist Pascale Dorchain in a missive from Holland: "I'm so proud of my new music stand."

Clea Galhano, who plays recorder in the local Belladonna Baroque Quartet, agrees: The Anderson Music Stands "are so steady, beautiful and elegant, and they help to enhance the music," she wrote.

What we've got here, in short, is a musician's answer to music stands that are not portable and, in many cases, not attractive. And leave us not even discuss those portable wire stands I remember from high school band -- gadgets so rickety that they would topple at the drop of a clarinet reed.



In fact, not all of Anderson's clients are musicians: Several customers use them as so-called "functional furniture," set up in homes or studios to display paintings or books.

So, if compliments were currency, Anderson would be a wealthy gent, indeed. Alas, there has been one obstacle to financial success: the price.

When Anderson introduced the stand in mid-2003, it carried a retail price of about \$400, the result of some 20 custom-designed parts. Thus, his total sales have barely topped \$100,000 since the start-up, mostly via word-of-mouth and orders on his website.

But there's light at the end of the orchestra pit: Thanks to some design modifications, Anderson managed in December to trim the retail price to about \$300. That still sounds like sticker shock to me, but apparently it struck a chord with the potential market.

Sales since then have accounted for about 20 percent of the three-year total -- with no promotion beyond Anderson's website. In fact, because he and a part-time employee do all the finishing and assembly in his garage shop, the sales spurt has about swamped their ability to fill orders.

"I can't do any marketing at all until I can find a workshop with the equipment and skills to do all the work," Anderson said. The less appealing alternative is to invest about \$100,000 to equip his own shop to produce the wooden parts.

In either case, we're talking a shop equipped with computer numerical controlled (CNC) equipment operated by folks who know how to use it.

"It's not as simple as just finding a good cabinetmaker," said Anderson, who labored as one several decades ago. "We're dealing with precision parts like machinists use."

He might have found the answer, however, with a small woodworking shop in outstate Minnesota that is equipped with a CNC router and run by an experienced hand. Anderson hopes to have a deal signed by the end of the summer.

Anderson's product brainstorming began in 1982, when he was an energy auditor for the city of St. Paul and developed a plastic seal to cut off air leaks at the pulley openings of double-hung windows.

At the peak in the late 1980s, the device was generating about \$80,000 a year. And even now, six years after the patent ran out, he's still selling about \$20,000 worth a year.

Also in the early 1980s, Anderson and Gary Nelson, an engineer with the Minnesota Energy Office, developed the Minneapolis Blower Door, a highly efficient fan system that seals into a doorway and sucks air out of a building to measure airtightness and locate leaks.

The two started the Energy Conservatory, a Minneapolis company that still markets the Blower Door and several related products. Anderson sold out to his partner in 1997 with an agreement that gave him a small percentage of sales over an extended period.

That helped pay the bills while he worked on other product ideas, most notably the music stand. Now, if he can just figure out a way to boost production enough to start promoting it, Anderson reckons it has a sizable potential, never mind the cost.

Waddle, the St. Paul violin maker, figures cost won't be that much of a factor.

The Anderson Music Stand "is beautifully designed and very well made," he said. "Even at \$300 or \$400, I figure he's giving them away."