

1000 songs in your pocket, batteries not required

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Reporter: Garry Maddox



Sound idea ... John Johnston in his workshop with one of his pocket violins.
Photo: *James Brickwood*

A DISH of rabbit-skin glue is simmering on the bench. The violin maker John Johnston has an emergency job: fixing a cracked cello before a performance in 24 hours.

All around him are signs of his craft: a rack of bows, reference books, sheet music, instrument cases, tiny thumb planes, even a picture of Albert Einstein cheerfully playing a violin.

One of half a dozen violin makers in Australia, Mr Johnston produces about eight instruments a year. But lately he has a new interest.

The Rozelle craftsman wants to revive the long-forgotten pochette, or pocket violin, for the way they were once carried around between performances. Used by minstrels and dancing masters who taught minuets in private homes, they were popular for 200 years before falling out of favour around 1800.

"With the romantic classical movement, it just became a bit old-fashioned," Mr Johnston says. "But it has a lovely sound."

Compared to a violin, a pochette is a limited instrument. A narrower range and lower volume make it little value to an orchestra. But Mr Johnston believes it is worth reviving as a teaching instrument for children - costing about half the price of a violin at \$6000 to \$7000 - and for what it can offer in world music, folk and rock. Because it is tucked into the armpit rather than under the chin, the pochette allows a violinist to sing.

Mr Johnston's obscure interest started when he saw a pochette in London. After measuring various examples, he has designed and produced two with distinctive carved heads.

"I've always been drawn to the appearance," Mr Johnston says. "It has personality."

The test will come when Mr Johnston takes one of his pochettes to an exhibition and trade fair in Italy next month. He hopes other makers and violinists see its potential and give the pocket violin a new currency.

The violinist Nicole Forsyth, who plays with the Ironwood Chamber Ensemble and Sydney Symphony and teaches at the Conservatorium of Music, agrees that the pochette has a place in popular music.

"There are folk fiddlers, for instance, who play Irish and Scottish and bluegrass music who like using them when they're travelling because they're so incredibly portable," she says.