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### Macon-born violinist makes a \$3.5 million dream deal

*Pierre Ruhe; Staff*

After the deal-making was completed Monday at a Wall Street law firm, **Robert McDuffie** could finally sleep easier. The Macon-born violinist, who's building a major international career and appeared as soloist with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra most recently in October, finessed a deal worth \$3.5 million so he could play his dream instrument: a Guarneri del Gesu violin named the Ladenburg, made in 1735 in Cremona, Italy.

McDuffie, 42, of New York first played the instrument in August 1995. Celebrated violinist Joshua Bell, a friend, came along to a sale of rare violins to give advice. "We all agreed right there that this was the instrument for me," McDuffie says. "It had a lot of power and richness but also a sweetness at the top range. I felt it could be as natural as possible for me to produce my own sound. "And then I had to worry how the hell I was going to pay for it."

The owner, Dietmar Machold of Machold Rare Violins in New York, was asking \$3.5 million, well beyond McDuffie's means, but loaned the instrument to him while he searched for funds. "I was in love with this special violin, but I wasn't stupid," the violinist said Tuesday. "I wasn't going to mortgage my life away."

His solution took plenty of business savvy and all of his Georgia-born charm. He called together friends, family and a couple of fans plus a few people intrigued by the investment possibilities -- 16 investors in all -- and formed a limited partnership called 1735 del Gesu Partners LP, created for one purpose: to buy the violin for McDuffie's use.

Monday, the partnership signed the papers that legally transferred ownership. McDuffie also signed a 25-year lease to play, care for and insure the violin. When the lease is up, McDuffie will be 65, and the partnership will presumably sell the instrument for a sizable profit. At least that's the plan.

Each share cost \$100,000. If the rare-violin market remains strong, the \$3.5 million investment could appreciate up to 10 percent per year. In 2024, the partnership stands to make as much as \$25.7 million. Plus they help McDuffie with his career.

In addition to maintaining a healthy performance schedule -- he's on tour some 20 to 30 weeks a year -- this adventure turned him, in effect, into director of development for **Robert McDuffie Inc.**

"Except for one New York investor, everyone knew me and was investing in me and in my career," he says, "in addition to investing in the partnership."

The group of 16 includes McDuffie and his wife, Camille, a book publicist and native Atlantan, and her family, headed by Mack Taylor, a retired real estate developer.

Several friends from New York were attracted by the partnership offer, as were a couple from Hawkinsville in south central Georgia, longtime fans who wish to remain anonymous. So was Paul Tagliabue, another old friend and commissioner of the National Football League. He hosted several New York gatherings where McDuffie made his pitch. Mike Mills, bassist for the Athens-based rock group R.E.M. and McDuffie's childhood friend, eventually signed up, too. One investor remains anonymous but chipped in \$1 million, the largest share of the deal.

Four years ago, just after he first played on the Ladenburg violin -- named after the powerful German family that owned it in the 19th century -- McDuffie recorded an essay for National Public Radio. He told of meeting his musical soulmate and the problem of getting anyone help him pay for "a \$3.5 million piece of wood."

His first approach was to a family friend, James B. Williams, then chairman of SunTrust Banks, hoping the bank would buy the instrument outright and let him promote SunTrust the world over. It was the first of many rejections.

"Back then I thought it would be so easy," McDuffie says. "I was pretty naive. For a while after (those rejections),

everything was all up in the air, until some non-musician friends threw up the idea of a limited partnership."

That proved the winning approach. Still, it was hard work. He can joke now that long-time friends would look the other way when he approached, knowing he would hit them up to invest.

"There was a lot of anxiety in the process," says Camille McDuffie. "There were awful times when we weren't sure it was going to happen."

But all that's behind him. He's soaring with the del Gesu tucked under his chin and has promised to perform two private concerts a year for his investors.

"I'm kind of numb right now at how hard it's been," McDuffie says. "Now I want to channel the energy I've spent in acquiring this fiddle into musical projects. I don't have to go to bed every night worried that I might not get it."

Photo: **Robert McDuffie** assembled an investment partnership that included several Georgians so he could acquire a rare violin made in 1735. / NANCY SIESEL / New York Times

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