

Meet Brendan Townsend: many hats, one baton

By María Eugenia Guerra

I caught up with cellist and conductor Brendan Townsend, a native of Cork, Ireland, in the foyer of the Guadalupe and Lilia Martinez Fine Arts Center at Laredo Community College. We spoke of his plans for the Laredo Philharmonic Orchestra and the unique collaboration between Texas A&M International University, Laredo Community College, and the Philharmonic, a collaboration that puts him at the heart of orchestra instruction and performance in Laredo. Townsend comes to Laredo from Tennessee Tech in Cookfield where he taught music and conducted the Bryan Symphony Orchestra.

LareDOS: Are you daunted by the work ahead -- that of teaching at Laredo Community College and Texas A&M International University while directing and leading the Laredo Philharmonic Orchestra?

Townsend: No, I find it kind of exciting. It's easier than being a freelance musician as I have been for some years in my life, years in which you have to have multiple schedules with multiple orchestras. The schedule I have now undertaken is not terribly unusual. Each institution has its own unique style and flavor, and I will work within the bounds of each, keeping their goals in mind.

LareDOS: What is your goal at each school?

Townsend: To make a better music program. Each school serves slightly different students, and I am learning who they are. We are working musically with students from a very young age and preparing them for a career in music through a full time music degree.

LareDOS: What is your coursework like? Do you have a template for teaching music?

Townsend: I teach an orchestra class at each school and private cello at each school. I'm using the same template that my cello teacher used which I hated, but it works. Orchestra is slightly different. At TAMIU, the orchestra students are music majors and community members, and at LCC students may be music majors or minors. The University orchestra is the preparatory for the Philharmonic. It's a pro-



Brendan Townsend conducts the TAMIU orchestra at rehearsal.

gression.

LareDOS: Have you come across talent in the six weeks that you have been here?

Townsend: Very much so. I've spent time at Nixon High School and at the magnet school. I was blown away by the orchestra at Nixon High School. Mr. Valenciano has spent a great deal of time working with those kids. They trust him, and that is evident in the strong relationship he has built with his students. I have found that students at both TAMIU and LCC have much promise. We have middle school and high school students playing with the LCC orchestra.

LareDOS: Are you anticipating an overnight success here building up the orchestras of both schools while revitalizing and conducting the Laredo Philharmonic Orchestra?

Townsend: I'd like to reach my goals as quickly as possible. The city is ripe for what we are undertaking. There has been a burning desire to have these cultural relationships between institutions, but for whatever reason, things remained separate. My position was created as a full time one so that I can focus on serving the needs of the community and serve the needs of the students. Eventually we will establish a youth orchestra. We've laid the groundwork for that.

LareDOS: What did you know about the music community in Laredo before taking this job?

Townsend: I have a very close friend here, Jennifer Clark. Before I ever even applied for the position, I

had met some of the people who would be my colleagues here. I came here with a clear idea of the mission and the job. I felt I was the right person. I have the right set of skills to do this. Over the years the jobs I have had have prepared me for this job with diplomacy, musicianship, directing a youth orchestra, and recruiting them for orchestra.

LareDOS: What is your experience as a conductor?

Townsend: I started conducting professionally when I was 17 years old. My father was a conductor of choirs and amateur opera in Cork. I thought the guy with the white stick had the power, that everyone stopped and started when he waved the stick. The power actually lies in the musician and the relationship between the musician and the conductor. Your job as conductor is to facilitate musicians to play at their highest level, including calling to their attention their mistakes. The conductor facilitates collaboration. Sometimes when the group psyche comes together it's an incredible feeling for the musician, the conductor, and the audience.

LareDOS: What's in store for the performance of the Philharmonic under your direction?

Townsend: We will be taking a musical tour around the world. We start in the US and we end up back

Continued Page 15

From page 14

in Laredo. We will visit Ireland, England, Scandinavia, Russia, France, Germany Austria, Spain and Bohemia, the Czech republic, Poland. And specifically we will end up back in Laredo. The music of the 'Streets of Laredo' is an old Irish tune. Look forward to hearing that.

That's our musical journey. We will be doing the programming differently. All of the pieces are accessible, not unlike some of the melodies on a Nokia cell phone. At our first performance you will hear variations on 'America the Beautiful,' 'New York New York,' 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow,' and a medley of tunes from *Oklahoma*. This is not typical fare for the Philharmonic, this city's orchestra.

LareDOS: What are you doing in the community to generate interest in the Philharmonic Orchestra?

Townsend: There used to be a large body of people who attended the Philharmonic's performances. We want those people to know we would like them to come back as well as others in the community who love music. And we've changed the programming.

LareDOS: When is the Laredo Philharmonic Orchestra's first rehearsal for the season?

Townsend: November 22, the day before our first performance. This is a professional orchestra. There are few who are not full time musicians. Even if they are not, they have enough experience and they know what it takes to come to rehearsal. Many of them are band directors and musicians. We supplement with students from LCC and TAMIU, and we hire in some of the strings. Wind and brass musicians are all Laredoans.

LareDOS: Laredo must seem another world compared to Cork. Tell us about the differences.

Townsend: There are actually great similarities in the personalities of the people of both places. There is an openness here that I found doesn't exist in other parts of the United States. It is much like the very welcoming nature of the Irish people. Of course the landscape is very different. Everything is bigger and farther away. It hasn't been like culture shock, however, because I have had a slow introduction to the US. I lived in the Netherlands for seven years and worked on a US military base. I have slowly been assim-

ilated. Working in San Antonio was an acclimation to the particularly unique culture of Laredo. Cork, like Laredo, is a city of about 200,000. It's a major port and has one of the biggest harbors in Europe. It is home to the computer industry, to Apple's European headquarters, and to a lot of farming.

LareDOS: How did you come to music?

Townsend: As a youngster, it was inescapable. It was all around me. My father was a musician and so was my mother. My parents were very keen that we would have a strong love of music.

LareDOS: When did you understand what music meant to you?

Townsend: I understood that I loved it when I was 10 or 11. I always said I would be a conductor. My parents expected the whim to pass. My brother tells me he knew I would go on to be a conductor. My parents tried to persuade us to have music as a phenomenal hobby rather than a career. My mother had designs on me becoming an accountant, my brother a teacher, and my other brother a lawyer. My mother, Grainne, is a pianist. My father, Declan, played violin and viola, but his love was conducting. I'm the fourth generation of Townsend conductors. I'm the first one, however, that is making a living conducting.

I'm very grateful that my parents never pressured us. They didn't want us to be professional musicians. They could have pushed us harder, but they made sure the choices about music were ours. Today kids are pushed too hard, when what they really need is to be kids. We were. We climbed every tree that could be climbed. My parents realized we were talented, but they let us be children first. My mother has been supportive in every way, from being an encouraging mother to making sure our dress clothes were in good form. My Dad did some extraordinary things that we hardly knew about because he was humble. The music was just work. He taught me to respect the integrity of composers. He tossed aside compliments. He saw music as something useful, but in fact some of it was really great.

One of the most incredible experiences I have shared with my father was this past Christmas. In Tennessee I had conducted "Aislynn," the piece my father wrote.

I had conducted it four or five times and did some editing of a handwritten score he had given me. I had recorded it and brought him a copy. I didn't send it ahead. I was with him as he heard my version for the first time and I experienced it with him. He said it sounded exactly like what had been in his thoughts when he wrote it. That was the biggest complement he could have paid me.

LareDOS: The border is a new place for you to experience. How might living and working here affect your sense of music?

Townsend: I think it will give me a fresh outlook on certain types of music. I find a similarity in mariachi music and Irish traditional music. Though they are also very different, the similarity is in the numbers of people who get involved playing by ear, playing because they love it.

I've quickly realized that some people here are very aural, which gives me incredibly quick results in the classroom. The border and our proximity to Mexico will influence my teaching style in some ways. I have enormous respect for mariachi. It's part of the people here.

LareDOS: What is your goal for the Laredo Philharmonic Orchestra?

Townsend: I want to place the Philharmonic at the cultural center of this community.

LareDOS: You have available to you two beautiful state of the art venues for performances for the LCC and TAMIU orchestras as well as the Laredo Philharmonic Orchestra. What are you to infer is the value of the arts in this community?

Townsend: I'm astounded at the two beautiful buildings. What this says to me is that this community has a huge financial investment in the performing arts. But those buildings wouldn't be there if there wasn't a cultural interest in it.

LareDOS: What did you consider most before deciding you would take this position?

Townsend: My cello teacher was from Dublin. There were three music families in Dublin. He was from one of them. He married someone from one of those families, and they came to live in Cork. He said he could make a difference and leave a thumbprint in Cork. In New York I am one of 300 unemployed conductors. In Laredo I will have the opportunity to do what I want to do and make a difference. That was a huge part of my coming here.