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## S A V I N G Strings

Dotcom millionaire Bill Townsend wants to celebrate classical stringed instruments, rescue America's struggling orchestras, recruit a new generation of music lovers and give modern violin makers the recognition they deserve. The weird part is, he has a plan. By Steven L. Shepherd

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MISTY KEASLER





Bill Townsend in the converted garage of his Austin, Texas, home. There, inspired by classical violin makers, he has crafted more than two dozen stringed instruments.

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ill Townsend tells his guests he's not hitting them up for money. "It's really more of an informational session. Because what I'm really looking for are people who are interested in being involved in this endeavor." And then he begins his story.

His audience on this warm day in early fall consists of a dozen boosters and business leaders seated around a long dining table at the private Headliners Club on the 21st floor of the Bank One Tower, overlooking the state capitol dome in Austin, Texas. Gazpacho is served, and as his guests begin their lunch, Townsend begins his PowerPoint presentation. Behind him are two props: a new violin Townsend made for the Dixie Chicks' Martie Maguire (WILLIAM TOWNSEND, reads the label inside, *Fatto in Austin nel anno del nostro Signore 2004; for M.M.*), and a copy of the inlaid 1688 "Marylebone" Stradivari, one of two cellos he has made in his short career as an amateur luthier.

To rapt listeners, Townsend outlines his long-range, four-step plan. First, he wants to commission today's top violin makers to produce 35 acoustically and visually exact copies of famous old instruments. Second, he wants to create a loan program for the "Historical Collection" that, for eight years after they are made, would put those 35 instruments into the hands of orchestras around the world. Third, for at least a decade after that, he wants to break up the collection and loan individual instruments to talented young musicians who could use them for extended periods. Finally, he wants to use the collection to generate interest in creating an Internet-based orchestral music educational program for fourth- and fifth-grade children.

If, in the process, Townsend's proposed project helps ensure a future for classical stringed music, reverses the imperiled fortunes of orchestras nationwide, helps modern stringed-instrument makers achieve recognition rivaling those of the most revered masters—Antonio Stradivari and Guarneri del Gesù among them—and makes his adopted hometown of Austin the center of the world for fine violin-making, so much the better. Because Bill Townsend doesn't have much interest in small ideas.

TOWNSEND'S STORY HAS MANY BEGINNINGS, AND ONE IS IN THE COAL country of western Pennsylvania, where Townsend was born and grew up and where, at 27, he ran for Congress hoping to bring change, but lost. The area, he says, is plagued with dead-end jobs, and "it's very difficult for young people to get out unless they're given the opportunity to see what's beyond the border." Most of his high school friends are still there. He'd be there too, he says, but for his father, owner of a horse farm and holder of a Stanford MBA, who "believed in exposing his kids to as much as possible." Townsend says his parents did a great job of letting him "see what's beyond the borders not only of Pennsylvania, but of the United States," and he's come to consider that opportunity vital as he has grown older, for it showed him the promise and possibilities of a wider world.

There's also April 2, 1996, in Boston, where the search engine company Lycos was headquartered. Less than a year earlier, a venture capital group had purchased rights to the technology for \$1 million and brought in Townsend and four others to launch the company. That day the young Internet firm held its initial public offering, and when the stock market closed at the end of the day, Lycos was worth \$300 million, the dotcom boom of the 1990s had been further juiced, and Bill Townsend—31 years old and one of the five—was feeling "rather fortunate."

And there's China, where Townsend was the guest of honor at a family banquet in 1999. Lycos was behind him by then, and his new company was building an intranet connecting 22,000 Chinese schools. During the course of many long stays, Townsend learned that his interpreter's father was a violin maker. Townsend asked to visit his shop, and says he was "fascinated" from the moment he walked in. He began spending his spare time watching the luthier, Ziang Shu Mei, at work and learning the lore of the violin and the history of Cremona, the town in northern Italy where Stradivari, Guarneri, Nicolò Amati and other famed makers flourished in the 16th through 18th centuries.

Townsend arranged a dinner invitation, and while there Ziang set before him a platter of spruce, ebony and maple slabs. His host said, "Now you'll make a violin," and Townsend spent many days sitting next to the old maker, measuring, cutting and carving. Student to the master.

By the time he had finished his work in China and returned to the U.S., Townsend had decided to set up shop in his garage, where he has made more than two dozen increasingly fine instruments. He also joined the Violin Society of America, visited New York dealers who showed him multimillion-dollar Strads and sought out top contemporary makers, learning about their craft and their business.

He also bought an instrument. For \$50, he picked up an old fiddle from a friend of a friend of a friend. He didn't play then. Still can't. But no matter. The violin came with a beat-up case and some papers. When these helped to establish that the instrument was built in Cremona in 1670 by Nicolò Amati, the resulting \$500,000 increase in resale value eased the sting of discovering that it's hard to learn to play the violin.

NICOLÒ AMATI PROVIDED TOWNSEND WITH MORE THAN A WINDFALL. Nicolò was the grandson of Andrea Amati, who began making violins in the 1560s and was the first of the famed Cremonese masters. It is in their honor that Townsend named his organization the Amati Foundation, the centerpiece of the plan he is promoting in Austin. It's a plan he started to piece together soon after he returned from China, and it's based largely on what he learned in those early months.

He learned that orchestras need audiences. In focus groups made up of people who don't usually go to classical concerts, the respondents, when asked about violins, often said that they had "always wanted to see a Stradivari." But many original Strads are in museums, where they can be seen but not heard. He learned that the few available Strads are beyond the financial reach of most players, and that players still need good instruments. He learned that there are great modern makers who are no less skilled than their predecessors, but whose work is not fully appreciated. And in the business of violins, perception is almost, if not entirely, everything.

Townsend's approach to problem-solving is to look for the one silver bullet that will work the greatest number of times. The approach relies on a talent for seeing connections, and it's a talent that Frank Federer says is one of Townsend's gifts. Federer, who specializes in helping underperforming companies, and was among those at the Headliners Club, says Townsend has an extraordinary "ability to link things and get to cause and effect among things that are seemingly not related, and to realize that, 'No, wait. They're all part of the same problem. And therefore part of the same solution.'" "

The solution came as Townsend immersed himself in the violin world and its many peculiarities. He began covering his office walls with handwritten notes and flow charts. He needed something for everyone—a way to lure newbies to the concert halls, a way to let skeptical players see and compare dozens of new instruments at once, a way to let modern makers showcase their works. What emerged was a traveling collection of replicas of important historical stringed instruments—replicas, that is, with a twist. And he would put the collection to work.

Townsend's plan for the Amati Foundation Historical Collection begins with these PowerPoint presentations to explain the concept. If he can raise the needed money, he will commission today's top makers to produce 35 exact copies of famous old instruments, including half a dozen Guarneris and nearly a dozen Strads (among them the 1716 "Messiah," the 1709 ivory-inlaid "Greffuhle" and the 1690 "Tuscan"), all built to look and sound the way they did the day they left their makers' shops. That is, absent 300 years of wear.



BUILDING INSTRUMENTS THIS WAY PRESENTS A PARADOXICAL challenge for contemporary makers. Lutherie is undergoing a renaissance, and there are makers today whose instruments may elbow aside a violin by one of the masters as the tool of choice for a performing artist. The renowned soloist Cho-Liang “Jimmy” Lin, for instance, owns the 1734 “Duke of Camposelice” Guarneri. But he also owns a violin built in 2000 by Brooklyn, N.Y.-based maker Sam Zygmontowicz. One morning this summer Lin, who is the artistic director of the La Jolla Music Society’s summer festival, prepared for a Brahms trio he was to play that evening at La Jolla’s Sherwood Auditorium by taking both instruments to the hall and rehearsing—after which he chose the Zygmontowicz for the concert. He did so, Lin said, because La Jolla’s marine air was “choking” his Guarneri. The 4-year-old Zygmontowicz was doing a better job of resisting the humidity, and Lin believed he could “make a better sound” with it.

Few in Sherwood would notice that Lin was using a new instrument. Its superb sound notwithstanding, Lin’s Zygmontowicz looks as if it’s been around for at least a few hundred years; indeed, it looks remarkably like his aged and worn Guarneri. Listeners have long been taught that “older is better” when it comes to violins, and to help players meet their audiences’ expectations, violin makers know how to make the new look old: Corners are roughened, varnish is chipped and “distressed,” nicks are gouged and fake dirt is smudged into hollows.

A favorite is Guarneri’s 1742 “Lord Wilton,” on which entire careers have been built. Thousands of copies exist, some rendered so meticulously as to include reproductions of microscopic bits of black tuxedo from the shoulders of the instrument’s long line of illustrious owners. There’s an art to this, but giving oneself up to it comes at a cost. New makers often sacrifice their identities. And it can make even the best modern luthier uncomfortable to cut a sharp edge or apply an unfaded varnish that, like the brilliant colors of the newly cleaned Sistine Chapel, seems garish.

But the Historical Collection presents an opportunity relished by the participating violin makers who come from eight countries. Four are from California, including Eagle Rock native Mario Miralles, who runs Mario & Brenda Miralles Violin-Makers with his wife. At 41, Miralles has been making stringed instruments for 20 years and is one of the most sought-after luthiers in the world. He has a 12-year waiting list, and his clients have included Yo-Yo Ma (for whom he copied the cellist’s beloved 1733 Montagnana), the 17-year-old prodigy Caitlin Tully and the principal concertmasters of both the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Chamber orchestras.

Miralles looks forward to trying to undo the effects of time, trying to imagine how an instrument such as the 1713 “Bass of Spain” might have appeared the day it was last polished by Stradivari. It’s a task not unlike trying to envision—without a photograph—a stooped and wrinkled 90-year-old as a 16-year-old youth. If letting people see the unmarred instruments of the Historical Collection also helps reverse the prejudice against new-looking instruments, Miralles, who designs his own instruments in addition to making copies, says “it would be wonderful.”

Once the instruments are commissioned, Townsend, who has lived in Austin since 1997, figures it will take 18 months to build the Historical Collection. He then plans a public unveiling and museum exhibition of the collection, after which he intends to lend it for use by orchestras around the world. (His primary requirement is that the orchestras make some of the ensuing concerts and a dress rehearsal free to children.) The orchestra loans will last eight years, after which the collection will be split up for at least a decade and the individual instruments will be lent to talented young players for long-term use.

And that’s only half of the plan.

Townsend, who became a father in 2000, wants to leverage the interest created by the Historical Collection to spur the funding and adoption of a program to teach violin to fourth- and fifth-grade children in underprivileged schools. And he means the whole shebang—giving the schools instruments, books, teachers and access to master classes on the Internet taught by world-class performers such as Joshua Bell and Ruggiero Ricci. “We’re talking about letting kids in Spearfish, South Dakota, learn from a great master about how to play a particular piece,” he says.

It’s a dazzling vision, and as his Austin listeners finish their meals he takes them crisply through the whys and the hows. As to why, Townsend says we’re losing something important. The percentage of U.S. elementary schools offering stringed or classical music programs is declining. According to a report by the Department of Education, in 2000 barely one-fourth of American elementary schools offered string or orchestra programs. Even in those that did, participation was poor, he says. The result is that children are not being exposed to classical arts, and the U.S. is facing “a great cultural loss.”

To implement his program, Townsend plans to cluster the schools in groups of three so they can share a teacher. He’ll work out the bugs in 12 schools in Austin, rural Kansas, Spearfish (a town in the Black Hills, where the median household income in 2000 was \$27,000) and South Los Angeles. By 2010 he hopes to have the program in 200 schools. By 2020, in 500.

It’s ambitious, but “I’m a big believer that you do things in life to make a difference,” Townsend says. “Life is way too short to mess around with things that don’t work. And I think this can work. It could change the lives of thousands of kids.”

THIS, THOUGH, IS AN ASSERTION OF FAITH, AND IT WILL TAKE MORE than faith to bring the Amati Foundation to life. It will take \$4 million to build and maintain the Historical Collection. It will take \$500,000 to run the 12-school pilot program. And for all 500 schools, it will take \$16 million a year. Townsend has already put \$1.5 million of his own money into the idea. But he’s not Bill Gates rich. Nor is he as wealthy as Irwin Jacobs, the chief executive and founder of Qualcomm, who in 2002 helped save the in-and-out-of-bankruptcy San Diego Symphony by pledging a \$120-million donation. And after a few “dotbomb” setbacks in recent years and the birth this spring of their second child, Townsend promised his wife that he’d make the Amati Foundation self-supporting.

To find sponsors for his dream, Townsend is relying on a host of assets. One is confidence. Another is that gift of seeing connections and crafting win-win solutions.

And then there is Austin. Rodney Macon, a former vice president with Fidelity Investments, who attended the Headliners Club talk along with Federer, says “there is no shortage of money in Austin. The funds are bulging.” If anything, he thinks “there’s a shortage of people who’ve got ideas, who’ve done their research and been able to validate their idea.” For these people, he suggests, the money exists.

Robert Freeman, dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Texas at Austin, has a similar view. This fall, he says, the university completed a seven-year capital funding campaign that had a goal of \$1 billion; when it ended, more than \$1.6 billion had been raised.

And he, too, is a Townsend supporter. When its tours are finished, the Historical Collection may need a permanent home. In wood and varnish, it will be an important document showing what today’s best luthiers thought about the old masters’ works. It will warrant study by tomorrow’s makers, and to this end Townsend has talked to the dean about a violin-making school at the university. The dean is enthusiastic, because he is helping to build a top-tier academic string and orchestral program. He already has hired a professor from Juilliard, and a violin-making school would complement his plans. His students and faculty could “get access to terrific violins that don’t cost a million dollars,” and there’s the appealing “possibility that every fine string player in the world would eventually wind up in Austin, Texas, in order to buy a violin.” Money for the school, says the dean, shouldn’t be a problem.

For the Amati Foundation, money may be more of a problem. This fall, Townsend has given his presentation about once every two weeks, trying to generate public interest in his plan as the foundation continues its search for a major underwriter. And even if the unthinkable happened, Macon, who is not a classical music enthusiast, says Townsend could still count it a success: “Just from my own personal perspective, he has brought something into my life that didn’t exist. I have an appreciation of the instrument, an interest in violins that I’ve never had before.”