

A reporter's job is to investigate stories objectively, ignoring emotion in order to deliver a story. We are trained to not take a personal interest in our subjects. Truth be told, when I met Bill Townsend to learn about the nonprofit organization, The Amati Foundation, I had no interest in violins, classical music, or the effects of music education on children. My own children are six and nine and while one plays piano, the other is more interested in Manchester United. But after two hours with Mr. Townsend, I was so convinced his foundation holds the key to improving education and all facets of classical music that it may prove difficult to objectively write about this man's exciting plans.

# Savior of the Strings

Damek Hovorka

"First let me tell you that up until 1998, I had zero interest in the violin," begins Townsend. "In fact, if it wasn't recorded by Ted Nugent, AC-DC, or Queen, it probably wasn't on my musical radar screen."

A chance encounter at a Beijing, China Children's Palace would open the door to a trek Townsend describes with boundless excitement. Children's Palaces are facilities where children congregate after school to learn the arts and sciences. A business trip had taken Townsend to China and as he walked through Beijing's main Children's Palace he heard a performance of Bach's Chaconne in D Minor. Walking into a room he was surprised to see a ten-year-old girl playing violin. He mentioned how good she was and the instruc-

tor informed him that she was "just average" and that if he'd return the next day he could hear what good violinists sounded like.

Townsend returned the following day and was delighted to witness a performance by nearly twenty violinists, aged seven to fourteen, performing what appeared to be impossibly difficult pieces. He leaned toward his interpreter to share his excitement and she offhandedly mentioned her father made musical instruments and had many students who could play as well as these children.



Townsend quickly arranged to visit the luthier's workshop and found himself "fascinated" from the first moment and "hooked" after a two hour discussion in which the maker informed him that the very best stringed instruments were made in Cremona, Italy in the early 1700s and their quality has never been matched in the centuries since.

"I've spent the majority of my career in the technology industry and to think that you couldn't improve upon something made 300 years ago seemed ludicrous," said Townsend. "Virtually every technique in modern civilization has been enhanced or dramatically improved in the last century. I began

spending every free hour trying to learn more about the violin's history, construction and industry, resulting in a passion for the instrument."

Townsend was then 36 years old, (he's now 40) and in the months before his first son was born he found himself asking many of life's big questions. "I'm thinking, 'I'm going to be 40 in a couple of years and there are a couple of things I haven't accomplished that I want to do.' And one of them was to create a really great program to help children learn." The problem was, he didn't know what it should be. For a while he thought he'd do something to help kids learn computers. But he quickly realized the time for that was past. "Most kids can jump on a computer and do amazing things. They don't need help with that now. My four-year-old has been using the Internet since he was 20 months old!" Then he thought, "This whole thing with the violin is kind of interesting. Maybe there is something I can do in what appears to be a staid, old-fashioned industry and get children and teenagers tuned into classical music."

He soon began visiting violin dealers, luthiers, orchestras, teachers, and anybody in the music industry that would agree to share their knowledge. Finally, in 2000, while sitting in a cafe in West Palm Beach, Florida, in the United States, he sketched his idea for a non profit organization on a napkin. "One thing I wanted to do was think big. When my partners and I started the search engine Lycos in 1995, we thought big and created one of the enduring Internet companies. I believe life is too short to think small," says Townsend. So he devised a plan that incorporated instrument makers, orchestras, musicians, museums, donors, corporate marketing partners, and most important, kept children at the center of it all. And so was born The Amati Foundation, named after Nicolo Amati, considered by many to be the teacher of history's most famous violinmaker, Antonio Stradivari.

By this time in our meeting, I am still not emotionally attached to Townsend's story, but because of his enthusiasm, I can't help but wonder what will come out of his mouth next.

Townsend lays out the framework of a plan that seeks nothing less than to help save the future of classical stringed music, to reverse the fortunes of orchestras around the world, to give children musical opportunities they might otherwise miss, and to help modern stringed instrument makers achieve recognition with the world's leading musicians.

"The problem with most non profit groups is that they don't manage themselves like a major corporation and they often think so small that they miss the opportunity to expand their ideas beyond a geographic boundary. I built the foundation like McDonald's: we do something well, prove out the model, then expand it so others can benefit," says Townsend.

I'm starting to feel like a fish in the Danube River eyeing a free meal and ignoring that there is a hook attached to it.

Whereas most American companies plan on a quarter-by-quarter basis, Townsend's plan is a timeline stretching more than 20 years into the future. The timeline begins with the commissioning of a collection of 37 virtually exact acoustic and visual copies of history's most famous violins, violas, cellos, and basses, among them Stradivari's 1715 "Messiah" and Guarneri's 1742 "Lord Wilton" and the 1739 "Sleeping Beauty" cello, by Montagnana; all built to look the way they did the day they left their makers' shops 300 years ago.

"We conducted research that found the average person who does not attend symphony events does so primarily because they equate Bach with one song. Mozart is one song. Beethoven is one song. They don't realize that these are composers who wrote lots of different pieces. It may be because there are no words, so the songs don't stick in your mind like pop music does." But the fact remains, for orchestras to grow and prosper, you have to bring people into concert halls and Townsend has developed a program to do just that. "We found that 62% of those surveyed knew that Stradivari made instruments, but less than 1% had seen a Strad. When asked if they'd be interested in seeing what a Strad looked like when it was new, 87% said they would. And when asked if seeing



*The Amati Foundation founder Bill Townsend*

a recreation was of interest, nearly 75% still said “yes”.

Townsend says it will take twenty months to build the Historical Collection. He then plans a grand public unveiling and museum exhibition, after which he intends to put the collection on tour, loaning it for 8 years for use by orchestras and museums around the world. The foundation’s minimal requirements include the orchestras opening a dress rehearsal to local school children whom the foundation will invite and educate about the music and instruments of the orchestra. “This gives us the ability to bring in over 2,000 children, parents and teachers, primarily from inner city schools, to experience live musical performances,” says Townsend. Following the rehearsal and a question and answer session with the musicians, each child will receive a booklet entitled, “*So You Want To Play A Musical Instrument*,” which will help guide them in the best manner to pursue learning an instrument; even if that instrument happens to be the drums. “While The Amati Foundation is centered around the magnificence of the violin, at the core of our child outreach is the goal of getting kids playing an instrument,” espouses Townsend. “We’re not trying to train the next Yehudi Menuhin; we want to bring music into children’s lives because of the proven benefits of improved comprehension and math skills and the lifelong joy found in playing music.”

The orchestra and museum program will culminate around 2015, after which the collection will be split up and the individual instruments loaned out for the long-term use of talented young players. Each year, the instruments will be measured, tested, and recorded, creating a massive amount of data on instrument wear and maintenance that cannot be easily replicated in traditional settings. To that end, Townsend is in discussions with three leading American music schools and universities to become the permanent home of the collection for research purposes.

At two of the universities, the instruments would be loaned first to the institutions’ own students and then to outside performers. One of them is the University of Texas, one in the largest university systems in the States. Townsend is working with the well-known violin makers Gregg Alf, Christopher Germain, and Raymond Shryer to form a violin making school as part of the university’s curriculum.

“Imagine top young performers performing on these incredible instruments; violin making students having access to study the works of the world’s best contemporary makers; and acoustic and chemical researchers being able to study the effects of construction and wear and tear,” says Townsend. Add to this the estimated 200 million people that will be exposed to the Historical Collection’s tour, includ-

ing thousands of corporate leaders, and over 200,000 children who will experience classical concerts firsthand and the social benefit of the program is far reaching. Perhaps it is the most important arts program of the past century.

I feel the hook being set in my mouth. Townsend exudes confidence in the program and states that it was 5 years in planning to make sure the program was viable. He continues on and I am becoming more and more a fan of this humble entrepreneur.

I delved into his childhood and early career to try to understand from where his passion emanates. His story begins in the mining country of western Pennsylvania, where Townsend grew up on a horse farm that had been in his family for over 200 years. At the age of five, his mother, Jacquelyn Mayer Townsend, a former Miss America of 1963, suffered a stroke which left her paralyzed and without speech. “I remember coming home from kindergarten and first grade and I’d read my mother the books I read that day in school. As she lay helpless on the couch, I’d teach her the A-B-C’s and how to tie her shoes, lessons she had taught me just a year or two before.” Townsend proudly announces that his mother has since recovered and become a motivational speaker, proclaiming, “If she can come back from a devastating stroke to inspire thousands of others with her story, I knew there was nothing that was going to get in the way of reaching my goals.”

It is in western Pennsylvania that he returned three years out of college to start an advertising agency at age 23 and where, “to make a difference,” he ran for United States Congress at the age of 27 against a 16-year incumbent; just narrowly losing in the general election. The next year he sold the agency and joined the \$1.3 billion communications firm Ketchum as head of global new business. Shortly thereafter he and four others started the search engine Lycos, taking the firm public in a then-record eight months. “We had 23 employees and very little money in the bank, but through hard work and focused determination toward reaching our goals, we created one of the biggest names on the Internet.”

After Lycos he started several companies, the largest of which, YouthStream Media Networks, employed 1,100 people and served over 8,000 high schools and colleges and hundreds of the top advertisers in America.

Townsend grew up in a household of music. His grandmother, Beverly Mayer, was an Ohio public school music teacher for over 30 years. Townsend took saxophone and piano lessons as a child, then self-taught himself guitar, playing in several bands during his high school and college years. “It’s funny, but my undergraduate degree is from The College of Wooster and the first day I was on campus, I moved into my dorm room and saw that my roommate had 2 violin cases in the closet. My first thought was, ‘oh, great, I’m rooming with a nerd,’ but it turned out that he was a guitar player too and we spent countless hours playing music. Sometimes we’d take classical pieces by Vivaldi and Bach and transpose them for rock guitar,” says Townsend.

I asked Townsend who his one-on-one dream lesson would be with and he quickly replied, “Without a doubt it would be two people: Ted Nugent for a guitar lesson and Aaron Rosand for violin. Nugent proves you can have great fun playing the music you love without resorting to drugs or alcohol, plus he’s a great American patriot who I admire for this candor.”

When Townsend first returned to the States from China he purchased a CD which included Rosand’s performance of Sarasate’s *Zigeunerweisen*. “That song penetrated my heart like no other. I was so touched that I wrote to Mr. Rosand. Never before had I realized a violin could move me in such a manner.”

Townsend’s career and life experiences certainly provide him the skills to pull off the Historical Collection. But that’s only half of the plan. He tells me that one of the things he noticed when he came back from China was that many of the people he knew in the computer industry were also musicians. He started asking around, and the results “always showed that a high percentage of people with sound mathematical or programming skills were also musicians.” More broadly, Townsend argues that

America is losing something important in its culture. The proportion of American elementary schools offering stringed or classical music programs is on the decline according to numerous studies. Whereas in 1960, 81% of schools offered such programs, today, less than 19% do. The result, Townsend says, is that children are missing a proven teaching tool that can have lifelong consequences.

Townsend wants to leverage the interest created by the Historical Collection to promote the funding and rollout of a The Amati Foundation Education Programs to teach the violin to fourth- and fifth-grade children in underprivileged schools. And he wants to fund and manage the whole program: giving the schools instruments, books, teachers, and access to master classes on the Internet taught by world-class performers like Leila Josefowicz, Joshua Bell, Vanessa Mae, and non-classical violinists such as Boyd Tinsley of The Dave Matthews Band and fiddlers Mark O'Connor and Edward Caner. "We've figured out a way to let kids who would never have the opportunity to play a violin learn from an exceptional artist about how to play a particular piece of music. How fun and rewarding that will be? In our pilot, kids played everything from Bach to Civil War fiddle tunes to songs from Destiny's Child, Eminem and even Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven. They ate it up!"

To implement his program, he plans to cluster the schools in groups of three so they can share a teacher. He'll begin with 12 schools in central Texas, rural Kansas and South Dakota, and inner city Southern California. By 2010 he hopes to have the program in 200 schools and by 2020, in 500.

Kelie Plank, founder of KGP Consulting and two non profits, has been instrumental in helping Townsend devise a chapter program for the foundation. As executive director she will lead the creation of twenty city-based chapters that will be tasked with raising \$1.5 million (US\$) each year to fund education programs. If 75% of the chapters hit their goal, the violin instruction programs will be funded nationwide. "The chapter concept gives us a local presence and we're finding enthusiastic people who want to volunteer to help build these in cities across America," said Townsend. "Eventually, we could partner with other organizations to create chapters in EU countries and replicate the foundation's programs."

The ability to create a program then replicate it across America and around the globe is what makes this approach really powerful. "It's ambitious, but I'm a big believer that once we show the results of returning arts funding to schools, we'll begin to see rapid adoption of our programs," says Townsend, "Seeing my mother lay paralyzed on a couch taught me that life is much too short to expend energy on things that don't work. And I know this can work. It will change the lives of hundreds of thousands of children and teens and become a model for excellence in distributed education."

To that end, The Amati Foundation is creating an online learning portal that will be made available to all schools in North America. The portal will enable children to learn music at their own pace and will become a resource for teachers and parents. "It doesn't take the place of a teacher, but instead supplements the pedagogical process, bringing technological ad-

vances in online learning to any classroom that wants to utilize the service," says Townsend.

To find donors and corporate sponsors for his dream Townsend is relying on a host of assets. One is confidence. Another is knowing what to value. "The Historical Collection will have a global reach of over 200 million people. Title sponsorship is only \$4 million, resulting in an incredibly efficient, multi-year media buy that reaches C-level executives, community leaders, teachers, parents and children. From the standpoint of corporate sponsorship, it's one of the most positive programs to which a company can tie their name."

Of course it helps to build a program that is extensively researched, and in creating The Amati Foundation Townsend has considered the needs of just about every conceivable group. Orchestras everywhere need audiences. Museums need events. Players, most of whom can't afford a historically important violin, need an efficient way to test and compare the instruments of modern makers. Makers need ways to gain exposure outside of their geographic areas.

"One of the finest makers I've met is Peter Beare in the United Kingdom. Peter's craftsmanship is on par with the great Italian makers of the 18th century. Let's suppose he worked full time at making and was able to craft 10 violins a year. To audition a violin, either the player has to visit Peter's shop or Peter must ship the violin for a typical two week trial period. Now let's suppose the player wants to try instruments by Guy Rabut, Jan Spidlen, Peter, and Patrick Robin. Either violins are shipped in from around the world, or she travels to the U.S., Czech Republic, United

Kingdom, and France just to audition instruments. It's a terribly inefficient and expensive method for auditioning instruments," explains Townsend.

If the instruments of the Historical Collection bring new audiences to the concert halls, and if the chance to play not one but dozens of new instruments convinces players of today's makers' skills, and if the sound is good, which Townsend convinces me it will be, everyone in the music industry wins.

There are a lot of people in the world with ideas. But the people who have great ideas, who have done their research and been able to validate their idea, for these people, the opportunity to change the course of history exists. And perhaps this is where Townsend and The Amati Foundation have their biggest role. To this reporter, this is the most ambitious project I have ever heard about. It is so well researched, so vast in scope, yet simplistic in concept, that I believe the citizens of Praga will be listening to the instruments of the Historical Collection—including an Antonio Stradivari replica by our own Jan Spidlen—in the near future. And while I have intended to present a non-biased story about the amazing Bill Townsend, just from my own personal perspective, he has brought something into my life that didn't previously exist. I now have an appreciation and emotional equity toward the violin that I never had before.

To learn more visit  
[www.amatifoundation.org](http://www.amatifoundation.org).

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