Violin professor proves music transcends borders

Andrzej Grabiec says the power of sound unites people

By Steven Brown

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Andrzej Grabiec, professor of violin at the University of Houston, leads a practice session at UH Tuesday, June 10, 2014, in Houston. (Melissa Phillip/Houston Chronicle)

Andrzej Grabiec, violin professor at the University of Houston, uses a Ludwig van Beethoven quartet to illustrate music's unifying power. At the university's Texas Music Festival, he's coaching the work with four young musicians from far-flung schools who met when the festival began. Through Beethoven, they've rapidly clicked.

"When they play a Beethoven quartet, we all understand what this music is about. We may fine-tune certain things. But this is where music is truly an international language," Grabiec says.

Grabiec, who performs in one of the festival's chamber-music concerts Tuesday, himself embodies how music transcends borders. Born and trained in the industrial city of Katowice, Poland, he has performed in Europe, North America and Asia. He has taught at the University of Houston since 1995, and festivals in Europe are his home for part of each summer.

Yet Grabiec might never have studied music, he says, if not for a mistake his mother made when he was starting school.

Q: What did she do wrong?

A: She went to the elementary school to register me, and the building was under renovation. The main door was locked, and there was a note saying to go to the back door. So she went to the back door, found the office, left the enrollment paper and went home. We went on vacation, and when we got back, there was a letter saying, "Please come with your son for the entry exam."

My parents were puzzled. They had never heard of an exam for elementary school. So my mother went and asked about it. The lady in the office said, "We have to find out if your son has any musical talent." There actually were two schools in the same building, and my mother accidentally took the door that led to the music school.

Q: So you decided to try out anyway?

A: My parents found out the school offered all the regular school classes, plus music. So there was a big family discussion, and my parents decided to give it a try. I only needed
to sing a song, and I happened to have a nice repertoire. (He laughs.) There was a radio program every morning that was designed for children (to sing along), and I loved it. So I chose a so-called difficult song to impress them. I must have done something right.

**Q:** Once you started on the violin, did you take to it right away?

A: My very first violin teacher was a fantastic man. I look back on it and think that if it wasn't for him, I don't know if I would be a musician. He made it so exciting. He made me love music and feel that it's a lot of fun.

The musical education (in Poland) was at a remarkably high level. It started at the age of 7 and continued up to the university level and beyond. And even though nobody in my family was a musician, they attended concerts regularly. They had subscriptions to the philharmonic orchestra and took me along.

**Q:** You moved to the United States in 1979. Why did you leave Poland?

A: The presence of the big brother (the Soviet Union, which dominated Poland until the Iron Curtain fell) had a strong impact on people's lives. Since I was a musician and had competition prizes behind me, I traveled quite a bit. From my hometown to Vienna, Austria, was something like 150 miles - not a huge distance. But the difference between the two places was so huge that I had to ask myself, "Do have to live like I do in Poland, or could I live differently?"

Also, my two sons were very little. I asked myself, "What kind of life can I offer them? Should my boys, whenever they want to say something directly from their heart or mind, have to look over their shoulder to see who is watching?" Those kinds of things motivated me to start looking.

In the United States, I had a musical contact. I went there (Colorado) to play once, then twice, and the second time, he asked if I would be interested in taking a concertmaster position with his orchestra and starting a chamber orchestra. So we came to the United States.

**Q:** What was the University of Houston like when you arrived in 1995?

A: I came at a very interesting time, when the Moores School of Music was about to be built. The day I started my job, there was a ground-breaking ceremony. John Moores (a donor to the school) made a speech that was so inspiring. He talked about how important music was in people's lives - what it does for families, what it does for communities, what it does for our brains and our emotions. It was absolutely fantastic. I said to myself, "Yes. I've come to the right place."

**Q:** On Tuesday, you'll help perform Zoltán Kodály's *Duo for Violin* and Cello. There aren't many violin-and-cello duets, are there?
A: No, and this beats them all. If I could give it a nickname, I'd call it a symphony for two string instruments. It's very creative, very imaginative. Kodály was a fantastic composer who understood strings remarkably well. The duo is rich and very colorful.

Texas Music Festival

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday (Perspectives Series chamber music concert) and 7:30 p.m. Saturday (Texas Music Festival Orchestra) Where: Fine Arts Building (Tuesday) and Moores Opera House (Saturday), Entrance 16, University of Houston Tickets: $15; 713-743-3313, uh.edu/class/music/tmf