

In Toone with the Past

Cello sings out after a century of silence

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Cello that survived pioneer's journey to Utah is rediscovered by descendants

The rough-edged cello bears the scars of a long and arduous life, but in the hands of Utah musician Kayson Brown, the instrument sings with such profound beauty that listeners tend to reach for handkerchiefs.

The cello's rich tone has an edge that hints at a history marked by hardship, tragedy, hope and endurance. And when Brown's expert fingers draw music from the strings, there is a sense that the musician and the instrument complete one another.

Brown restored the cello to its destiny as an artist's voice after a century of silence - and the cello provided him a touchstone to his family's musical past. He shares with the instrument a legacy that reaches back to his great-great-great-great-grandfather, the cello's original owner.

John Toone was born in Birmingham, England, in 1813, the son of an architect and contractor who built fine buildings that still stand in the English city of Leamington. Unlike most people of his time and place, Toone studied building, medicine, law and music. In England, he worked in building trades and served as a royal musician to Queen Victoria, say family histories compiled by his descendants.

Toone converted to Mormonism in 1849. Soon after, he crossed the Atlantic Ocean with his family and joined a wagon train headed for Utah in 1852.

According to a family history of Thomas Condie, a member of the wagon company, the travelers were accosted in Wyoming by Sioux Indians in war paint.

"Brother John Toone had a fiddle [cello] and the Saints sang," the account says. "This so charmed the Indians that they departed in peace."

Toone would make four subsequent trips across the plains to assist other pioneer companies. One of those was the Martin Handcart Company, which suffered many deaths when early snows trapped the pioneers in the mountains of Wyoming.

In Utah, Toone married two more wives and worked as a builder while he kept up his music. A stone marker at the corner of Second Avenue and D Street in Salt Lake City shows the location of an early schoolhouse and identifies John Toone as the builder. He also took part in building and decorating the Salt Lake Theatre, Utah's first playhouse, and is listed as a member of the theater's first orchestra.

As a trained musician, Toone's talents were in demand in the new city. He played for many of the dances and concerts that added gaiety to pioneer life, including events in Salt Lake City's old Social Hall.

Even after being called by Brigham Young to settle the remote town of Croydon, in Weber County, Toone often rode his horse over a series of mountain passes to perform in Salt Lake City and visit family there.

Judging by records of his life, Toone's taste for music was matched by a taste for adventure. He guarded the pioneer mail route in Salt Lake City's early days, a dangerous job. Later, in Croydon, he cleared land for a farm and served as a frontier doctor.

When smallpox struck the town in 1874, Toone's son Richard caught the disease. Toone injected a calf with his son's blood and created a vaccine with which he inoculated 60 people, helping to end the epidemic.

After Toone died in 1893, his cello remained in Croydon. It was stored in a descendant's barn, where it may have spent nearly a century. A crack on the cello's face is said to have been delivered by the kick of a horse.

Although the story of John Toone was well-known among his many descendants, 100 years after his death only a few knew of the cello's survival and its location.

Kayson Brown was unaware of his talented ancestor when he took up the cello as a fifth-grader in California. Given a choice between violin and cello at school, he opted for cello, convinced that "violins were for girls."

Brown took to the cello as if born to play it - and perhaps he was.

"If John Toone were alive today, he'd be playing the cello the way I am," Brown said. "He'd be playing for family and friends and in professional circles. It's a matter of pride for me to think that my ancestor was in the very first orchestra ever in Utah, and now, five generations later, we're still playing."

Like his ancestor, Brown performs at various events along the Wasatch Front, freelancing in pit orchestras and playing for church, social and family occasions.

John Toone's cello entered Brown's life about six years ago, while he was an undergraduate at the University of Utah. Around that time, he developed an interest in genealogy and was surprised to learn that one of his ancestors was a gifted cellist. After distant relatives mentioned that the cello might still exist, Brown began searching.

By making random phone calls to people with the surname of Toone, he found someone who directed him to its location. The cello is still owned by another branch of the John Toone family, whose members gave Brown permission to repair and play it on loan.

Brown says being united with the cello has helped him understand his past and purpose.

"Maybe this music thing I'm pursuing is not unique to me, but is something that is in my blood," he says. "For the first time, I've felt connected to an ancestor. He must have gone through the same demands in playing the instrument that I do. The instrument sounds just as good today as it did then, it's just as hard to play, and we're probably playing the same music."

After Brown began performing on the John Toone cello, coincidences involving other Toone descendents started happening. One occurred when Brown was invited to play in an LDS sacrament meeting in Salt Lake City. Although he also performs on a 100-year-old Italian cello, Brown decided the piece he was scheduled to play - the pioneer anthem "Come, Come, Ye Saints" - should be performed on John Toone's cello.

After the meeting, he chatted with the congregation's bishop, Keith Toone, and the two discovered their common ancestry.

Keith Toone, an ardent music-lover, knew his great-great-grandfather's life story and had always wanted to know what became of his cello. When Brown told Toone that the instrument he had just heard was the long-lost John Toone cello, "the look on his face was priceless," Brown said.

"We'd tried so long to find it," Toone said. "I'm so glad he's got it, and I hope it's always used by a professional musician - someone who appreciates where it came from."

Brown says the cello seems to have an affinity for its history. Though he has recorded the Dvorák Cello Concerto and Bach Cello Suites with the instrument, he thinks the cello sounds most glorious when playing the hymn that lent courage to thousands of Mormon pioneers traveling to Utah:

*Come, come, ye Saints, no toil nor labor fear,
But with joy wend your way.*

*Through hard to you this journey may appear,
Grace shall be as your day.*

'Tis better far for us to strive

Our useless cares from us to drive.

Do this, and joy your hearts will swell,

All is well! All is well!

"It plays itself on that one," says Brown.

Certainly, the performance is affecting. As the cello weeps the last verse - "And should we die before our journey's through" - Keith Toone has to wipe his eyes.

"I can take anything but music," he apologizes.

Brown understands. To him, John Toone's cello is more than wood and strings. It's a tangible symbol of the ability to find joy in trials and cultivate beauty in harsh circumstances.

"The cello will outlive me," Brown says. "It will be a family heirloom, and presumably in the hands of other cellists who will connect to John Toone and read about the sacrifices he made to come here, and feel like they too have some genetic code that helps them play music here in the Salt Lake Valley."

* To see a video of Kayson Brown playing the pioneer cello, visit www.sltrib.com



Keith Toone, right, a distant relative of Kayson Brown, wipes his eyes as he is overcome with emotion while listening to Brown play "Come, Come, Ye Saints" on a cello that once belonged to the men's common ancestor John Toone, shown far left, who was born in Birmingham, England, and immigrated to Utah in the mid-1800s. (Leah Hogsten/The Salt Lake Tribune)

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