



Photo by John Lee

## Donato Cabrera: Reno’s musical masterpiece

To a musician, a crescendo is a steady increase in volume and intensity. It is a fitting turn of phrase to use when describing the rise of University of Nevada, Reno alumnus Donato Cabrera, '96 (applied music) to become the assistant conductor of the San Francisco Symphony and to his current position as the Wattis Foundation music director of the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, internationally recognized as one of finest youth orchestras in the world.

“I’m riding the wave and just trying to stay on the surfboard,” he says.

Cabrera draws again and again from his Reno musical roots while being carried along the rising tide of his musical career.

Cabrera moved to Reno from Las Vegas when he was 10 years old, graduated from Reed High School, and earned his bachelor’s

degree at Nevada. His post-graduate profile reads like the “Who’s Who in U.S. News & World Report’s Top College rankings”: earning his master’s degree in conducting at the University of Illinois, and pursuing further graduate studies in conducting at Indiana University, Bloomington, and the Manhattan School of Music.

But, Cabrera says, like charity, success begins at home, with organizations like the Reno Philharmonic Orchestra, Reno Chamber Orchestra, Nevada Ballet and Nevada Opera, as well as the excellent music teachers he studied with as a student in Reno.

“Reno has everything to do with my success,” he says. “I was very lucky to have these people around.”

While spending summers listening to his grandmother play the piano, who learned

from her father, Cabrera was inspired to begin taking piano lessons at age 8. He signed up to play the French horn in middle school band, and before long, he was playing in the Reed High School band, under the guidance of Felton Hickman Jr. '60 (music).

“He always did a lot of extra things,” Hickman says of Cabrera. “He’d try out for honor band, all-state, perform solos and play in the brass choir. He took two classes a year in instrumental music.”

Hickman, now retired, taught music in Reno for nine years at the middle school level, and 19 years of high school music. His late father, Felton Hickman Sr. '38 (music) began conducting the University band in 1940, after receiving his bachelor’s degree from Nevada. Known in Reno as the “Grandfather of Music,” Hickman Sr. retired as professor emeritus



OPPOSITE: In the War Memorial Opera House. ABOVE: Conducting Don Giovanni with the San Francisco Opera. RIGHT: Conducting the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra.

from the University in 1966.

Hickman says as a teacher, he was influenced by his father's belief that students should be nurtured and not dictated to. So, when Cabrera expressed an interest in conducting the high school band, Hickman let him do it.

"I gave him opportunities to do the things he wanted to do," Hickman says. "I wanted the kids to be an active part of things—not for me, but for themselves."

Cabrera says he thinks Hickman is one of the best conductors he knows, and he uses many of Hickman's techniques with the San Francisco Youth Orchestra.

A conductor has to have the ability to lead other musicians by indicating tempo, phrasing, dynamics and style using gestures and facial expressions.

"To be a conductor at any level, you have to be an educator, whether you're leading professionals or beginners," Cabrera says. "Felton's gifts as a high school educator were exactly where they needed to be so someone like me could find him."

After high school, Cabrera enrolled at Nevada. There, under the tutelage of the University's previous cello professor John

Lenz '70 (music), Cabrera again picked up the conductor's baton, to lead the University orchestra.

"Donato was a very talented musician," says Lenz, now professor emeritus. "Music was of utmost importance to him. He expressed interest in conducting right off the bat, and he was good at it."

Cabrera says the opportunities he got as a student at a college the size of Nevada far surpassed what he might have had at a larger school, where only master's students are usually allowed to conduct a small piece or an overture.

"The faculty at the University of Nevada, Reno are very good," Cabrera says. "I received a great education. John Lenz is one of the most inspiring musicians I've ever met. Having that caliber of musician teaching you from an early age is crucial."

Lenz, a Reno resident since 1951, received his bachelor's at the University and his master's at the New England Conservatory in Boston. He joined the University of Nevada faculty in 1972 teaching cello, horn and music theory.

"I was here much longer than the 37 years I taught here, though," Lenz says. "I was a student in the department back in junior high playing in the University orchestra

before the Church Fine Arts building was finished in 1960."

Lenz is now the principal horn player of the Reno Philharmonic, the Reno Chamber Orchestra, and is the cellist of the Telluride Chamber Players in Colorado. He is joined in these endeavors by his wife, Paula (Griggs) Lenz '73 (music), and daughter, Ruth Lenz '97 (applied music), '99M.M. (music).

In the proverbial village of music education that is Reno, Cabrera also received support at the part-time job he held throughout college at a local CD store owned by University Vice Provost Emerita and Professor of Biology Emerita Carol Ort and her husband, Fred Anderson.

"The University really expanded Donato's knowledge, and he brought that back to the store," Ort says. "He had this knowledge and love of different conductors and knew who had the capabilities and skills to conduct different types of music, and could talk to the customers about it."

Cabrera says in the future, he would like to continue conducting both opera and symphonic works. He served as the associate conductor of the San Francisco Opera from 2005 to 2008 and made his conducting debut in South America in 2008 with the Orquesta de Concepción. His experience in the many ensembles, he says, gives him patience and understanding with young musicians. When he is working with the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, Cabrera takes a page from his own history book.

"What I learned from Felton and John were thorough foundations in how to make music," he says. "If you're not well-rounded in the fundamentals, you can't teach them to someone else."

His advice to instrumental music students is to learn every instrument, pitfalls, limitations and all. Music performance majors, he says, should also learn a foreign language, such as German or Italian, and study abroad.

"Western Classical Music has its roots in Europe," he says. "Get there for a semester." 