

FEATURES

If you must learn a song, learn an Irish song

It's hard to believe now, but Waltons New School of Music grew from a spur of the moment idea

Roslyn Dee

Imagine that you're an editor in New York, living in Manhattan, right at the heart of things, with your wife and your baby son. It's April 1994. You're doing okay. Actually, you're probably doing better than just okay. And then a seed is sown by your brother-in-law back in Dublin – come back and start a music school, he says. So you arrive in Dublin in July. You move with your family into the middle of the rabbit-warren building that is to be the school. You devise a programme and you start to hire teachers. You work 12-hour days, sharing the burden with your wife so that one of you works while the other looks after your child. And two months later, in September, with 150 pupils now signed up for tuition, you open Waltons New School of Music.

Phew! Just listening to John Mardirosian tell this tale of how he and his wife Aideen Walton launched their school nearly a decade ago is enough to convey that the whole enterprise was pretty-scary-stuff territory. "Yes," he says, "it was, I suppose. I mean we'd built a life for ourselves in New York city and there we were, starting from scratch again. But I think there's always something to be said for

making changes and shaking things up a bit."

Now, although John Mardirosian's first professional life embraced the world of literature rather than music, his music pedigree is also rather impressive since both his grandfather and his great-grandfather were composers. He grew up in northern Virginia, outside Washington DC, the son of an Italian/American mother and an Armenian father. As a youngster he was, he says, "very serious about music," his instrument of choice being the viola, although actually it chose him rather than the other way round.

"I was playing in a standard school recorder class and I was tired of it," he says, "so I said to my mother that I wanted to play the flute. Along I went to the school band room but a string orchestra was playing there. The teacher took one look at the size of my hands [they're large] and said that she really needed a violinist. And that was it – a total fluke."

While it was Niall Walton of the well-known Dublin musical family who first suggested the idea of the music school, John Mardirosian's first encounter with the Walton name was in Trinity College in 1986. He had

completed his degree at Harvard and had taken up a scholarship place on an M.Phil. course, studying Anglo-Irish literature. Aideen Walton was on the same course, specializing in this academic area after completing her primary degree in literature and music. While John's instrument is the viola, hers are the piano and the Irish harp.

After college they headed off to Italy together and taught in Rome for two years, returning to Dublin in the middle of that spell to get married. Next it was New York, where they lived for five years until the arrival of their son Samuel started them thinking about his future education and so their thoughts started turning towards Ireland. And then Aideen's brother told them about the old building on Dublin's South Great George's Street and, in the same breath, mentioned the words "music school".

Now, nine years later, Waltons New School of Music is a forward-thinking and thriving enterprise with 53 teachers and some 1,100 pupils per term. But it's not on numbers, nor indeed on exams, that John Mardirosian measures the school's success, for his is an ethos that is much more wide ranging and all-embracing. "It's about accessibility," he says, explaining that they have pupils aged from five to 75. "When we started the school we had a very strong sense that the vast majority of people weren't going to go on to be professional musicians so there was no point focusing our methods on the 5% who were. It's about balance, and choice."

So in Waltons today you're as likely to come across someone playing jazz piano or the bodhrán as you

are to encounter someone studying for their own teaching diploma. It is a business, though, and John Mardirosian doesn't pretend otherwise, but it's also, you sense from talking to him, still a labour of love and something to which he is totally artistically committed.

Yet he's certainly not elitist about music. "It's a mysterious area for a lot of people and it can be intimidating. What is important is to demystify it and open it up to everyone." And you have to have breadth, you can't be narrow, he says. "The broader the foundation you have, the higher the tower can be built."

As director of the school (his wife has stepped back from the day-to-day running since the arrival of their second son, Eoin, but is still very much involved in an ideas way) John Mardirosian is constantly thinking of new openings, new ways of doing things, stretching the boundaries all the time.

A couple of years ago, for example, in conjunction with the ESB, he launched the Waltons World Music Summer School with concerts, courses and workshops for children. The school also runs workshops that tie in with the Leaving Cert syllabus and other workshops that operate in Dublin primary schools. It has to be said that when he gets on to the topic of schools, John Mardirosian is practically evangelical about the need for better music education in this country – within a system that gives access to everyone.

"Music," he says, warming now to his theme, "is an outlet for children that's every bit as valuable as sport, and it's one that offers kids a clear indication of progress – if you



Labour of love: John Mardirosian launched the Waltons New School of Music with his wife Aileen Walton

practice a piece with any kind of application, then the next day you'll be better at it."

Because his mobility has been somewhat restricted as a result of multiple sclerosis, John Mardirosian now divides his working time between the school itself and his home office. He relies heavily, he says, on his excellent staff, remarking that without them "I wouldn't be able to do the job." Most of his time nowadays is inevitably spent on the administration side of things, and on planning new projects.

This year's development is Waltons World Masters, a concert and master-class series that provides a platform for world-class musicians, not only as performers, but as teachers too. Indian percussionist Trilok Gurtu was first up in the National Concert Hall back in April and later this month it seems that we're in for a treat when the

Flamenco guitarist Juan Martín struts his stuff, together with his Arte Flamenco Puro company of two dancers and a singer.

Meanwhile, back on South Great George's Street the pupils come and go – a young mother of four studying for her diploma in piano, a 10-year-old violinist, a businessman with a flute. There's even a young Japanese man determined to get to grips with the bodhrán. Now that's diversity for you.

Waltons New School of music can be contacted on 01 478 1884.

Juan Martín plays in the National Concert Hall in Dublin as part of the Waltons World Masters series on Wednesday 18 June.

JUST THE TONIC

Last Sunday Tom Wickham sat his Grade III piano exam. He started learning the instrument in Waltons just over two years ago and now he's flying through the grades. He's 74 years of age and a retired pharmacist.

"I was always interested in music," he says, "but it was my two sisters who learned the piano as children." Then three or four years ago he signed up for a music appreciation class in UCD and that was the spur. Off he went to Waltons New School of Music where he says he was fortunate to get Liza Hingerty as his teacher. "If I pass the exam I did last weekend, then it's all her doing." In Waltons he found them "very receptive to elderly people" and he has been progressing ever since. He likes doing the exams because they give him a focus but he also plays for the sheer pleasure of it, mostly the classics – Mozart, Beethoven and the like – and the odd bit of Gilbert and Sullivan.

"Music is a wonderful thing," he says, "even health-wise. Sure in hospitals, they're saying now that half an hour of Mozart is as good as a dose of valium."